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U.S., Korean, and Japanese Leaders Step Toward a Shared Future at Camp David

At their trilateral summit at Camp David on August 18, U.S. President Joe Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced significant new steps toward a lasting structure for trilateral security cooperation. While their pledges fell short of a formal security agreement, the leaders committed to initiatives that demonstrate their shared geopolitical and economic security concerns and to enhance trilateral cooperation mechanisms, especially by strengthening the fragile Japan-South Korea leg of the triangle.

The summit was a notable success for South Korea and Japan's recent efforts to set aside unresolved historical frictions related to Japan's colonization of the peninsula from 1910 to 1945. Leveraging their personal relationship and commitment to building new bridges, the initiatives taken by Yoon and Kishida are intended to be difficult to reverse, so that their work can weather future political challenges in each country.

Shared Principles, Vision, and Commitment to Consult

The leaders unveiled three documents presenting a shared vision for trilateral partnership and specific initiatives to deepen cooperation across the military security, economic security, and development cooperation spheres. Among these areas, their steps on military and intelligence cooperation are the most significant.

- The **Camp David Principles** outline shared trilateral values of “freedom, human rights, and the rule of law” and a shared objective to support regional and global peace and prosperity, serving as core guidelines for trilateral cooperation.
- In service of these principles, the **Spirit of Camp David** outlines a vision for the implementation of trilateral cooperation through concrete measures and initiatives.
- In a separate **Commitment to Consult**, Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul acknowledged the interlinkages among their respective security situations and committed their governments to swiftly consult with each other on shared challenges and align messaging and responses. This commitment does not rise to a legally binding treaty obligation to consult, but it marks the first



time that Japan and South Korea have explicitly noted a shared interest in the other's security at the leader level.

Focusing on regional challenges, Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington noted specific security concerns regarding changes to the status quo by force, specifically “dangerous and aggressive behavior supporting unlawful maritime claims [...] by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the South China Sea,” and reaffirmed the “indispensable” need for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, language that earned sharp rhetorical responses from China.

North Korea also took center stage, with the three nations reaffirming their demands for North Korea's denuclearization and a shared strategy of reinforcing each partner's deterrence and response capabilities, coordinating on sanctions, and leaving the door open for dialogue. They also reaffirmed support for Ukraine and the shared goal of deterring violations of territorial integrity.

Institutionalizing Cooperation and High-Level Dialogue

Aiming to regularize trilateral engagements on their shared priorities and challenges, Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul announced several tracks for sustained high-level dialogue. These include annualized meetings among their leaders, foreign ministers, defense ministers, and national security advisors, as well as a new engagement track for economic and trade ministers and a meeting between finance ministers. In addition, the countries will launch a Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue to coordinate strategies toward the region and identify areas for joint action.

The clear goal of their emphasis on institutionalization is for Biden, Kishida, and Yoon to lock their successors into habits of trilateral cooperation that cannot be derailed by domestic politics or isolationism in future years.

DEFENSE: DEEPENING AND REGULARIZING COOPERATION

Several new or expanded defense initiatives are also intended to institutionalize cooperation in the long term, including:

- An enhanced intelligence-sharing and real-time information-sharing mechanism focused on North Korean missile launches, to be set up by the end of 2023 (previously announced)
- Annual named multi-domain joint defense exercises
- Enhanced ballistic missile defense cooperation



- A working group on North Korean cyber activities and sanctions evasion efforts
- A Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation Framework to support capacity-building among ASEAN and the Pacific Islands

ECONOMIC SECURITY: EXPANDING TECHNOLOGY COOPERATION AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

Several initiatives announced at the summit aimed to advance innovation and improve the three nations' resilience to economic coercion, including:

- Supply chain early warning systems, on a pilot basis, to focus on semiconductors and batteries
- Establishment of a consultative body for technical standards and regulatory cooperation in the fields of artificial intelligence (AI), advanced digital technologies, and Open RAN
- Increased trilateral cooperation between development finance institutions in Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul, focusing on infrastructure and supply chains
- Trilateral expert exchanges as part of the U.S. cancer moonshot program, and collaboration between National Labs on ensuring safe, secure, and trustworthy emerging technologies, including AI

TAG Take: Big Steps But Challenges Remain

The Camp David summit drew on unprecedented momentum in trilateral relations prompted by a shared sense of threat from China, North Korea, and Russia and triggered by the unique decision of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol to prioritize shared national security interests above politically powerful historical grievances.

The three leaders and their teams succeeded in establishing institutionalized mechanisms and regular opportunities to build strategic trust and cooperate on many of the key security and economic issues facing the region. Their commitment to consult marks a significant step in building trust between Japan and Korea.

Still, changes in political sentiment and leadership in the three capitals present an abiding risk to the strengthening of trilateral cooperation. Deep sensitivities between Japan and Korea regarding security cooperation held the leaders back from making a stronger commitment to shared trilateral defense, despite a push for more from the United States. Differing views on economic relations with China may continue to limit the scope of trilateral cooperation on economic security, a



situation reflected in the absence of any specific commitments on technology denial toward China at Camp David. Tokyo and Seoul also have quite different degrees of concern about potential conflict related to Taiwan.

The immediate aim of Biden, Kishida, and Yoon will be to use the coming year to solidify institutionalized habits of trilateral cooperation, to avoid the kind of back-and-forth political unraveling seen in prior years (*see timeline below*). A continued hardline approach from Beijing may be the most important factor pulling the three nations together in the years ahead.

This report was prepared by Melanie Berry and Rintaro Nishimura. Jason Trinh prepared the graphic.



Timeline of Japan-South Korea Relations

2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• July: Japan restores South Korea to export “white list.”• May: Kishida visits Korea for meeting with Yoon, then Yoon travels to Japan for G7 Summit.• April: South Korea restores Japan to its list of preferential trade partners.• March: South Korea announces proposed solution to the wartime labor dispute. Yoon visits Japan – the first South Korean leader to do so in four years. He and Kishida agree to resume reciprocal leader visits. South Korea then withdraws its WTO complaint against Japan’s export controls and announces normalization of information-sharing under GSOMIA.• January: South Korea protests Japan’s resubmission of a mine complex linked to wartime forced labor for the UNESCO World Heritage list.
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• September: Kishida and Yoon meet on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly and agree on the need to improve relations.• May: Yoon Suk Yeol sworn in as the South Korean president.
2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• October: Fumio Kishida takes office as Japan’s prime minister.• April: The Seoul Central District Court dismisses a separate lawsuit raised by comfort women, citing Japan’s sovereign immunity.• January: The Seoul Central District Court rules in favor of “comfort women” victims and orders the Japanese government to pay damages.
2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• August: South Korea’s foreign ministry states that it can end GSOMIA any at any time, although it suspended its decision in November 2019.• July: WTO members create a dispute panel to rule on South Korea’s complaint against Japan’s export restrictions.• February: Japan initiates second WTO dispute complaint regarding alleged subsidies provided by South Korea to its shipbuilding industry.
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• August: South Korea’s foreign ministry states that it can end GSOMIA any at any time, although it suspended its decision in November 2019.• July: WTO members create a dispute panel to rule on South Korea’s complaint against Japan’s export restrictions.• February: Japan initiates second WTO dispute complaint regarding alleged subsidies provided by South Korea to its shipbuilding industry.
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• December: A South Korean naval vessel directs its fire-control radar at a Japanese Self-Defense Forces aircraft, sparking a diplomatic dispute.• November: South Korea announces plans to dissolve comfort women foundation. Its Supreme Court upholds a 2013 appeals court decision that Mitsubishi Heavy Industries compensate forced laborers.• October: South Korea’s Supreme Court upholds 2013 lower court ruling ordering Nippon Steel and Sumitomo Metal to compensate forced laborers.• January: South Korean President Moon Jae In says that the 2015 comfort women agreement was insufficient and that Japan should sincerely apologize.
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• November: Japan and South Korea sign General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• December: Japan Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida and Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se announce “final and irreversible” resolution to “comfort women” issue – establishing a foundation to support women in Korea forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army.