

Origin and Development: The Evolution of the US–Japan–ROK Trilateral Security Mechanism

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Abstract

With the rise of global hot issues and the continuation of local wars, security issues have returned to the world's attention, and nontraditional security has gradually been taken seriously, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. With the resulting shift in the strategic focus of the U.S. towards the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. has continuously sent economic and military resources and international influence to the region. The Indo-Pacific region has gradually become the main battlefield for regional powers and world powers to demonstrate their strength and implement diplomatic strategies. Many new diplomatic relations and regional small multilateral cooperation have also emerged in the Indo-Pacific region. This multilateral cooperation covers economic, technological, military and other content. The characteristics and possible evolution paths of the “trilateral security mechanism” of the United States, Japan and South Korea will also inevitably bring new changes and possible conflicts to the region and even the world's foreign and defense.

Keywords

US-Japan-ROK “trilateral security mechanism”, geopolitics, the US strategy

1. Introduction

In August 2023, the United States, Japan, and South Korea announced that the relationships among the three countries had entered a new stage. The three documents brought about by this, such as the “Camp David Principles” (The White House, 2024a) and the “Camp David Spirit” (The White House, 2024b), also announced to the world that the three countries had formed an unprecedented institutionalized partnership. Unlike the bilateral alliances between the United States, Japan, and South Korea since World War II, the long-term and institutionalized cooperation between the three countries will bring new changes to the geopolitical situation in Northeast Asia and even global security issues in many fields, such as the military, intelligence, economic strategy, supply chain supply, and value diplomacy. In addition, because the trilateral cooperation agenda carries a strong deterrent against North Korea, it will accelerate the containment of China in terms of the supply chain and key technologies, which will inevitably increase the heat of the traditional “North Korea issue” and bring more “black swan” possibilities. We also need to recognize the new changes in the development of the three countries, the strategic changes made by the countries involved, and the new possibilities brought about by this new type of relationship in a complex international situation.

2. Background of the Formation of the US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Security Mechanism

Any breakthrough in new international relations cannot be achieved in a short period of time. It must be based on long-term historical needs and recent practical advancements. With respect to trilateral cooperation, alliances between the United States and Japan and between the United States and South Korea have a long history. The promotion of the new trilateral relationship not only includes traditional historical factors but also includes the policy shifts of Japan and South Korea in recent years and the strong promotion of the United States. Unlike traditional alliance relationships, the institutionalized security cooperation relationships among the three countries also include their own unique characteristics and features.

2.1 Historical evolution of the trilateral cooperation between the United States, Japan and South Korea

Since World War II, the United States has signed alliance agreements with Japan and South Korea in Northeast Asia to prevent the expansion of the socialist camp and maintain its own presence in Northeast Asia. During the Cold War, the United States, Japan and South Korea further deepened their bilateral relations. After the end of the Cold War, the United States, Japan and South Korea began to cooperate on the North Korean nuclear issue. They emphasize their shared commitment to the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and their intent to address the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK's) nuclear and ballistic missile programs (The White House, 2021). Since the Obama administration announced its return to the Asia--Pacific region, the cooperation among the three countries has not only deterred North Korea from achieving a nuclear-free peninsula but also attempted to use the joint efforts of the three countries to achieve the growth of the three countries' influence in the region and balance China's growing regional influence. To date, the trilateral cooperation mechanism has been formally formed during the Biden administration, and cooperation includes the dual purposes of deterrence and containment. As a result, the trilateral cooperation between the United States, Japan and South Korea has been continuously strengthened and promoted on the basis of the bilateral alliance and in response to different issues that have arisen in various historical periods and has evolved into its current form.

2.1.1 US-Japan Alliance

The U.S.-Japan alliance originated from the "Daily Security Treaty". The "US-Japan Security Treaty" was signed in 1951 together with the "San Francisco Treaty", which officially ended World War II. The US-Japan alliance was used to meet its national security needs so that it could focus on rebuilding its economy. This has also influenced Japan's long-standing security strategic thinking. In 1960, the new US-Japan Security Treaty gave the United States the right to establish bases in the archipelago and, at the same time, made the United States's ally commitment to defend Japan when Japan was attacked. In 1967, the "Three Nonnuclear Principles" were formulated, and Japan became more dependent on US nuclear protection. Since the 1970s, the United States and Japan have begun to strengthen joint military training and exercises between the two countries. The United States has always attached importance to the role of the U.S.-Japan alliance and regards it as the basis of all East Asian, Asia--Pacific and Indo-Pacific security policies. Japan has strong economic strength and military capabilities and is the gathering point for US military deployment in the Western Pacific. Since the North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s, trilateral defense cooperation between the United States, Japan and South Korea has been promoted, and cooperative relations between Japan and South Korea have been promoted. Japan also pays special attention to the situation on the Korean Peninsula and maintains its position and interests in Northeast Asia. Since the beginning of the new century, as Japan's national strength has increased, its desire to become a normal country and a global power has increased, and it has become increasingly tied to the strategic interests of the United States. Given China's growing regional influence and the United States' increasingly obvious containment strategy against China, Japan has also shown a conservative policy tendency. This approach is in line with Japan's realistic strategy to continuously obtain military and economic benefits through the U.S.-Japan alliance and promote trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan and South Korea to intervene in the regional situation and contain China's development in the region.

2.1.2 US-ROK alliance

There is a significant difference between alliances between South Korea and the United States and between Japan and South Korea. As the United States' geopolitical helper in East Asia, Japan is responsible for strategic arrangements in Asia, whereas the early US-South Korea alliance focused more on deterrence against North

Korea. However, with the strategic shift of the United States, the policy inclinations of South Korea's new government, and the need for political achievements, the U.S.-South Korea alliance has gradually moved away from the traditional scope of the alliance and is working toward a comprehensive strategic alliance. They think that North Korea is closer than ever to being able to threaten the United States, thereby testing the proposition that Washington will want to risk an attack on behalf of its regional allies. Kim Jong-un has developed his military arsenal in a deliberate attempt to change the status quo on the Korean Peninsula, and, by extension, in Northeast Asia (Smith, 2020).

The US-ROK relationship began with the “US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty” in 1953. Thus, the US-ROK alliance is anchored on the basis of building a common defense against North Korea, taking into account the important geopolitical advantages of the Korean Peninsula in the US global strategic layout, actively using the US-ROK alliance to deter North Korea, promoting US-Japan-ROK cooperation, and establishing a Northeast Asian geopolitical pattern that is beneficial to itself. Since the 1990s, the North Korean nuclear crisis has erupted; the United States, Japan, and South Korea have become increasingly concerned about North Korea's nuclear weapons process; and Japan and South Korea have become increasingly aware of the necessity of bilateral security cooperation. In January 1993, the three parties launched a consultation mechanism to strengthen coordination on the North Korean nuclear issue. In April 1999, the United States, Japan, and South Korea established the Trilateral Coordination and Supervision Group (TCOG), marking the beginning of the establishment of a trilateral security cooperation contact mechanism. However, with the easing of the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, different South Korean governments have adopted different policies toward North Korea in different periods, positioned their own political identities in Northeast Asia, and their attitudes toward the speed and breadth of the US-ROK alliance cooperation and the US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship have also changed from period to period. In addition, owing to the existence of many issues with Japan, such as history and territorial sovereignty, the South Korea--Japan relations that the United States is trying to promote have also become a shortcoming and obstacle to the normal advancement of the trilateral relationship.

2.1.3 Trilateral Cooperation

Trilateral cooperation is based on bilateral alliances between the United States, Japan and South Korea. Owing to its concern about the North Korean issue, the United States has also tried to build trilateral cooperation between the United States, Japan and South Korea, and trilateral cooperation has also been promoted for a certain period of time. However, it is subject to obstacles at different times, especially historical problems in Japan--South Korea relations that are difficult to solve in a short period of time, which has also hindered the rapid advancement of trilateral relations. Japan and South Korea are similarly situated in the evolving East Asian regional order as important allies of the United States. This, however, does not necessarily mean that they are united as a counterbalance against a rising China (Soeya, 2016). With the United States' attention to the emergence of new problems—China's rise has brought the United States' belief that it has the ability to compete with itself in the long term—the United States has also continuously emphasized the normalization of Japan--South Korea relations to promote the easing of Japan--South Korea relations and the importance and necessity of trilateral cooperation in the new era. In addition, substantial action has been taken. In 2022, the United States, Japan and South Korea held 27 diplomatic-level communication meetings, and by the end of July 2023, there were 16 meetings, a significant increase compared with previous years (3 times in 2018, 3 times in 2019, 2 times in 2020, and 8 times in 2021). In June 2022 and June 2023, the defense ministers of the United States, Japan and South Korea held trilateral talks and issued joint statements on the occasion of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. On April 14, 2023, the United States, Japan and South Korea held the 13th working-level consultations of the defense authorities at the U.S. Department of Defense. After intensive meetings and consultations between senior military and diplomatic officials, the leaders of the United States, Japan and South Korea finally met at Camp David in the United States in August 2023, officially opening a new era of trilateral cooperation.

2.2 The Motivation for the Formation of the US-Japan-ROK “Trilateral Security Mechanism”

The trilateral cooperation mechanism was formally formed on August 18, 2023. It was formally formed from the beginning of contact in the 1990s to the present. In this process, the bilateral alliances between the United States and Japan and between the United States and South Korea established by the United States were

the basis for cooperation. The settlements of the United States, Japan and South Korea contained the basis for the formation of a trilateral quasi-alliance relationship. Trilateral cooperation also needs to exist and be further promoted because of the “North Korea issue”. However, because the existence of the three sides requires long-term deep-rooted historical issues, the depth and breadth of the trilateral cooperation have been delayed while being promoted. However, in recent years, the strategy implemented by successive U.S. governments has shifted to a clear “Indo-Pacific strategy” and has begun to deeply intervene in the Indo-Pacific geopolitical situation; the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has made people see the possibility of traditional geopolitical crises breaking out at any time, and security issues have once again become the main topic of concern to all countries; South Korea has also ushered in a new conservative president, who won the election in the new election in 2022 and overturned the previous pragmatic foreign policy; South Korea's shift has also brought about the restoration of Japan--South Korea relations. With frequent trilateral contacts, multiple high-level meetings and active promotion of the formation of a mechanism-based agreement, the real motivations contained therein have become a key factor in overcoming the long-standing Japan--ROK conflicts in trilateral cooperation and promoting the development of trilateral cooperation.

2.2.1 Leading Role of the US Strategy

In the trilateral relationship, the role and dominant position of the United States are unquestionable. From a historical perspective, the advancement of the trilateral relationship mainly depends on the degree of interference of the United States in Northeast Asian affairs and the quality of Japan--South Korea relations. In recent years, the United States' national strategy has not only been seriously concerned with Northeast Asian affairs but also devoted great attention and resources to the entire Indo-Pacific region. Since the Trump era, the normalization of Japan--South Korea relations has been promoted, and the United States has been actively leading the closer cooperation in the military, intelligence, and economic fields of the three countries of the United States, Japan, and South Korea, led by the United States. In the later Biden era, the Biden administration issued a new “Indo-Pacific National Strategy” report, which clearly stated that South Korea and Japan are strategic fulcrums for the United States to build the Indo-Pacific region and pay attention to regional affairs together. Japan and South Korea also followed the US strategy, which aggravated the instability of the regional situation.

2.2.2 Returning to International Security Issues

While the theme of the world is moving towards “peace and development”, gunfire and shrapnel have never truly left the world. The beautiful and stable world we see is actually just that most of us prefer peace and stability, and the wars in various corners hidden under the curtain are nothing more than not involving the interests of major powers and are not worth reporting by the world's mainstream media. When the world ushers in a new round of situation, the relationship between major powers is not as stable as before, and competition and cooperation have become a reality. When irreconcilable contradictions arise between major powers, the beautiful curtain of the world will eventually be torn apart.

A new round of disputes is underway worldwide. The sudden outbreak of the “Russia--Ukraine conflict” has continued to this day, the new round of religious geopolitical impact of the “Palestine--Israel conflict” has shaken the entire world, and the powder kegs that already exist in the world are ready to move. The Balkans, Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Korean Peninsula, and Taiwan are likely to be detonated at any time, and security issues have returned to mainstream countries worldwide. The Korean Peninsula issue involves the interests of major powers worldwide, and the resulting security crisis has also deeply affected countries in Northeast Asia and even countries worldwide. In a multipolar state of global affairs, mounting distrust may further aggravate already unstable relationships between regional hegemony as well as the periphery states within their orbit, creating a cycle of compounding declines in international relations (Grafstein, 2022).

2.2.3 South Korean Government's Diplomatic Shift

The Moon Jae-in administration, South Korea, chose a pragmatic foreign policy on the basis of practical interests. It adopted the “Sunny Policy” initiated by Kim Dae-jung and an attitude of engagement and dialogue on the “North Korea issue”. The traditional alliance between the United States and South Korea took the approach of strengthening the alliance but keeping the scope of the issue within a reasonable and controllable range. It took a position of not causing an escalation of the situation when the United States organized various

multilateral cooperations against China and traced back the historical issues between Japan and South Korea during its term.

With the emergence of a new round of general elections in 2022, South Korea's domestic politics also ushered in a new situation. In the context of this election, the conservative tendency has returned significantly, and President Yoon Seok-yeol, who took office in May of the same year, also has a strong conservative tendency. Since taking office, the new president adopted a comprehensive overturn of the policy arrangements during the Moon Jae-in period to highlight his own policy propositions. In terms of the foreign strategy, choose to bind the US-ROK alliance and release its own Indo-Pacific strategy. Following the United States' foreign arrangements, diplomatic relations with Japan should be repaired, trilateral security cooperation among the three countries should be promoted, the Camp David Summit, in this regard, has established a formal cooperative mechanism and produced meaningful trilateral agendas (Lee, 2023), the scope and content of trilateral cooperation should shift from traditional North Korean issues to Chinese issues. A number of small circles have formed in economic, technological, supply chain and other regions with the United States and other countries.

2.2.4 Comprehensive Improvement of the Japan-ROK Relationship

The relationship between Japan and South Korea has always been a key factor hindering the advancement of trilateral cooperation, and the problems between the two sides include historical issues and territorial sovereignty issues, which cannot be solved in the short term and will also constrain diplomatic relations between the two countries for a long period of time. After the end of Moon Jae-in's administration, South Korea ushered in the Yoon Seok-yeol administration. At the beginning of Yoon Seok-yeol's administration, South Korea's foreign policy was greatly reversed, breaking the consistent sunshine policy toward North Korea, adopting a pragmatic policy of peace and beauty in economics, choosing to fully lean towards the United States, and taking the same position and caliber as the United States, thus ushering in a new direction for Japan–South Korea relations. In March 2023, the Yoon Seok-Yol government proposed a “third-party compensation case” for the forced labor compensation case during World War II and promoted the “thawing” of South Korea--Japan relations by unilaterally compromising with Japan, compensating for the shortcomings in the trilateral relationship between the United States, Japan and South Korea and clearing the way for the restart of trilateral cooperation. The foreign policy highlights the “pro-American and pro-Japanese” orientation, adopts the same ideology as the United States and Japan do, accepts the China threat theory, takes the Western collective “Russia–Ukraine conflict” stance, and addresses the issue of Japan's nuclear wastewater discharge from the standpoint of value-based diplomacy, etc., in exchange for the three countries being able to achieve a breakthrough in new relations in a short period of time.

3. Progress and Characteristics of the US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Security Mechanism

3.1 Main Contents of the Trilateral Security Mechanism

On August 18, 2023, after the Camp David in the United States, the “trilateral security mechanism” between the United States, Japan and South Korea was formally formed, and three documents were signed, namely, the “Spirit of Camp David”, the “Spirit of Camp David”, and the “Commitment to Consult”. Relying on these three documents, the United States attempted to unite regional allies to form trilateral cooperation, using the issue of maintaining security as a cover, to maintain the United States' hegemonic security and leading security in the Pacific region, and to contain countries or other actors that threaten to affect the United States' regional influence.

The three countries expressed their views on the “trilateral security mechanism”. Now, a longstanding mission of denuclearizing North Korea, as well as the COVID-19 crisis, shifting trade order, supply chain realignment, climate change, democracy in crisis, and numerous other new challenges confront them (The White House, 2022). These challenges can be tackled only when countries sharing the universal values of a liberal democracy and human rights come together. South Korea believes that the purpose of this summit is to increase the ability to respond to North Korean nuclear and missile threats. The three countries agreed to conduct trilateral joint exercises every year. In mid-August 2023, the three countries had conducted a maritime ballistic missile defence warning test for the real time sharing of missile warning data to demonstrate their ability to deter and respond to North Korea’s advancing nuclear and missile threats more effectively. By the

end of 2023, the three countries intend to operationalise their sharing of missile warning data on North Korea's commitments reflected in the November 2022 Phnom Penh Statement (Fan, 2024). The leaders of the three countries mentioned issues such as North Korean human rights and kidnapping in the document. Some people believe that this reflects the changes in the South Korean government's policy toward North Korea. South Korea's main goal for trilateral cooperation is to maintain its own defense security on the Korean Peninsula.

The United States has clearly stated its intention to contain China in the fields of security, economy, cutting-edge technology, and the supply chain. In relevant documents, the United States stated that it firmly opposes any attempt to unilaterally change the status quo in Indo-Pacific waters by force. The evolution of domestic politics, together with the new geopolitical challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, have also prompted the Philippines to adjust its strategy in the South China Sea (Fan, 2024).

3.2 Progress in the Promotion of the US-Japan-ROK “Trilateral Security Mechanism”

The 2023 Camp David Summit emphasized that “a new era of partnership between the United States, Japan and South Korea has begun” and declared that the three countries need to unite and coordinate their actions at “historical turning points of geopolitical competition, climate crisis, Ukraine crisis and nuclear provocation” and that “under the support of the solid US–Japan and US–South Korea alliances, the bilateral relations between the two countries are stronger than ever, and the same is true for the trilateral relationship between the United States, Japan and South Korea”. Unlike the previous bilateral cooperation between the United States and Japan and South Korea, trilateral cooperation, driven by the results of the Camp David meeting, continues to take new action and bring new progress to the region.

3.2.1 Promotion of the Three-Country Quasialliance Circle Through Institutionalization

The Camp David Accords, the three parties confirmed that they would hold at least one trilateral leader meeting each year and would hold meetings with foreign ministers, defense ministers, trade ministers, and heads of national security departments each year. They also launched an annual trilateral “Indo-Pacific” dialogue at the level of assistant secretaries of the state and directors of departments. The three parties pledged to quickly consult on regional challenges and threats that affect the common interests and security of the three countries. They have also cooperated in many fields to build regional systems such as supply chains and “Chip4” alliances. The promotion of institutionalization has also caused the interests of the three countries to overlap more closely and formed what some scholars believe is a de facto quasialliance.

3.2.2 Defense Cooperation as the Main Approach to Regional Deterrence

In August 2023, after the leaders of the United States, Japan and South Korea held the “Camp David” summit, the relations between the three countries opened a “new chapter”, and the three parties pledged to consult on handling regional crises on the premise that emergencies affect common security, advance a shared trilateral vision for addressing global and regional security challenges, promoting a rules-based international order and bolstering economic prosperity (The White House, 2024a).

U.S. President Joe Biden said, “We are enhancing our trilateral defense cooperation to play a role in the Indo-Pacific region. This includes launching annual multidomain military exercises to bring our trilateral defense cooperation to an unprecedented level. We are redoubling our information sharing efforts, including on North Korean missile launches and cyber activities, and strengthening our ballistic missile defense cooperation.” The primary concern of the United States, Japan and South Korea in strengthening trilateral relations is defense cooperation, with the main directions being the North Korean nuclear issue, the institutionalization of trilateral military exercises, and the response to the so-called common security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region.

3.2.3 Deepening Economic Cooperation and Building an Exclusionary System

In addition to building trilateral defense cooperation on the North Korean issue, the three countries have continuously extended security issues to other areas; increased their attention to security in the economy, supply chain and other fields; and built a series of regional economic and technological cooperation circles. The obvious anti-China characteristics of these circles have revealed the anti-China intentions behind their trilateral cooperation. Among them, the clear statements of the national strategies of the United States, Japan and South Korea to strengthen economic and technological cooperation among the three countries, the

convening of multiple economic interaction meetings, the promulgation of legal provisions, and the restoration and recovery of the Japanese and Korean economies have promoted joint cooperation among the three countries in the economic field.

3.2.4 Expanding the Indo-Pacific region and Guiding Regional Development

The trilateral cooperation not only involves the “North Korea issue” in Northeast Asia but also extends to other hot issues in the Indo-Pacific region. The trilateral joint statement expressed great concern for the stability of the ASEAN region. The three parties reiterated their commitment to cooperate through regional forums and groups such as ASEAN, Friends of the Mekong River, and the “Blue Pacific Partnership”. By building relations with ASEAN and Pacific countries, they reshaped the Indo-Pacific situation.

3.2.5 Ideology Disguises the Emphasis on Common Values

The United States has been pulling Japan and South Korea together to build a small circle containing China. In addition to taking advantage of Japan’s and South Korea’s respective real needs for the United States, the United States has also attached ideological “democratic” values to prompt Japan and South Korea to ignore the potential costs of trilateral cooperation and to be more tied to the American camp, thereby making them serve the completion of the United States’ strategic goals.

3.3 Characteristics and Trends of Trilateral Cooperation Between the United States, Japan and South Korea Under the New Situation

Since the meeting at Camp David, the cooperation between the United States, Japan and South Korea has become increasingly obvious due to the formal establishment of the mechanism, and its actions have shown unique characteristics and possible trends that are different from the traditional bilateral alliances between the United States and South Korea, the United States and Japan, and other multilateral cooperation mechanisms of the United States.

3.3.1 Dual Guidance of Practical Interests and Ideology

The formation of the trilateral relationship is based on the great practical interests of the three countries. The practical interests of the three countries include not only the need for the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy to compete with China in an all-round way, South Korea’s own security needs against North Korea, Japan’s need to accelerate its transformation into a global country but also the need to be recognized by democratic countries such as the U.S. in the new era to increase the diplomatic achievements of the government during its administration and obtain stronger practical interests, such as Japan and South Korea looking forward to more foreign markets and the possibility of becoming permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. This dual guidance of practical interests and values has also made trilateral cooperation more multifaceted and in-depth and has also led Japan and South Korea to increase their integration into other multilateral cooperation organizations led by the United States and participate in democratic summits.

3.3.2 Strengthening Cooperation Space Through Institutionalization and Effectiveness

The institutionalization of trilateral cooperation was confirmed by the agreement at the Camp David meeting. The development of these cooperation mechanisms is also accurately positioned at the common practical needs of the three countries, covering a wide range of areas such as traditional and nontraditional security, supply chains and infrastructure, cutting-edge technology, oceans, and humanities, to increase the actual effectiveness of the mechanism. Cooperation in these areas has been elevated to the ministerial level and institutionalized.

3.3.3 Give Equal Weight to Defense Security and Economic and Technological Security

In the security field, the three parties will continue to focus on responding to North Korean nuclear and missile threats and strive to improve the “deterrence” of armaments and joint mobile response capabilities. At the same time, as the scope of trilateral cooperation expands to the “Indo-Pacific”, it is also possible to increase military presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans through joint exercises and training in the future and, in nontraditional defense security, strengthen communication and cooperation between the intelligence of the three countries and connect with the military industry chain. Moreover, the United States, Japan and South Korea, under the banner of “economic security”, seek to reduce economic dependence on China and jointly

maintain their dominant position in the high-end industrial chain and high-tech fields. They will focus on strengthening cooperation in the fields of chip semiconductors, key minerals, power batteries, artificial intelligence, the digital economy, biomedicine, network security, etc., to respond to security issues in their own science and technology fields.

4. Constraints of the US–Japan–ROK Trilateral Security Mechanism

Although trilateral cooperation has been formally formed under the joint promotion of the United States, the Yoon Seok-yeol government's continuous promotion of reconciliation between South Korea and Japan and the common practical interests of the three countries, trilateral cooperation is not unbreakable. The shortcomings that exist are also the keys to the continued deepening and sustainability of the trilateral relationship. The historical issues between Japan and South Korea, such as comforting women, forced labor during World War II, and the Dokdo (Takeshima) dispute, have not been resolved, and the conflict between South Korea and Japan may break out again at any time. The increasingly confrontational political situation in South Korea has replaced conservative policies and returned to a pragmatic foreign policy path. The continuous confirmation of the three countries' respective interests and needs within the mechanism and the obvious deviations have greatly increased the obstacles to the long-term development of trilateral cooperation.

4.1 The Conflict Between Japan and South Korea Has a Long History and Will Continue to Exist for a Long Period of Time

The conflict between Japan and South Korea has a long history and is deeply rooted. Historically, the Japanese government's consistent avoidance of historical issues that South Korea cares about has shaped the short-term irreconcilable conflicts between Japan and South Korea. During Yoon Seok-yeol's administration, to comply with the United States's trilateral cooperation requirements, he forcibly promoted trilateral cooperation and eased relations with Japan, but his policy toward Japan was also deeply criticized by the domestic masses, who criticized his “humiliating diplomacy”, which also became a major issue for the opposition parties in South Korea to oppose the Yoon Seok-yeol government.

4.1.1 Japan and South Korea Have Long-Standing Historical Issues

Historical issues between the two countries, such as comforting women and forced labor during World War II, have seriously affected the mutual goodwill and recognition between the people of the two countries and restricted their long-term development.

Comfort refers to Asian women who were forcibly conscripted, recruited or lured by the Japanese army during World War II and forced to provide sexual services to the Japanese army. These women came from regions such as China, South Korea, the Philippines, and Indonesia. It is estimated that approximately 200,000-400,000 women have become comfort women. South Korea believes that these comfort women have suffered serious human rights violations, sexual violence and physical abuse and demands that the Japanese government formally apologize for this issue, acknowledge historical responsibility, and compensate victims. South Korea also requires Japan to make comfort women issue formal historical education content to avoid history repeating itself. Although the Japanese government acknowledged the responsibility of the Japanese army for comforting women during World War II in the “Kono Statement” in 1993 and issued apology statements on this issue in 1995 and 2015, South Korea believes that these apologies and compensation are not sincere and sufficient. The Japanese government argues that the comfort women issue was formally resolved in the 1965 Japan--South Korea Treaty on Basic Relations, so no further claims should be made. Japan responded to South Korea's request that Japan should take positive action to resolve the comfort issue of women between Japan and South Korea, which also laid hidden dangers for the fixed contradictions between Japan and South Korea.

During Japanese colonial rule, many Koreans were forced to work by the Japanese government, including in mines, factories, and military factories. These workers suffer severe exploitation and abuse, and their labor is often carried out under extremely harsh conditions. It is estimated that between 600,000 and 1 million Koreans became forced laborers. The South Korean government and civil groups have called on the Japanese government to formally apologize for the forced labor issue, acknowledge historical responsibility, and provide compensation to victims. Although the Japanese government has made some apologies and compensation moves on this issue in the past, South Korea believes that these are not sufficient because many victims have

not yet received compensation or apologies. However, the Japanese team believes that, according to the 1965 Japan--South Korea Claims Agreement, many historical issues between Japan and South Korea, such as the comfort woman issue and the forced labor issue, should have been fully resolved in this agreement, so it has also rejected the South Korean Supreme Court's many judgments on historical issues left over between Japan and South Korea.

4.1.2 There is a Dispute Over Territorial Sovereignty Between the Two Countries

The Dokdo issue, also known as the Takeshima issue (called Takeshima in Japan), is a dispute between Japan and South Korea concerning the sovereignty of a group of islands located in the East China Sea. The islands, which consist of two main islands and a number of smaller islands, are at the heart of a territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan. The group of islands is located in the East China Sea, a certain distance from both the Korean Peninsula and Japan's Kyushu Island, at the confluence of the Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea. Under international maritime law, islands should be considered islands rather than rocks.

South Korea calls these islands “Dokdo”, whereas Japan calls them “Takeshima”. South Korea claims sovereignty over these islands and has set up island guards and facilities on them. South Korea claims that these islands have been recorded in Korean historical documents and maps for hundreds of years and that South Korea actually controls them. Japan also claims sovereignty over these islands, believing that they are also recorded in Japanese historical documents and maps. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Japan implemented a series of control measures on these islands. However, with the end of World War II and the end of Japanese colonial rule, the ownership of these islands once again became a focus of controversy. Japan believes that, according to the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, Japan automatically gave up its sovereignty over the Korean Peninsula, but Takeshima has never belonged to the Korean Peninsula since ancient times, so it does not comply with the San Francisco Peace Treaty. In 1952, South Korea's leader, Syngman Rhee, divided Dokdo into the “Syngman Rhee Line” and declared its territorial sovereignty over it. The then-South Korean President Lee Myung-bak also landed on Dokdo in 2012. The Dokdo issue has always been a sensitive issue in Japan--South Korea relations, triggering diplomatic and civil conflicts. There have been diplomatic conflicts between the two countries over this issue. For example, the two sides compete for support and support for islands on international occasions. On the private side, there are sometimes demonstrations in South Korea and Japan that express dissatisfaction with each other's positions. This has become an important factor restricting the long-term harmonious development of Japan and South Korea. The unresolved practical issues such as the Dokdo (Takeshima) dispute also leave the possibility of sudden tensions in the originally relaxed relationship between the two countries.

4.1.3 There are Differences Among Political Parties in South Korea

In the process of reconciliation between Japan and South Korea, opinions in South Korea are particularly divided. Lee Jae-myung, leader of the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Korea, directly criticized the Yoon Seok-yeol government's diplomacy toward Japan, believing that it was “humiliating diplomacy” that “catered to Japan” and that the Yoon Seok-yeol government had become a “puppet” of the Japanese government. Lee Jae-myung also launched a hunger strike against the Yoon Seok-yeol government, demanding that the Yoon government “apologize for destroying the livelihoods and democracy of the people” and “oppose the discharge of Japanese nuclear wastewater into the sea.” The Yoon Seok-yeol government in South Korea is also facing great domestic pressure in terms of diplomacy toward Japan and strengthening trilateral cooperation between the United States, Japan and South Korea.

4.2 The Three Countries Have Different Security Concerns and Obvious Deviations

Although the tone of trilateral cooperation is quite high, the United States, Japan and South Korea have their own thoughts behind their seemingly close relationships. The three countries have different interests in the Asia-Pacific region. South Korea is concerned with peninsula issues, Japan is concerned with the Diaoyu Islands and East China Sea issues, and the United States is concerned with strategic competition with China. Japan and South Korea may follow the United States in some areas of the supply chain and semiconductor policies, but the two countries are unwilling to relinquish their economic cooperation interests with China. It is impossible for them to follow the United States in everything, and there must be multiple constraints.

4.2.1 South Korea Focuses on Deterrence Against North Korea

North Korea poses the primary security threat to South Korea and is South Korea's greatest hidden danger. The ROK–US alliance is also based on strategic deterrence against North Korea. At the Camp David meeting, the three countries reaffirmed the “US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty”, which is the most important and legally binding treaty mechanism to safeguard South Korea's national security. It is also South Korea's greatest concern. However, the Yoon Seok-Yol government said that the ROK-US-Japan cooperation is intended mainly to address the North Korean nuclear issue and that the three countries are trying to contain China's development under the cover of the North Korean issue. This increases the possibility that South Korea will stand at the forefront of the US's containment of China, which is not in South Korea's interest.

4.2.2 Japan and the United States Focus on Containing China

In the overall plan of the US grand strategy “Indo-Pacific Strategy”, launching comprehensive competition with China is its primary goal. South Korea and Japan are also the key fulcrums in its strategic conception. The relationship between South Korea and Japan is the weakest. Efforts should be made to promote the easing of their relations and deepen cooperation to form a joint force, build institutionalized cooperation and thus help China's strategy. In terms of the choice of national strategy, Japan chose to deeply embed the US system to bind US interests, exaggerate China's threat theory, and formulate a long-term and stable conservative strategy. South Korea is different. Since the Kim–Dae–jung period, all South Korean governments, whether progressive or conservative, have refused to participate in the US missile defense system (MD) to avoid further provoking China. Although Yoon Seok-yeol broke the continuity of this policy, because he is facing a situation where the ruling party is small and the opposition party is large and his own public opinion continues to decline, whether his policy will swing back remains to be seen.

5. Conclusion

Northeast Asia is an important geopolitical region. Located east of Eurasia and north of the Pacific Ocean, it relies on Eurasia and extends to the vast Pacific Ocean, with a broad geostrategic space. The process of modern national development also brings together major powers in the world today, including Russia, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Mongolia, and China. Among them, Japan signed the “US-Japan Security Treaty” the “San Francisco Treaty” with the United States in 1951, and South Korea signed the “US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty” with the United States in 1953; the United States became a common ally of regional countries, South Korea and Japan, and was deeply involved in the regional hot issue—the North Korean issue. It has invested considerable resources and international influence in Northeast Asia, and the United States has become a force that cannot be ignored in Northeast Asia; thus far, Northeast Asia has gathered the world's three major nuclear powers and permanent members of the Security Council—the United States, Russia, and China—and contains the international powder keg—the Korean Peninsula issue. The strong national strength of the United States; the rapidly developing economy and national strength of Japan, South Korea, and China; and Russia's abundant natural resources and military capabilities have also made the region a de facto main venue for the intersection of interests and games between major powers.

With the increasing development of China, its economy and comprehensive national strength have gradually strengthened, and its regional influence has continued to rise. The United States' strategic positioning of China has also changed accordingly, from the previous “engagement and cooperation” to a “potential strategic competitor”, which has also broken the balance of power that the United States believes. Against this background, the United States has revised its strategic direction and used traditional allies to shape the geopolitical structure of Northeast Asia. The ‘new multilateralism’—an institutional redesign that seeks to respond to unprecedented changes in and challenges to the US-led international order (Calabrese, 2023). The strategic security structure in Northeast Asia is also experiencing rapid turbulence. North Korea has continuously improved its nuclear and missile capabilities, launched various types of missiles many times, and significantly improved its ballistic missile technology. Affected by the Ukrainian crisis, the relationship between South Korea and Russia has become increasingly cold, but the relationship between North Korea and Russia has quickly warmed. The United States, Japan and South Korea have also accelerated the reshaping and improvement of relations. Trilateral security cooperation amongst the United States, South Korea, and Japan has been a long-standing, vital feature of the East Asian security architecture since the Cold War, but its levels over time have been highly inconsistent (Gilbert, 2021). South Korea has joined the sanctions against

Russia, and Russia has also included South Korea in the list of “unfriendly countries”. North Korea stands firmly on the side of Russia. After Japan completed the easing of relations and reached trilateral cooperation, a new era of cooperation and development among the three countries began.

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Conflicts of Interest

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