



***HOW TO BUILD US-JAPAN-ROK  
TRILATERAL COOPERATION ON  
TAIWAN***

BY DANIEL FU

*Daniel Fu ([dfu@hbs.edu](mailto:dfu@hbs.edu)) is a Research Associate at Harvard Business School.*

*This PacNet was developed as a part of the United States-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Next-Generation Leaders Dialogue to encourage creative thinking about how this vital partnership can be fostered. For the previous entries please click [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).*

In recent years, Japan and the United States have taken a series of steps to bolster deterrence-building vis-a-vis the Taiwan Strait. In 2021, for example, Tokyo and Washington reportedly formulated a joint [plan](#) that entails the US Marine Corps setting up an attack base along the Nansei island chain in preparation for a Taiwan Strait military contingency. Moreover, following the conclusion of US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2) discussions in 2023, it was announced that Washington would repurpose a Marine Corps regiment in Okinawa and equip it with anti-ship missiles that can [target](#) PLA Navy ships during a Taiwan Strait military conflict. The Republic of Korea (ROK), however, has long been reluctant to toe the same line. The election of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, and recent public [animosity](#) towards China within South Korea, may change things. Seoul's shift towards becoming more proactive on Taiwan issues has been notable. In May 2021, for example, Taiwan was named for the first time in a joint [statement](#) between the ROK and the United States. In February 2023, ROK Foreign Minister Park Jin stated in a CNN [interview](#) that Seoul opposes any unilateral change of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait via force and that such a change would

have a “direct impact” on South Korea. This marked a remarkable departure from earlier posturing. It would be remiss to not transform such willingness, however slight, into incremental steps amenable to Seoul that ultimately support Taiwan's defense. This article will identify and discuss three such steps that should be taken.

First, trilateral discussions involving the three countries should be organized to establish whether Seoul will allow troops from US Forces Korea (USFK) to support US operations during a Taiwan Strait military contingency. A commitment from Japan to permit the US to utilize its bases in-country to defend Taiwan, a move already [expected](#) by Chinese foreign policy elites, would enable Seoul the space needed to provide USFK the “[strategic flexibility](#)” to operate beyond the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, discussions can be held to formulate plans for ROK and Japanese forces to provide rear area and intelligence-gathering support in the event of a Taiwan Strait military contingency. In such discussions, it is critical for Washington to reassure Seoul of USFK's ability to deter the DPRK from engaging in any military adventurism during a Taiwan Strait conflict. Washington, for example, could enter into a NATO-style nuclear sharing [agreement](#) with Seoul. Additionally, Seoul must be prepared for a distracted Washington in the event of a Taiwan conflict and be prepared to engage in more burden-sharing regarding deterrence efforts vis-à-vis Pyongyang. With the ROK's already sizable military [advantages](#) over the DPRK, this should not be significant challenge.

Second, the three countries should seek to bolster cooperation with Taiwan via joint coast guard operations. Japan has proven proactive in this regard. In 2017, for example, Taiwan and Japanese officials [signed](#) an MoU enabling the conduct of joint search and rescue operations. Likewise, the US has sought to bolster Coast Guard ties with Taiwan and the two nations [established](#) a Coast Guard Working Group in 2021. The 2022 National Defense Authorization Act also mandates a report on National Guard cooperation with Taiwan, which should be expanded to include Coast Guard training as well. Given such precedent, Seoul should follow suit and initiate joint Coast Guard

training exercises with Taiwan. All four nations should conduct training exercises together, particularly in the [waters](#) off Pacific Island countries with which Taiwan has diplomatic relations. Given Seoul's potential concerns regarding provoking Beijing, cooperation can focus on issues such as drug trafficking, [marine debris](#), and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.

Third, the three countries should continue efforts to bring the Chip4 Alliance to fruition. The proposed alliance will enable the three countries to, together with Taiwan, build a more robust and comprehensive semiconductor supply-chain that reduces Beijing's leverage on the international stage. All four nations possess a unique comparative advantage when it comes to semiconductors. As ROK Minister of Trade, Industry, and Energy Lee Chang-yang [stated](#): "South Korea holds its strengths in memory chip [production], Taiwan is strong in the foundry business. The US has the equipment and technology and Japan is strong in minerals and components." Chip4 has shown promise despite initial doubts regarding the initiative. In February 2023, for example, Chip4 [held](#) its inaugural video meeting featuring senior officials from all four nations thus assuaging concerns about preliminary [delays](#). In March 2023, Japan [lifted](#) export controls previously imposed on the ROK's semiconductor industry, thereby eliminating more barriers to cooperation in the semiconductor space. In the same month, South Korea [appointed](#) semiconductor expert Lee Eun-ho to be its envoy to Taiwan. Lee, the former president of the Korean Security Agency of Trade and Industry, a government institution that helps South Korean corporations comply with export controls, has already spoken [favorably](#) about Chip4. His appointment is a strong signal that the ROK is increasingly serious about heightening cooperation with Taiwan in the semiconductor space.

While Tokyo and Taipei's participation is more or less assured, doubts remain regarding Seoul's commitment to a potential Chip4 alliance given that [60%](#) of its semiconductor exports go to China. Given [past](#) economic coercion by the PRC, Seoul is inevitably concerned that any decision to join Chip4 would be met by economic retaliation against its semiconductor industry. Seoul, however, should keep

two things in mind. First, trends suggest that South Korean semiconductor exports to China will decrease precipitously going forward regardless of Seoul's decision-making. Beijing has, after all, set a target self-sufficiency rate in semiconductors of 70% by 2025 and launched aggressive state [subsidy](#) programs to realize this goal. South Korean companies must be reminded that market opportunity in China will fall as Beijing pursues such autarky, even if it falls [short](#) of meeting its targets. Semiconductor [exports](#) from the ROK to China have already fallen 13.4% year-on-year. Second, Beijing has exhibited significant reluctance to sanction TSMC despite heightening cross-strait tensions. Moreover, US export controls, endorsed by the Netherlands and Japan, have made Chinese firms more [dependent](#) on South Korean companies such as SY Hynix and Samsung for critical semiconductor materials. Concern about potential countersanctions, therefore, should be minimal.

The aforementioned steps listed in this article provide three, realistic avenues through which the United States, ROK, and Japan can cooperate in a trilateral manner over Taiwan while also bolstering bilateral ties between each other. Any or all of these steps will remind Beijing that military action against Taiwan is strongly opposed by other East Asian security actors. As Beijing continues its campaign of military and economic coercion against Taipei and consolidates increasingly formidable military capabilities with an eye on Taiwan, such deterrence-building efforts are sorely needed.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*