



AN AUKUS-JAPAN-ROK FRAMEWORK FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC

BY JASMIN ALSAIED

Jasmin Alsaied (jalsaid@mei.edu) is a US Navy Surface Warfare Officer and a 2023 YFPF Security and Defense Rising Expert. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense, the Department of the Navy, or the U.S. Government.

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 this vital partnership can be fostered. For previous entries please click [here](#) and [here](#).

The [AUKUS](#) security agreement, cemented between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom in September 2021, enhances regional partnership in the Indo-Pacific by facilitating technology sharing, strengthened supply chains, and the acquisition of nuclear powered, conventionally armed submarines for Australia. The pact also creates a pathway to establish engagements focused on renewing, strengthening, and expanding military cooperation between AUKUS, South Korea, and Japan.

For the region's security, stability, and protection, American practitioners should seek to expand Japan, South Korea, and AUKUS relationships by developing a framework engaged in combined defense efforts that build interoperability and trust in environments where China's assertiveness remains ever-present. AUKUS-Japan-ROK engagement would allow stakeholders to work towards shared goals against threats in the region by providing opportunities to use technology as a deterrent to aggressors.

To streamline defense frameworks currently in the region, this new engagement would create an opportunity to develop an integrated deterrence posture that changes the security landscape of the Indo-Pacific. In doing so, the framework could also develop the Indo-Pacific's premier advanced technology incubator. Like US Central Command's [Task Force 59](#), US Indo-Pacific Command can work with the ROK, Japan, and other AUKUS members to establish multilateral exercises that allow nations to test, develop, and iterate upon technologies that support a more robust maritime partnership—a key tenet of the Biden administration's [Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness](#).

There is an interest from all parties to increase the use of advanced technologies in the region. First, the AUKUS pact includes [projects](#) on undersea autonomous vehicles, artificial intelligence systems, and the rapid integration of commercial technologies. Moreover, both the ROK and Japan have expressed interest in AI and autonomous projects and could help test and develop these platforms to solve warfighting needs. Further, these efforts directly tie into parallel objectives outlined by the [Phnom Penh statement](#) on the US-Japan-ROK trilateral partnership. The November 2022 statement emphasized the importance of technology leadership, security, and regional partnership. With Japan presiding over the G7 this year, the country could likely seek to tie in efforts from several of their [priorities](#): resistance to economic coercion, the promotion and protection of emerging technologies, and the increased cooperation between like-minded countries.

Regional defense efforts under this framework could improve maritime domain awareness and facilitate closer postures that reiterate Japan and the ROK's place as leaders at the forefront of a harmonized Indo-Pacific strategy. The integration and placement of these tech platforms in the region could accomplish two tasks: develop new defense capabilities for the ROK, Japan, and AUKUS, while also testing and embedding technologies that rely on rapid data transfer and information sharing. Both outcomes work towards a shared goal of deterring aggressive actors in the region and allow like-minded nations to develop technologies without the concern of malicious

proliferation. This joint framework would reinforce confidence-building measures at a time when discussions of weapons and warfare tend to threaten stability.

AUKUS members, however, should remain cognizant of the implications their security pact may have on perceptions of security in the region. At its inception, the AUKUS security pact brought together three nations looking to build new opportunities to support and champion a free and open Indo-Pacific. Now, the pact must acknowledge sentiments that key Asian allies like the ROK and Japan may harbor. During Japan's 2021 Liberal Democratic Party leadership contest, current prime minister Fumio Kishida [expressed skepticism](#) with the AUKUS deal. Likewise, many in the ROK are concerned with China's views of the AUKUS deal. South Koreans want to avoid another ream of punishment from China, like the [sanctions dealt](#) after the 2017 installation of the THAAD missile defense system. Another round of [cyber attacks](#) or [missiles](#) are also options [China and the DPRK can choose to illicit](#) a swift and painful response to deeper collaboration with the Americans.

Negative sentiments alongside potential retaliation could make the case for either country's disinterest in a tech-heavy force laydown with AUKUS. For Japan and the ROK, participation further feeds into the narrative that US-led defense postures aren't inclusive of all Asian nations, regardless of democratic status or wealth. With such a large presence in the region, it is natural for Japan and the ROK to ask themselves where they fit into the security aperture as treaty allies and how their capabilities integrate with the pact's. Employing these technologies is not just signaling—it's a dangerous reality to many that stronger, more powerful militaries intend to change the way they engage in global relationships, markets, multilateral institutions, and more. The AUKUS pact should be fully ready to come across a similar or commensurate response from any actor in the Indo-Pacific.

However, a closer examination would reveal what both nations truly seek from alliances and defense posturing. First, the ROK wishes to protect its interests and sovereignty in a changing security environment. In the past, this sentiment was lost on

many Western policymakers, but it seems that the latest [trilateral ballistic missile exercise](#) held on Feb. 22 between the ROK, US, and Japan is working to mitigate many of the ROK's security concerns. Second, Japan's recently released [National Defense Strategy](#) makes clear that Japan seeks to develop counter-strike capabilities and heavily participate in the initial phases of the kill chain. In conjunction with the [2015 legislation](#), meant to expand the mission sets of the Self-Defense Forces, Japan is clearly serious about transforming their defense posture. Lastly, both countries also seek greater assurances or information regarding the commitment of America's extended deterrent. As evident by the establishment of the trilateral [US-Japan-ROK Extended Deterrence Dialogue](#) this June, both allies see conversations regarding integrated deterrence and their place under America's "nuclear umbrella" as the priority. At the root of this relationship, stakeholders must remember that this framework would be focused on deterring threats through tech-centric defense efforts—not at power balancing amongst themselves.

American defense strategy should capitalize on the growing desire within Japan and South Korea to pursue more advanced warfighting techniques, increased defense spending, and an ameliorated posture in the region in tandem with regional allies and partners. Though many partnerships and information sharing agreements of some form already exist bilaterally between these nations, such as [GSOMIA](#), none currently integrate and streamline many of the existing efforts surrounding defense and security. The AUKUS-Japan-ROK connection could be a natural extension of these relationships.

To be clear, AUKUS-Japan-ROK is a framework for engagement with Japan and the ROK that does not rely on nuclear technology sharing. Instead, the AUKUS-Japan-ROK relationship could build a broader, more cohesive engagement of actors united in deterring regional threats by using advanced emerging technologies, like those previously mentioned. Engagements of this nature could also supplement AUKUS' military aperture and provide a shared framework that uses soft power tools to project stability in the region. An AUKUS-Japan-ROK relationship will become ever more important as

China continues to threaten rules-based norms out to sea. Capitalizing on the momentum between warming Japan-Korea relations, AUKUS' progress, and an increased appetite in tech needs to be a priority of the Biden administration. Although AUKUS is still years away from this kind of development, early dialogue on the future of the region is of the utmost importance. Other regional allies and partners will be watching closely to see how the US and Asian allies cooperate in the coming years as tensions rise in the Indo-Pacific. Alliance projection, though largely overlooked during peacetime, is a tool of *benefit*, not of *burden*. As the regional demand for multilateral leadership grows, acknowledging the defensive, diplomatic, and capacity concerns of such an alliance will be key to the success of an AUKUS+2 relationship.

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