



***TO SECURE US-JAPAN-ROK GAINS
FROM CAMP DAVID, BRING SOUTH
KOREA TO THE QUAD***

BY JOSHUA FITT

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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](#), and [here](#).

On a warm August afternoon in Virginia, beneath a lush canopy of ash trees, President Joe Biden, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, and President Yoon Suk Yeol convened to show the world that their response to adversity is unity. In contrast to the gridlock that has characterized the nadir in [Japan-ROK relations since 2018](#), the [Spirit of Camp David](#) charts a course for the US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship predicated on steadfast alignment in the face of unprecedented threats. Among the [summit's initiatives](#) is a plan to regularize trilateral ballistic missile defense and anti-submarine warfare exercises—a response to North Korea's [record-breaking tempo](#) of provocative missile tests over the past year and a stark reminder of the stakes underpinning the trilateral relationship.

Considering the [backdrop](#) of a [deteriorating security environment](#) in the Indo-Pacific, this turning point is vital to the sustainability of the regional order. However, while the latest round of Japan-ROK rapprochement is promising, it remains fragile, and therefore the progress of the US-Japan-ROK trilateral could unravel, like after similar past breakthroughs. Still, by articulating a common vision and actionable

agenda, the United States, Japan, and South Korea are undeniably closer to escaping the well-trod cycle of previous decades. To continue making progress toward a relationship that will survive the next resurgence in Japan-ROK bilateral tensions, additional efforts must both increase the political costs of regression and demonstrate to domestic populations that these relationships can be sources of strength and catalysts for prosperity.

Fortunately, a complementary agenda with initiatives on preserving a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific [already exists](#) in the form of the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States). South Korean integration into the Quad's activities would provide a channel through which Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul can work together on concrete lines of effort, thereby reinforcing their relationship against bilateral turbulence.

Amid the increased volatility in the region, the resurrection of the Quad stands out as a momentous victory for stability. In a few short years, the Quad has emerged as a focal point of multilateral collaboration in the Indo-Pacific and a [central pillar](#) of the Biden administration's regional strategy. The Quad is a major force for good in the region: its promise is rooted in an ambitious agenda that aims to meet the needs of the Indo-Pacific through leveraging the comparative advantages of its members as liberal democracies. That agenda has grown from [the Quad's origins](#) in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the mid-2000s to its current state with [working groups](#) tackling a slate of issues, including [cyber security](#), [climate change](#), [infrastructure](#), and [critical and emerging technology](#).

While South Korea may not officially join the Quad in the near future, that should not preclude its involvement. During the Quad's revitalization in 2020 and 2021, Japan-ROK tensions and former President [Moon Jae-in's indisposition](#) toward the group understandably made South Korea's participation a nonstarter. Now that relations have improved and Yoon has [expressed interest](#) in certain working groups, the situation has changed. Nonetheless, the Quad countries have signaled their grouping will not expand its membership as it is still gaining momentum and

defining its purpose. However, after two years of building the lines of effort of its various working groups since its [first leader-level summit](#), the Quad should soon begin to consider opportunities for partnerships and consultations on certain initiatives with highly capable like-minded countries such as South Korea.

To start, the Quad could invite Seoul to send observers to working group meetings. South Korea already [engages bilaterally](#) with Quad countries on many of the issues in the Quad's portfolio. Seoul's financial resources, technical know-how, and positive reputation in the region would empower the Quad to scale up its activities and build a more compelling agenda, particularly in areas such as critical and emerging technology, where South Korea is already a world leader. From Seoul's perspective, the Quad is an opportunity to act on its Indo-Pacific foreign policy ambitions of increasing South Korea's presence outside the Korean Peninsula, thereby transforming into a "[global pivotal state](#)."

Considering South Korea's position as a strong US ally, [leading Indo-Pacific democracy](#), and technological powerhouse, South Korean involvement in the Quad would not only be a force multiplier for the grouping, but also a boon for the US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship. Incorporating South Korea into the region's most promising democratic coalition would provide critical opportunities to rebuild the connective tissue of the US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship that have atrophied over the past several years. Through the Quad, Japanese and South Korean officials would have more opportunities to interact, exchange views, and build personal ties in a constructive multilateral environment. Acting in concert upon their shared strategic interests would lay the foundation for a more cooperative bilateral partnership by increasing trust and fostering mutual understanding.

The tenor of Japan-ROK ties habitually fluctuate, but the Quad could bring structural support to the relationship. With the [Spirit of Camp David](#), leaders in Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul took advantage of the current upswing in trilateral ties to proclaim their shared ambitions and collective purpose. Adding the

Quad's comprehensive lines of effort to those objectives would enhance the trilateral's scope and further cement its future. The Quad will not always be closed to new members, and in the meantime it ought to pursue relationships with like-minded partners that would support its goals. Incorporating South Korea—even initially at the observer level—would lead to a more capable Quad, a more stable trilateral relationship, and ultimately, a more prosperous Indo-Pacific.

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