



***TRILATERAL APPROACHES:
DIVISIONS, SANCTIONS, AND A
STRONGER FUTURE***

BY SERINA NAKAGAWA

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On March 23-25, 2023, I attended the United States-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Next-Generation Leaders Dialogue in Tokyo, Japan that focused on the theme: "Reimagining the Trilateral Partnership for the Future of the Indo-Pacific." I met many talented and passionate young leaders, thinkers, and political strategists from Japan, South Korea and across the United States at this Workshop. Their educational backgrounds and career experience was deeply insightful for how governments, militaries, and some prominent think-tanks approach regional issues – especially since I am much closer to being a sociologist-historian than a political scientist.

Throughout the Trilateral Dialogue, Russia's invasion of Ukraine remained central. Instability in Europe has created friction between NATO-allied countries and Russian allies such as China. It has forced stakeholders in the trilateral to reconsider the salience

of compounding Taiwan-DPRK contingencies. The United States (US) has a vested interest in providing security and assurance to allies and states with shared values given these crackdowns on democracy and challenges to the rules-based international order.

Delegates representing Japan and the ROK expressed concern over the US's ability to lead after witnessing the slow and rather disheartening response to Ukraine. For Japan and the ROK, an issue in the Taiwan strait or with the DPRK is more tangible than for the US. This division was expressed through different approaches to the future of the Indo-Pacific and the Trilateral relationship. Whereas delegates from the US viewed the region through large-scale issues such as climate security issues, emerging technology, and challenges to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), the other delegates focused on the DPRK, the Taiwan strait, and China's centrality in the region economically and technologically. All delegates saw intelligence sharing as a path towards a stronger alliance both in relative peace times and during a higher military operations tempo. The specificity of the Korean and Japanese delegates were indicative of the imminent threat that regional instability poses.



In our talks, it felt as though the Trilateral Alliance is maintained primarily on an adversarial relationship with China and the DPRK. The current focal point is on semiconductor manufacturing and punishing breaches in the rule of law with sanctions and intensified joint military exercises. I find that this is a rather limited way to frame the importance of the Trilateral. Instead, I hope that a renegotiation of DPRK sanctions will lead to a productive talk about

the future of the Trilateral beyond Chinese and North Korean threats. Currently, the DPRK faces the most extensive sanctions regime in the world. The three member countries use sanctions as the primary tool to punish the DPRK. However, it is worth noting that the sanctions regime has not prevented further development of nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities for the DPRK – indicating its failure to achieve their goals.



All three teams suggested some form of further sanctions on the DPRK during the dialogue without discussion as to why additional sanctions would be effective. It is necessary to review the purpose, ramifications, and consider alternatives to hold the DPRK accountable for its actions. Criticisms of sanctions on the DPRK fall under three categories: poor implementation, anti-humanitarian consequences, and ignoring the fundamental purpose of North Korea's nuclear capabilities. Proponents of sanctions admit that there are many holes in the policy, mostly involving workarounds by the DPRK including illicit trade and forgeries. Furthermore, changes in state policy by NATO-allied countries for bilateral relations flip-flopping between engagement (i.e. "Sunshine" policy) and strict denuclearization has created ambiguity and ineffective policy implementation. Objectors to sanctions cite the disproportionate effect on average North Korean citizens with the worst affecting poor and marginalized people. Sanctions have forced the regime to innovate income sources, resulting in cyberwarfare capabilities that have reaped over [\\$1.3 billion](#) for the regime. Although humanitarian aid is allowed, it is often rejected by the DPRK's

government and thus, continues unnecessary civilian suffering. As someone who studies the North Korean diaspora and human rights, it saddens me to see how talks regarding the DPRK often only consider war and sanctions and rarely the people. More thought must go into sanctions and as sanctions should not be seen as a simple solution to the "DPRK problem." I hope more of my peers will consider how their policies will affect non-combatants. It felt as though we only have China experts and Korean issues took a backseat in the discussion. Our fears of Chinese hegemony must not overshadow our duties to the ROK-U.S. Alliance and to problems that may arise across the 38th parallel for the region.



Overall, I was excited to have this opportunity to gain political insight internationally and nationally with my fellow Americans. While differences in our approaches may inspire doubt between members of the Trilateral partnership, these differences also serve as a source for growth. At the highest level of policy and among young scholars, I am confident in our alliance's future. Our allies are capable of effectively carrying out a coordinated front against these challenges. The Trilateral Dialogue was a good forum to express concerns and learn from our differences to become better allies toward a stronger future. Additionally, it was nice to be able to visit the U.S. embassy and learn about U.S. priorities from federal representatives. It was insightful to hear directly from the Cabinet Secretary for Public Affairs talk about Japanese priorities in green transformation and Japanese ideas of benevolent capitalism and the importance of the G7 for Japan. Information from these visits, including a visit to the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs and the Sankei Shimbun, would have otherwise been unavailable to me. As someone who is currently insulated from these types of conversations due to my educational focus and background, I am grateful for this rare opportunity to engage with international politics in a way that is exciting, inspiring, and avoids being mind-numbing political and militaristic jargon.

Disclaimer: All opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent any organization.

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