



**A TRILATERAL DISCOURSE: THE  
ROLE OF HAWAII IN A FREE AND  
OPEN INDO-PACIFIC**

BY TESS SCHWALGER

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The Next-Gen Trilateral Young Leaders Dialogue was a riveting exercise that demonstrated the strength, resilience, and future areas for growth in our Trilateral alliance between Japan, the ROK, and the United States. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn from area experts as well as collaborate with our peers in the historic metropolis of Tokyo. As we visited the US Embassy, RCAST, Sankei Shimbun, and the Prime Minister's cabinet offices, the intricacies of diplomacy and policy making became clearer. The main activity

of the Next-Gen Trilateral Young Leaders Dialogue was a tabletop exercise that allowed us to put everything that we had learned into practice. As we discussed our countries' priorities and perspectives, it became clear that while our short-term goals were aligned, our long-term projections were not as connected. The United States' geographic location and its commitments to the region were reflected in our responses. Young leaders from Japan and the ROK were anxiously awaiting greater U.S. military responsiveness to aggression in the region, beyond just the increase in forward posturing with in the first-island chain.



The experts at the Trilateral Dialogue emphasized that the United States and its allies are not worried about China breaking laws, but rather China changing the rule of law in order to assert itself as the world superpower. As the United States and its allies fight to maintain their position, there are two fronts in the wake of rising tension between the PRC and the Trilateral to be aware of: first, military advancements in the first island chain and second, transport control and ownership in the second and third island chains. One of the most common concerns among young leaders and experts alike was military advancements in the region. Of particular note was the future of disruptive technology. While the U.S. military had been quick to increase the intensity of military exercises and presence in the region, like RIMPAC 2022, Balikatan 2023, and supporting Japan's counterstrike abilities, our peers from the ROK and Japan worried that it was not enough to counter China's emerging technology and digital policies.

Looking for a way to bring about potential solutions, experts urged young leaders to deepen their commitment to share intelligence and increase dialogue within the Trilateral.

Equally as important, and potentially critical to long term sustainability in the Pacific, is the challenge of economic and political independence in Oceania, specifically in regards to transport control and private ownership in the second and third island chains. As the tabletop exercise progressed, it became clear to young leaders that while the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) discussion was focused on Taiwan, in many ways it neglected the importance of other countries in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. Here is where I see one of the United States 'greatest opportunities for growth, specifically with regards to Hawaii's potential role in regional leadership.



Just as Hawaii is used as a hub for the United States defense forces, Hawaii can also serve as a diplomatic/political epicenter for the Pacific and Southeast Asia. In recent months, we have seen an increase of formal US relations being established in the region, such as the embassies in the Solomon Islands and Tonga, with more to potentially open in Vanuatu and Kiribati. Re-emphasizing the Pacific in FOIP is crucial to counter China's soft power advances in the region. U.S. policymakers should leverage Hawaii's diverse population and interconnected community to strengthen soft power in the region. This can be done through local leaders in Hawaii encouraging greater economic exchange in

Oceania and staffing indigenous people in the diaspora in Pacific embassies and government offices. As we enter into a new era of multipolarity, the importance of self-sustainable countries and economies in the second and third island chains will grow, and Hawaii can play a fundamental role in their establishment. The future of the Trilateral is heavily dependent on maintaining of the rule of law, stabilizing trade, and creating opportunities for sustainable development throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

Attending the Next-Gen Trilateral Young Leaders Dialogue was an eye-opening experience. Not only was this my first time in Japan, but it was also one of my first experiences seeing how diplomatic relationships work in real time. As we nourish our relationships with members of the Trilateral through intelligence sharing and a unified vision of a peaceful Indo-Pacific region, we can engage more in sustainable trade relations and enter a new era of political stability.



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