



**US-JAPAN-ROK TRILATERAL
DIALOGUE TAKEAWAYS: URGENCY,
EFFECTIVE COOPERATION, AND
ALIGNMENT**

BY CALEB WORKMAN

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This March, I participated in the US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Next-Generation Leaders Dialogue, designed around “Reimagining the Trilateral Partnership for the Future of the Indo-Pacific.” Taking place in Tokyo, Japan, this dynamic event consisted of site visits, discussion panels, and thought-provoking dialogue between attendees from the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. The three-day-long exercise revolved around the status and future of the US-Japan-ROK partnership, which represents some of the world’s most vital economic and military relations.

On the first day, we visited the United States Embassy, the Japanese Cabinet Office, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Sankei Shimbun Newspaper headquarters. We learned about the US State Department’s strategies, the Kishida administration’s foreign policy priorities, the strategic significance and challenges of the US-Japan alliance, and the reporting processes and viewpoints of one of Japan’s largest newspapers. Additionally, a panel of academic experts provided us with a deeper background on the three countries’ relations, while representatives from United States Forces Japan elaborated on the complexities of the US military’s involvement in Japan. We spent the second and third days at the University of Tokyo, Komaba Campus. Here, the Young Leaders considered their countries’ goals in the Pacific Region, expected challenges, and appropriate responses to arising issues they may

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Across the dialogues, roundtable discussions, and Tabletop Exercises, I noted three recurring themes:

1. A Resounding Sense of Urgency to Strengthen Positions in the Indo-Pacific

Often influenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many of the discussions centered around the heightened need to react immediately to the increasingly aggressive Chinese and DPRK posture in the Indo-Pacific. The Russia-Ukraine War has directed the US, Japan, and ROK to view forceful reunifications of China and the Korean Peninsula not as abstract ideas written into a rogue nation’s constitution, but something that can happen today with no warning whatsoever. The war has caused the participating countries, namely Japan and ROK due to their proximity to the potential conflicts, to view their situation more existentially and gravely. Consequently, it has added a sense of realism to the situation and, rightfully, resulted in deliberate action. A frequently mentioned figure was the Japanese buildup of its defense force, with spending budget accounting for 2% of total GDP, along with a proposed more outwards focus of the country’s armed forces. This new landmark strategy reverses decades of security policy to react to Japan’s unstable security environment. Also noted was an overall increase from last year in public security

consciousness in Japan and South Korea due to the conflict. This reaction reaffirmed the purpose of the US Military's continued presence in Japan and the ROK and the importance of strengthened military and diplomatic ties between the three countries.



2. An Introspective View on the Effectiveness of Intergovernmental Organizations

With the Russia-Ukraine War in mind, the dialogues centered around finding an intergovernmental framework that could effectively prevent and react to crises. The United Nations Security Council's inability to act against the Russian Invasion highlighted the lack of an existing multinational organization that could either militarily or economically address similar events in Asia. The G7 was commonly regarded as a potential frontrunner for this role in the Pacific, with conference attendees considering the effectiveness of the forum's coordinated sanction-based response to the invasion in 2022. Furthermore, the backdrop of the upcoming G7 Summit in Hiroshima added a sense of relevance to the G7 in our conversations. However, some Young Leaders were quick to point out the G7's shortcomings, particularly regarding the group's lack of inclusivity of Asian countries, especially South Korea.

As a result, we spent much time discussing what kinds of alternative intergovernmental frameworks could be called upon for a coordinated and organized military or economic reaction to Chinese or DPRK aggression. The Quad, ASEAN Regional Forum, and even a formally organized Pacific military alliance, like that of NATO or even SEATO, were mentioned as possible foundations

for deterrence and escalation. Our general consensus stated the immediate need for a coordinated coalition with deliberate sanctions and an orchestrated military response already planned. In each of these scenarios, it was clear that the representatives expected the US, Japan, and ROK to take part in leading the global response to the crises.

3. The Need for Aligned Goals and Cooperative Action

The final theme underpinning the three discussion-filled days was the reliance of the success of each nation's actions on its alignment with its allies. Each nation's representatives expected transparency of actions, goals, and expectations from the others. Correspondingly, any unified response to a crisis would call for harmonious and consistent rhetoric between actors. We determined that we would all need to openly communicate with our allies to align on when to take action and when not to take action. Accordingly, delegates emphasized how crucial it will be that their counterparts take no immediate action without first consulting with them. Additionally, a frequently mentioned effort to achieve this solidarity was intelligence sharing with partners and allies to promote cohesion in understanding and reduce the potential for mishaps to occur.

Any approach to maintaining stability in the Pacific Region can only be achieved through unity. This unity, in turn, is gained only through deliberate efforts to establish and build on partnerships, an effect achieved through decades of summits, reaffirmed treaties, multilateral exercises, economic agreements, and dialogues like ours.

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