



**TRUMP OR HARRIS: NEXT
ADMINISTRATION MUST SUSTAIN
AND ADVANCE THE US-JAPAN-ROK
TRILATERAL**

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The following is the eighth in a series on the challenges facing the next US presidential administration in managing the most crucial Indo-Pacific relationships. See part one in the series [here](#), see part two [here](#), part three [here](#), part four [here](#), part five [here](#), part six [here](#), and part seven [here](#).

With only days before the US presidential election, both the Japanese and the Republic of Korea governments are concerned about the implications of the outcome, which could very well impact the bilateral alliances and trilateral security partnership.

The point both Japan and the ROK will be watching very closely will be the new US administration's strategy vis-à-vis the threats and risks in the region. China's military modernization and assertive actions in the Taiwan Strait and beyond continue to intensify, and North Korea is soldiering on with its enhancement of its military readiness while also bolstering its hostile stance toward the ROK. Moreover, the growing cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow under the auspices of the "comprehensive security partnership" also raises new concerns about its impact on international security.

The combination of these threats up the risks in the region. Tensions have grown significantly in the last

two years in both the Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula, with added concerns over the risks of a [simultaneous contingency](#) in both theaters. Moreover, China's assertive actions in the East and South China Seas also raise concerns from the viewpoints of both defense and transport security. Taken together, both Japan and the ROK view their surrounding security environment to be increasingly challenging, but also have recognized that their security interests are intertwined.

Against this backdrop, the US, Japan, and the ROK have worked over the past two and a half years to deal with the myriad threats—with much improvements in the level of strategic and operational coordination. The frequency of trilateral dialogues at all levels, as well as defense exercises have increased, and there have also been new initiatives such as the real-time sharing of North Korean missile launches among the three forces.

The "[Spirit of Camp David](#)" issued at the Biden-Kishida-Yoon summit in August 2023 was essentially the institutionalization of the trilateral partnership. While the institutionalization of trilateral cooperation has been tried before, they either did not last or went through ups and downs with little follow-through. In 1999, the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group was established, but folded in 2003. In 2008, the Defense Trilateral Talks was launched, but failed to make any significant breakthroughs at the strategic and operational levels.

What made the "Spirit of Camp David" special was vision promised by the three states, vowing to deal with not just the North Korean threat, but the various security issues in the Indo-Pacific region. While one could claim that the trilateral vision was simply a broad gathering of the three government's Indo-Pacific strategies, it nonetheless reflected their convergent commitment to work as a stabilizer in the region.

Naturally, the future of the trilateral partnership pivots on consistency, coherence, and credibility. Arguably, the biggest threat to the partnership's sustainability has been the interaction of domestic political controversies and interests. For years, much of the

concerns were pointed at the state of Japan-ROK relations, where revisionist political disputes have ruptured cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo. Now, however, it is Japan and the ROK who are worried about whether the US will continue their commitment to trilateral coordination and extended deterrence—particularly with prospects of Donald Trump being elected.

Japan and the ROK's concerns over the new US administration have changed the tone of some of the discussions among interlocutors. Interestingly (but understandably), there are even growing voices arguing that Seoul and Tokyo must do more together to assure Washington that trilateral cooperation is beneficial and critical for the security interests of all parties.

Indeed, the “Spirit of Camp David” and the efforts pursued by Biden, Kishida, and Yoon administrations were about doing as much as possible to make it hard for any future leadership in the three countries to reverse the partnership. Yet the real test is how the US, Japan, and the ROK can further advance the partnership than just trying to keep it together.

At the macro level, much is about how the US, Japan, and the ROK operationalizes trilateral coordination and cooperation to deal with the issues in the Indo-Pacific region.

To achieve the above, the three will formulate and integrate their strategic and operational readiness beyond missile defense and anti-submarine warfare, and apply them to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; naval mine warfare; cyber and electronic warfare; outer space; evacuation of citizens; search and rescue; and logistics—all of which require greater [interoperability](#).

The three countries should also work toward, or at least discuss the establishment of a trilateral nuclear consultative group. While there have been limited concrete discussions on the expansion of the US-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group to include Japan, the three governments must take renewed steps in institutionalizing information sharing, coordinated plans and operations, as well as strategies for nuclear

conflicts given the threats posed by China, North Korea, and Russia.

Despite the various constraints and controversies, the US, Japanese, and ROK administrations deserve much credit in taking trilateral coordination and cooperation to new levels. But given the myriad and growing threats and risks in the Indo-Pacific, the US, Japan, and the ROK must continue their efforts to sustain and further advance the partnership.

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