

# The Prospects of the U.S.-Japan-ROK Alliance and China-ROK Relations



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## Editor's Note

Professor Moon Chung-in, a core strategist in South Korea's foreign affairs and military, has served under three left-wing governments led by Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in. He has held various high-level positions, including Chairman of the National Intelligence Reform Commission, Ambassador for International Security Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Chairman of the Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative, and Special Advisor to the President Moon Jae-in for Unification, Diplomacy, and National Security. Professor Moon is also a renowned international political scholar with global influence and one of the architects of the 'Sunshine Policy' towards North Korea.

Currently, Northeast Asia's international relations are in historical transition, with South Korea being a significant variable. What are the 'instability factors' in U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation? Is Camp David Summit really a 'milestone'? Where do the challenges and opportunities lie in China-ROK relations? How to make a breakthrough in the North Korean nuclear issue? How does South Korea's domestic political landscape interact with its foreign policy? Moon Chung-in, the former key decision-maker in South Korean diplomacy was interviewed on Ifeng.com's 'Dialogue with the World'."

## **Highlights:**

1. The establishment of 'NEATO' was a long-standing aspiration of American figures like Dulles and Campbell. With the August summit between the United States, Japan, and South Korea, the U.S. has made further progress toward this goal. However, South Korea's benefits from this are limited. The trilateral mechanism between the United States, Japan, and South Korea has two weaknesses: first, the uncertainty caused by domestic political fluctuations in the U.S. and South Korea, and second, the inherent instability within the triangular relationship."

2. Japan's flawed historical perception has led to a setback in recent years in military cooperation between Japan and South Korea. GSOMIA was once at risk of being terminated, but there hasn't been a significant interruption in crucial military intelligence exchanges between the two countries. Progressives in South Korea are concerned that the Summit could promote Japan's remilitarization, contribute to constitutional revisions, and potentially lead to a resurgence of militarism."

3. On August 15th, during the Liberation Day speech, President Yoon Suk-yeol did not follow the usual practice of criticizing Japan. For President Yoon, it is more important for Japan and South Korea to jointly address the threats from China and North Korea than to respect the historical memories of the Korean people. Left-wing leader Lee Jae-myung engaged in a hunger strike protest. The immediate cause was to protest the Yoon government's permissive attitude towards Japan's discharge of nuclear-contaminated water. The underlying reasons involve political disputes between the two parties and personal grievances."

4. Recent South Korean media have shown signs of a softened stance towards Japan, but public sentiment remains negative towards Japan. Japan is cautious about South

Korea's recent 'pro-Japan' attitude, as it recognizes that with shifts in South Korea's domestic political climate, anti-Japanese sentiment can easily resurface. Some in Japan believe that as long as inter-Korean relations remain tense, South Korea will seek Japan's assistance, and therefore, Japan-South Korea relations won't deteriorate. However, this view is somewhat biased and simplistic."

5.The statements made during the U.S.-Japan-South Korea summit regarding North Korea are seen as merely a change in rhetoric, while the situation on the Korean Peninsula continues to deteriorate. North Korea has previously accepted China's proposal, but now it requires greater concessions. The ongoing deterioration of South Korean public sentiment towards China plays a significant role in the worsening China-South Korea relations. This is rooted in various historical, cultural disputes, media demonization, and has a significant impact on young people in South Korea. It may be challenging for China-South Korea relations to improve in the short term, but if the left-wing takes power in South Korea four years from now, there could be an opportunity for a shift in bilateral relations."

**Interviewer: Chen Zhiwei**

**Editor: Chen Zhiwei**

**Dialogue with the World: Regarding the recent concluded U.S.-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Summit, President Yoon Suk-Yeol referred to this summit as a "milestone" for trilateral cooperation. Based on the outcomes of the talks, do you believe this summit truly holds a "milestone" significance?**

**Moon Chung-in: It might be a milestone for the US, but not for South Korea. Washington has always wanted to create a sub-regional collective defense**

**arrangement, like NATO, in Northeast Asia.** Thus, the summit was a kind of milestone for the US. But I don't think it represents a milestone for Seoul since it has already been maintaining a strong bilateral alliance with the US. and a close trilateral security cooperation with the US and Japan. I do not see any additional merits for Seoul other than symbolic achievement.

On August 3, 1954, John Foster Dulles, then Secretary of State proposed the establishment of NEATO (Northeast Asia Treaty Organization) similar to NATO that includes South Korea, Japan, Taiwan (then the Republic of China), and the US. **But President Rhee Syngman of South Korea strongly opposed that idea because he did not trust Japan.**

**Japan' s peace constitution also posed another barrier. At that time, Japanese public was wary of joining the alliance that could implicate Japan in another wars. That is why NEATO was not materialized.**

Kurt Campbell, who is an architect of Indo-Pacific strategy in the Biden administration, proposed the Asia rebalancing strategy in the capacity of assistant secretary of state for Asia-Pacific Affairs during the Obama administration and urged Japan and South Korea to work closely. In that way, he wanted to consolidate the trilateral security cooperation. But his efforts didn't work out well because relations between Japan and South Korea got soured over history issues.

On the occasion of Camp David Summit in July, however, his efforts proved to be successful. It can be seen as a stepping stone toward the institutionalization of trilateral cooperation, reminiscent of a NEATO-type arrangement, that can be vital to the Indo-Pacific strategy. In that sense, the US has everything to gain from the summit. Japan

gained a lot too, as evidenced by the enhancement of trilateral missile defense cooperation without making any concessions to South Korea.

**For South Korea, however, I don't see any big gains because existing arrangements such as the ROK-US alliance and the existing US-Japan-ROK security cooperation have already been working well. It cannot be denied though that the Yoon government was psychologically and symbolically rewarded.**

**Dialogue with the World: Some commentators suggest that the key aspect of this summit is the "institutionalizing" of trilateral cooperation, aiming to maintain the existing level of cooperation in security and prevent potential setbacks due to changes in governments. How do you perceive this perspective? Which factors do you believe impact the stability of trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan? Among these countries, which one presents the most significant "instability factor"? Japan seems particularly concerned about potential shifts in South Korea's policies after a change in government, which could potentially disrupt trilateral cooperation. How do you evaluate Japan's apprehensions?**

**Moon Chung-in: Yes, institutionalization of trilateral cooperation can be seen as the most significant achievement. But I see two elements of instability. The first is domestic politics, and the other is a built-in instability of the triangular relationship.**

**Change of the government in South Korea can greatly affect the future of the trilateral relations.** It's quite plausible given what happened in the past. For example, President Kim Dae Jung significantly improved bilateral relations with Japan by adopting the Future Partnership Declaration with prime minister Obuchi Keizo in October 1998. However, as history issues such as comfort women, the forced labor mobilization during the Japanese colonial period, and Dokdo/Takeshima became politicized, Japan- S o u t h

Korea relationship got instantly soured, even during the conservative governments of pro-Japan stance. That's why some Japanese are skeptical of Japan-South Korea relations as well as the future of the trilateral relations.

The same can be said of the US. Suppose Trump gets reelected in 2024! The trilateral cooperation will encounter a major challenge. Likewise, domestic political changes can emerge as a major instability factor.

And **from a geometric point of view, the triangular relationship is inherently unstable.** If one of the three betrays or defects, it is bound to dysfunction or collapse.

**Dialogue with the World: Former U.S. government officials have stated that South Korea's previous refusal to share radar data with Japan hindered U.S. efforts to counter North Korean missile threats, necessitating more convoluted approaches to obtain information. While South Korea and Japan had previously signed 'General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA)', South Korea decided to terminate this agreement in 2019. What were the considerations behind South Korea's decision to terminate the agreement?**

**Moon Chung-in:** I do not buy this argument. The Moon Jae-in government never terminated GSOMIA. It was conditional. On July 1, 2020, the Abe government imposed unilateral sanctions on South Korea involving three semiconductor-related materials. Japan claimed that South Korean firms were illicitly transferring Japan's critical technology and materials to potentially hostile countries like China and North Korea.

The Moon government was very angry about the measure because it was a false accusation. South Korean firms never engaged in such practices and fully compliant with international regulatory regimes such as the Vassenaar convention.

**The measure was seen as a political vendetta by the Japanese government to punish South Korean firms over the South Korean court's decision to freeze assets of Japanese firms in South Korea which were involved in forced labor mobilization during the colonial period.**

For the Moon government, it was a matter of trust. **If Japan cannot trust South Korea, how can South Korea exchange sensitive military information with Japan under GSOMIA?**

The Moon government responded by saying that unless the Japanese government lifts the sanctions, it would not renew the GSOMIA in November, which was supposed to be renewed annually. But the Moon government did not terminate GSOMIA partly because of American pressure, and partly because of military utilities, although its scope and depth was limited.

And the statement by former American government officials seems inaccurate. In tandem with GSOMIA, South Korea, the US, and Japan have been operating the Trilateral Information Sharing Accord (TISA). Information exchange between South Korea and the US has been robust, and the US can share such information with Japan. Thus, I believe, there were no major interruptions in information sharing between Japan and South Korea.

**Dialogue with the World: In the context of the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral summit, opposition party in South Korea have asserted that the South Korea-U.S. alliance is already robust enough, rendering cooperation with Japan unnecessary. How would you evaluate this viewpoint?**

**Moon Chung-in:** Yeah, that is the basic position of the opposition Democratic Party of Korea. Those who are critical of the Camp David summit argue that the existing bilateral

alliance with the US and trilateral cooperation with Japan and the US are robust enough to enhance South Korea's security. Thus, the new trilateral arrangement would not accrue any additional benefits to South Korea. It may be subject to the law of diminishing returns.

**One of the summit's documents, 'Commitment to Consultation,' clearly indicates that although Japan, South Korea, and the US are committed to consult in coping with common threats in the region, there are no domestic and international legal obligations.**

The Biden administration also stated clearly that the trilateral mechanism is a consultative body, not an alliance. Nevertheless, **the critics fear that such trilateral arrangement can send a wrong signal to Japan, tempting its conservatives to push for the amendment of the Peace Constitution.**

They have been campaigning for the constitutional amendment for 'a normal state (普通の国)' through remilitarization, namely the transformation of self-defense forces into regular army. . Many South Koreans worry about such developments.

This could be tantamount to bringing the genie, remilitarization, out of the bottle. **The critics worry that if Japan is allowed to remilitarize without first making authentic and sincere repentance and apology of past historical mistakes, old legacies of its militarism could easily resurface.**

Liberals and progressives in South Korea argue that putting the genie of militarism back into the bottle will be a daunting challenge. In that sense, they are critical of the Camp David summit. Indeed, burying the historical past for the sake of imminent security and economic interests will further aggravate fractured pains of the South Korean people.



**Dialogue with the World:** In this year's August 15th Liberation Day speech, President Yoon refrained from criticizing Japan on historical and nuclear wastewater disposal issues. Instead, he referred to Japan as a cooperative partner with shared values and interests. How do you perceive the content of President Yoon's speech?

**Moon Chung-in:** Yes, it was very unusual. Traditionally, the Independence Day presidential speeches have always touched historical issues and urged Japan to repent and apologize.

This year President Yoon did not mention about the historical past. Instead, he underscored the importance of common values shared between the two countries and need for future partnership and cooperation.

**For President Yoon, security and economic cooperation with Japan to cope with North Korea' s nuclear threats and challenges associated with China' s rise is more important than reminding people of Japan' s past historical mistakes and honoring Korean people' s collective memory of the historical past.**

A majority of South Koreans believe that his speech was inappropriate. They contend that we cannot move forward without settling the historical past. **The past is a mirror of the future. With broken mirror of the past, we cannot see the future clearly.**

I personally believe that it is not acceptable to sacrifice history issues for the sake of security and economic gains. Issues pertaining to security, economy, and history should be pursued in parallel, not in a sequential manner.

**Dialogue with the World:** Lee Jae-myong, leader of the opposition party has been undertaking a hunger strike against president Yoon. Do you believe it will be successful?

**Moon Chung-in:** I don't know. It will be a very critical political moment for Lee Jae-myong. It has elapsed nine days since he has undertaken the hunger strike. I don't know whether he will be successful or not. But his hunger strike will put the Yoon government in a very difficult situation as well.

**Nominal reason for Lee to engage in the hunger strike is protest over the disposal of Fukushima nuclear waste water into sea. But there are other reasons too. Lee argues that President Yoon doesn't honor democratic principles and he looks down upon the opposition party, which has a majority seat in the National Assembly.**

Without having mutual respect, he questions, how can he seek democratic politics? Recognition of mutual identity has become the primary cause.

**It also reflects Lee's personal grievance over the abuse of prosecutorial power.** The office of prosecutors has been investigating Lee and his associates for more than a year since Yoon, who was Prosecutor General under the Moon Jae-in government, was elected in March 2022, Lee's hunger strike can be seen as his personal protest of Yoon's government's prolonged and targeted investigation. Lee perceives the abusive investigation of Yoon's political vendetta.

Again, I don't know whether his hunger strike will be successful or not. But Lee has been gaining some public sympathy, and approval rate of him and his party has been on the rise albeit minimal.

**Dialogue with the World:** In previous years leading up to Liberation Day, there were numerous critical articles in South Korean media concerning historical issues with Japan, but this year, they were comparatively fewer. On previous International Memorial Day for Comfort Women events, large-scale rallies were held in front of the

**Japanese embassy, yet this year's event was conducted indoors and on a smaller scale. Do you believe there has been a shift in South Korean public sentiment towards Japan?**

**Moon Chung-in:** I don't think so. Public sentiments towards Japan are still negative. For example, a recent survey shows that 85% of respondents opposed the release of nuclear waste pollutant into the sea in Fukushima. And public rallies protesting Yoon government's pro-Japan stance are taking place almost weekly basis. **President Yoon has been losing his approval rate partly because of his pro-Japan policies.**

Although mainstream mass media in South Korea do not cover anti-Japanese activities fully, there are on-going public rallies regarding major historical issues such as forced labor, the comfort women, Dokdo, and the naming of East Sea, ( 东海 ) which Japan calls the Sea of Japan.

Yoon government's efforts notwithstanding, anti-Japanese sentiments will not disappear soon. That is why Japanese are not that optimistic about the future of Japan-South Korean relations. **They can be easily reversible, depending on domestic political mood.**

Former President Lee Myong-bak, who was known to be pro-Japan to his bone marrow, personally visited Dokdo for domestic political gain, disappointing Japan. Former President Park Geun-hye, whose father Park Chung-hee was a close friend of Kishi Nobuske, Abe's grandfather and former Japanese prime minister, was, contrary to public expectation, very tough on the comfort women issue.

That's why the Japanese government and people are much more cautious about Yoon's pro-Japan stance.

**Dialogue with the World: Noted Japanese media figure Sawada Katsumi (澤田克己) reviewed the state of Japan-South Korea relations during President Moon Jae-in's tenure. He mentioned that in President Moon's first year, relations between South Korea and North Korea were tense, and President Moon emphasized cooperation with Japan. Subsequently, South-North relations improved, and the importance of Japan-South Korea cooperation diminished, leading to a deterioration in Japan-South Korea relations. It seems that South-North relations are the key factor influencing Japan-South Korea relations' stability. How do you assess this perspective?**

**Moon Chung-in:** I would say it's partially correct. **It is true that when Japan and South Korea shared common policy on North Korea, the bilateral relations improved significantly.** For example, President Kim Dae-Jung pursued the sunshine policy, and Prime Minister Obuchi strongly supported it. Consequently, bilateral relations between Seoul and Tokyo were excellent.

But I don't think that North Korea is the key factor influencing the nature of Japan-South Korea relations. Let's take an example of President Moon Jae-in. He was genuinely interested in improving relations with Japan. He urged Prime Minister Abe to cooperate each other in dealing with threats from North Korea and other regional security and economic issues.

Meanwhile, Moon said that it will take much longer time to solve the history issues precisely because they require people's consent. Moon proposed to Abe that they should enhance cooperation in security/economic issues, while seeking an incremental approach to history issues simultaneously.

**But Prime Minister Abe rejected it by saying that unless history issues, especially comfort women and forced labor, are resolved first, there will be no cooperation in security and economic issues.**

Two leaders had four face-to-face meetings and eleven phone conversations, but failed to produce any positive outcomes. It was known that Prime Minister Abe was very stubborn on his stance.

In sum, inter-Korean relations are important in shaping Japan-South Korean relations, but they do not dictate the bilateral relations.

**Dialogue with the World: During the Trilateral Summit, South Korea, the United States, and Japan expressed willingness to engage in dialogue with North Korea without preconditions. However, around the beginning of the Biden administration, the U.S. stated it would not engage in unconditional talks with North Korea. What do you believe prompted this change in the U.S. stance?**

**Moon Chung-in: I would say it is simply a change in rhetoric, but not in substance.** Since its inauguration, the Biden administration has been kept sending the same message of ‘let’s meet without any preconditions’ to Pyongyang. But ‘there will be no summit diplomacy without first going through working level talks.’ North Korea did not respond to the US proposal.

Since the inauguration of the Yoon government May last year, the situation in Korea is getting from bad to worse. The Yoon government has adopted a hardline approach by strengthening self-defense posture and increasing the frequency and intensity of ROK-US joint military exercises and training.

And the US has been deploying its strategic weapons to South Korea more frequently. More importantly, the US and South Korea have agreed to upgrade American extended nuclear deterrence to deal with nuclear threats from North Korea.

Pyongyang has also been responding in kind by intensifying its ballistic missile test launches. Since May 2022, the North undertook more than 40 ballistic missile tests with more than 70 rounds. Force to force confrontation has been heightening military tension on the Korean peninsula.

**In the past, North Korea was receptive of China' s two proposals. First is the 'double suspension'(双中断) , mean ing exchange of US-ROK suspension of joint military exercises and training for North Korean suspension of nuclear and missile tests. And second is the 'two track approach(双轨并行),'** pursuing the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and the creation of peace regime in Korea simultaneously.

But now, North Korea is saying that is not enough. Kim Yo Jong, sister of Kim Jong-un, issued a statement in July: **'Even if the US suspends the joint military exercise and training as well as the deployment of US strategic weapons, we will not return to dialogue.'**

She also stated that even if the US withdraws its military forces from South Korea, the North is not going to have any meaningful talks with the US. **Because they are all reversible. Withdrawal of US forces from South Korea is also reversible. The US can redeploy their forces within 15 days.**

Therefore, **unless there are new innovative proposals that would include radical changes in terms of negotiation (e.g., from denuclearization to nuclear arms**

reduction talks) as well as the removal of hostile intent (e.g., removal of sanctions) and policy, and finally diplomatic normalization, resuming dialogue with the North will be very difficult.

**Dialogue with the World:** In recent years, anti-China sentiment among South Korean citizens has been escalating. How do you believe China could improve its image among the South Korean public? Some scholars trace the deterioration of South Korean goodwill toward China back to China's "Northeast Project," a relatively unknown project within China. Do you think South Korean media may have exaggerated the importance of this project?

**Moon Chung-in:** The Northeast Project was a source of anti-China sentiments 20 years ago. The Northeast Project is a scholarly project to restore the history of the Qing dynasty which was initiated by the China Social Science Academy.

In the process, Chinese historians involved in the project treated Goguryeo, an ancient Korean dynasty, as part of China's peripheral province. Such moves precipitated fierce anti-China sentiments in South Korea since they infringed Korean people's historical sovereignty.

However, that issue does not seem to cause anti-China sentiments in South Korea since the Chinese government took the proper measures and the project is now over.

**The THAAD issue and related China's ongoing economic and cultural sanctions since 2016 and 2017 have certainly aggravated South Korean people's anti-China sentiments.**

**There are other issues too. They are mostly related to cultural identity.** For example, during the opening ceremony of the Beijing winter Olympic, an ethnic Korean

Chinese wearing Korean costume appeared. Youths in South Korea complained that Korean costumes were introduced as if they were traditional Chinese costume. When a Chinese TV program introduced kimchi as Chinese cuisine of bao cai, South Korea youths became anti-Chinese.

Most recently, Chinese provincial authorities in Northeast provinces have not allowed South Korean tourists to visit the An Jung-geun's memorial site in Lüshun and Yun Dong-ju' s birth place in the Longjing county. The ban is temporary for repairing purpose, but South Korean media reported such measures were politically motivated. Such cultural clashes have been amplifying in cyber space, boosting anti-China sentiments.

Western media has also played a profound role in shaping anti-China sentiments in South Korea. **Western media has successfully demonized China by sensationalizing China' s domestic politics and military and diplomatic stance.** Reports on wolf warrior diplomats , is a good example.

South Korean mass media has been relaying such Western reports without proper filtering. On the contrary, they have been bandwagoning Western media' s moves, contributing to the shaping of anti-Chinese sentiments in South Korea.

The Chinese government recently lifted the ban the Chinese group tour to South Korea. I would say that will bring very positive impacts. The Chinese government and people should promote more exchange and cooperation with South Korea. Given the size of interaction and geographic and cyber proximity, it is virtually impossible to avoid discord and conflict.



However, China should try to minimize elements of conflict between China and South Korea, while maximizing elements of cooperation. Politicians, elites, experts, and media people should avoid the politicization of China-South Korean relations.

**Dialogue with the World: Do you believe next year's U.S. presidential election could potentially present an opportunity for improving relations between China and South Korea?**

**Moon Chung-in:** I doubt. Yes, **China-South Korean relations are by and large influenced by China-US relations.**

Thus, it is very important to understand the nature and direction of American politics. If 'anti-China' or 'China bashing' remains a common rallying point across the Democrats and Republicans, China-US relations will become quite unstable. Consequently, China-South Korea relations will be negatively affected. Even if Trump gets re-elected, situation is not likely to change.

**But if the opposition party wins the presidential election after 4 years, there could be some changes in China-South Korean relations.** Regardless of China-US relations, new government in South Korea might try to improve its relations with China. Under the Yoon government, however, I don't expect any big changes.