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# [Interview] US, Japan came out of Camp David with clear gains, Korea with more risks, says scholar

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**Moon Chung-in said that the outcomes of the trilateral summit at Camp David hearkened back to the Cold War era**

Moon Chung-in, the chairperson of the Hankyoreh Foundation for Reunification and Culture, speaks to the Hankyoreh about the Camp David summit at the offices of Global Asia in Seoul's Jongno District on Aug. 22. (Kim Gyoung-ho/The Hankyoreh)

Moon Chung-in, a distinguished scholar of international relations, described the recent trilateral South Korea-US-Japan summit at Camp David as “past-oriented.” The 72-year-old Yonsei University emeritus professor explained that the outcome gave the strong impression of a return to the Cold War era.

Moon sat down for a 90-minute interview with the Hankyoreh on Tuesday evening in the editorial offices of the English-language international affairs journal Global Asia in Seoul's Jongno District.

“The cost-benefit breakdowns for South Korea, the US and Japan are markedly asymmetrical,” he said of the summit's outcomes.

“The US got everything it wanted, to the point where people were talking about it having ‘achieved a 70-year-old dream,’” he explained, adding that Japan “lost nothing and gained a lot.”

“In contrast, South Korea gave away a lot and got little in return, while also taking on considerable security risks,” he concluded.

Moon said that South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol appeared “consumed with anxiousness to quickly produce the kind of diplomatic results that conservative supporters will appreciate.”

**Hankyoreh: How do you view this summit in terms of its historical stature and significance?**

**Moon Chung-in:** It holds a lot of symbolic meaning in terms of institutionalizing comprehensive security cooperation, including the holding of trilateral South Korea-US-Japan summits on a regular basis. I wouldn't say it was the kind of "event" that transforms the geopolitical or geoeconomic landscape, though.

To begin with, it's a trilateral cooperative framework, not a trilateral alliance. The "Commitment to Consult," which was one of the official documents that came from the summit, stated that it did not entail obligations in terms of domestic or international law with regard to joint action against regional threats.

More than anything, it's a return to the past. Van Jackson, a defense expert who worked under the Barack Obama administration, characterized this latest summit as "reactionary trilateralism."

Between 1954 and 1957, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles proposed developing a "Northeast Asia Treaty Organization" (NEATO), which would unite the US with Japan, South Korea, and the Republic of China (Taiwan) into an anti-communist collective security system along the lines of NATO in Europe. It ended up falling through because of objections from the Syngman Rhee regime, which insisted it couldn't cooperate with Japan, and because of Japan's pacifist constitution.

In a way, you could say that this is the realization of the US' 70-year-old diplomatic dream of uniting South Korea and Japan. But in terms of international politics, this sort of minilateralism with an exclusive "club" character is not a desirable approach.

### **Hankyoreh: How does the cost-benefit analysis play out for Korea, the US and Japan?**

**Moon:** We need to unpack the official assessment that this is a win for all three countries. The US had the most to gain, while Japan has also benefited a lot without losing anything. But Korea has made considerable concessions, gained little, and taken on considerable security risks. So the cost-benefit analysis for the three countries is quite lopsided.

### **Hankyoreh: Why don't we start with the US?**

**Moon:** The US got everything it wanted. Korea-Japan relations were the weakest link in the US master plan — I'm talking about the Indo-Pacific strategy — and that's been resolved by institutionalizing cooperation between the three countries.

Second, the US has long struggled to incorporate the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) into the Indo-Pacific strategy, given China's ascendancy in the region. But now Korea and Japan can actively help the US win over ASEAN.

Third, enabling trilateral cooperation between Korea, the US and Japan — something American diplomats have dreamed about for 70 years now — is a big political boon for Biden as he looks forward to next year's presidential election.

Fourth, every Korean president since Kim Dae-jung, whether progressive or conservative, has refused American appeals to take part in its missile defense system. Joining such a system would provoke North Korea and China without bringing South Korea any actual benefits. But President Yoon has decided to actively work with the US and Japan on their desired missile defense initiatives.

### **Hankyoreh: Can you break down Japan's cost-benefit analysis for us?**

**Moon:** I'd say that Japan has gained a lot without giving up much of anything. One major accomplishment is the agreement about real-time sharing of missile warning information. Korea has the earliest chance to detect missiles fired by North Korea or China. That's why Japan has pushed so hard for information sharing from Korea.

Second, Japan has secured Korea as a buffer zone. Without Korea, Japan would be on the front line of a second Cold War, but Korean participation puts Korea in the line of fire.

Third, this agreement makes it more likely that Japan will receive military support from Korea on the issue of safe navigation in the South China Sea and near Taiwan.

Fourth, Yoon didn't bother Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida about Dokdo, East Sea/Sea of Japan terminology, compulsory mobilization [of Koreans during the Japanese colonial period], or the release of water contaminated with radionuclides from Fukushima. In terms of domestic politics, that's very helpful to Kishida, who is struggling in the polls. He can claim he made big gains without sacrificing anything.

### **Hankyoreh: And what does Korea stand to gain and lose?**

**Moon:** Korea's conservatives and progressives have reached vastly different assessments. The conservatives are praising the agreement as a "massive success" and "the peak of Yoon's diplomacy," while progressives and moderates are voicing concern and opposition. Public opinion has become even more polarized, which is a major problem.

In reality, this summit reaffirmed that the most important institution for Korea's national security is the Korea-US Mutual Defense Treaty, given its legal force. The summit seems to have brought few advantages beyond those already provided by Korea's current alliance with the US and consultative arrangements with the US and Japan. The pledge about trilateral consultation includes the caveat that joint action against regional threats is not mandated by domestic or international law, which reveals the basic limitations of trilateral security cooperation. The Korean government claims that it pushed to have that clause included to avoid the risk of entanglement, but that seems dubious.

I suppose the Yoon administration can claim a win in the fact that the "Spirit of Camp David" document affirms the three countries' commitment to the denuclearization of North Korea; the "resolution of the issues of abductees, detainees, and unrepatriated prisoners of war," Korea's "audacious initiative," and "a unified Korean Peninsula that is free and at peace" — all key goals of Yoon's policy toward North Korea. But the White House didn't even mention North Korea in the fact sheet that it released to inform the American public about what was achieved in the summit. That's worth thinking about.

#### **Hankyoreh: What response do you think we'll see from North Korea, China and Russia?**

**Moon:** Those three countries will probably see this as South Korea, the US and Japan making their "hostile intentions" even clearer than before. China will likely respond angrily to the "Spirit of Camp David" section about opposing "unilateral attempts to change the status quo" in regard to the South China Sea and Taiwan and regard that as an infringement upon its core interests.

China will also see Korea, the US and Japan's agreements to share missile warning information and hold joint maritime exercises each year as movement toward a US-led theater missile defense. Furthermore, it will regard the agreement about an early warning system for supply chain disruptions as being aimed at itself.

#### **Hankyoreh: What about North Korea?**

**Moon:** It may detect greater hostility in the fact that the Biden administration replaced the phrase "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" with "denuclearization of North Korea" and drew attention to North Korean human rights.

But ironically, stronger ties between South Korea, the US and Japan could give North Korea an opportunity to emerge from its long isolation by underscoring the need for stronger ties between North Korea, China and Russia. We need to focus on signs of increasing cooperation between North Korea and China on the one hand and North Korea and Russia on the other.

#### **Hankyoreh: How about Russia?**

**Moon:** Considering that the three leaders [of South Korea, the US and Japan] sharply criticized [Russia's] invasion of Ukraine and stated that they're "united in our support for Ukraine," this will be a "hostile event" in Russia's eyes.

#### **Hankyoreh: Do you expect to see signs of North Korea, China and Russia strengthening their ties?**

**Moon:** I think there's a good chance of that. We can't rule out the dangerous possibility of the three countries responding with unprecedented joint trilateral military exercises.

#### **Hankyoreh: Yoon said during a Cabinet meeting on Monday that trilateral cooperation will reduce the risk of an external attack and seemed incredulous that cooperation could endanger Korean security.**

**Moon:** His logic and perspective here are hard for me to understand. When it comes to national security, we can't afford to be incredulous about unlikely scenarios. We need to act as cautiously as if we were handling a fragile vase. It's absolutely essential to avoid the worst-case scenario of war. Yoon keeps repeating his mantra of "peace through strength," but it's worth considering whether the US pulled out of Afghanistan and Iraq because of a lack of strength.

The issue is [the possibility of] an unintended clash and escalation [into a full-blown war]. The president must place the lives and safety of the public at the center of every policy. For that reason, he must be proactive about preventive diplomacy and avoid even winnable wars at all costs. When it comes to peace and security, the greatest virtues are prudence and humility.

By Lee Je-hun, senior staff writer

Please direct questions or comments to [english@hani.co.kr]

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