



Reinvesting in U.S.-Japan-Republic of Korea Strategic Relations: A Practical Trilateral Agenda

**Policy recommendations from an
Emerging Leaders working group**

Organized by The National Committee
on American Foreign Policy

January 2021

Acknowledgements

**The NCAFP is grateful to the following organizations
for their support of this project:**

Carnegie Corporation of New York

Henry Luce Foundation

Korea Foundation

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

The Working Group would like to thank the mentors for their time and valuable input: Dr. David Dollar, Senior Fellow in the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution; Ms. Elizabeth Phu, Assistant Professor and Office of the Secretary of Defense Chair, Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy; Ambassador (Ret.) David Shear; Dr. Sheila Smith, Senior Fellow for Japan Studies, Council on Foreign Relations; Mr. Scott Snyder, Senior Fellow for Korea Studies and Director of the Program on U.S.-Korea Policy, Council on Foreign Relations; and Ambassador (Ret.) Kathleen Stephens, President & CEO of the Korea Economic Institute of America.

Critical assistance and support for the Working Group and the report was provided by Ambassador (Ret.) Susan M. Elliott, President & CEO of the NCAFP; Ms. Susan A. Thornton, Project Director, Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) at the NCAFP; Ms. Juliet Lee, Project Manager of FAPS; Mr. Sampson Oppedisano, Program Assistant; and Ms. Rhe-Anne Tan, NCAFP Intern.



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The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) Trilateral Alliance Working Group brought together ten next-generation scholars and experts from the United States, Republic of Korea (ROK), and Japan to make policy recommendations on critical issues to peace and stability in Northeast Asia. These issues require cooperation between the U.S. and its major allies in the region, but progress toward the resolution of these issues is hindered by several trends: differing threat perceptions and policy approaches toward China and North Korea, the reemergence of history issues and strategic mistrust in bilateral ROK-Japan relations, and anxiety over President Trump's attitudes toward the value of alliances.

The Working Group members met with senior policy experts under the Chatham House Rule to discuss their perspectives and recommendations for addressing common security challenges, economics and national security, and domestic politics and history. The members were divided into three subgroups to collaborate on their respective report sections and policy recommendations. Members of the group shared a variety of opinions on the way forward for trilateral cooperation and the report reflects a summary of those thoughts.

Executive Summary

In late 2020, a group of emerging leaders from the U.S., Republic of Korea (ROK), and Japan met virtually in several sessions to consider opportunities for and challenges to trilateral relations, and to the U.S. goal of strengthening strategic relations by integrating the two bilateral alliances. The group members acknowledged U.S. motivations for stronger Japan-ROK cooperation, but were concerned that recent developments—including a bottom-line U.S. approach to alliance relationships, worsening trust between the ROK and Japan, and a growing gap in policy direction on regional challenges—would stifle progress toward this goal. The following report outlines key features of the domestic, regional and bilateral political and security environment and makes policy recommendations for managing mistrust and advancing common goals.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

Keep expectations low for trilateral security cooperation in the short-term and focus on harvesting “low-hanging fruit”

The three countries have different threat perceptions of the challenges posed by China’s rise and North Korea’s nuclear program and provocations. Additionally, bilateral relations need further repair and attention. The U.S. needs to resolve burden-sharing negotiations with the ROK and Japan in short order. Japan and the ROK need to work through various economic, political and security issues that arise from their historical relationship. The guiding principle for alliance management should be “Do No Harm,” an approach that should not preclude active cooperation but should consider and anticipate unintended effects, in part by examining the efficacy and outcomes of past efforts.

It is critical to adopt an “early harvesting” approach and focus on the “low-hanging fruits” in the near term. Trilateral cooperation should aim for phased convergence rather than quick and forced cooperation by Washington. The best role for the U.S. is to convene the three countries in various fora on the following topics:

- ***Pandemic health and economic recovery, including North Korea's public health needs.*** Though few details are available, it is likely that North Korea has substantial public health needs following both the global spread of COVID-19 and the DPRK's border closures, which halted normal economic and technical exchanges. The three countries each have important roles to play in providing humanitarian aid and assistance to North Korea.
- ***High-standard regional economic integration.*** East Asia is the fulcrum of the global economy, home to over a third of economic activity and more than half of global economic growth. Momentum for regional economic integration, including the implementation and expansion of trade agreements, provides opportunities to raise regional standards and support the rules-based order.
- ***Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZs) and territorial waters monitoring and deconfliction.*** China's military modernization and expanding operational environment has crowded space and challenged extended territorial integrity. Recent joint Sino-Russian maneuvers in Northeast Asian waters and airspace are an additional cause for concern. And the underwater space in Northeast Asia is increasingly crowded as submarine traffic increases to support monitoring efforts. The three countries should have a common approach to monitoring the strategic space and deconflicting their own activities. Incidents such as 2018's radar-lock dispute between a Japanese maritime patrol aircraft and an ROKN destroyer must be avoided.

Regional and global issues should be the short to medium-term focus for trilateral cooperation.

Because bilateral relations need repair, trilateral cooperation should focus on common regional and global challenges. Pandemic recovery, including the successful launch of the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, is an immediate shared priority, and the coming year provides opportunities for each country to assist each other in advancing national and regional interests. All three countries need a functional global economy, and should work together toward rules-based trade and economic management. And there are perennial non-traditional security threats on which the three countries can cooperate, including anti-piracy operations and climate change management—a strong priority of the incoming Biden administration.

Pandemic recovery, including the successful launch of the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, is an immediate shared priority, and the coming year provides opportunities for each country to assist each other in advancing national and regional interests.

Medium to long-term efforts would be enhanced by consistent investment and reinvestment in dialogue mechanisms at several levels.

Trilateral cooperation between the three democracies requires sustained people-to-people engagement. Group members noted that working-level official relations between the three countries remain relatively robust, but are often soured by the broader political and media environments. More educational and scientific exchanges, parliamentary delegation exchanges, and Track II trilateral efforts would help to manage or counter mutual mistrust by enhancing constituencies for stronger trilateral relations on all three sides.

Diplomatic engagement should include high-profile and low-profile efforts.

High-profile diplomatic efforts—photo ops, leadership meetings—are important signal-sending mechanisms. Low-profile diplomatic efforts—the continuance of routine communications and quiet trilateral engagement on common interests—build habits and networks of cooperation. Both are needed to focus efforts on and advance mutual interests. The U.S. can play an important role in convening the higher profile meetings and coordinating at least some of the working-level outputs.

Policy Recommendations

Working Group members provided the following specific recommendations for strategic trilateral cooperation.

Trilateral Diplomacy

Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo should revitalize trilateral coordination mechanisms, such as the vice foreign ministerial dialogues held from 2015–2017. This will provide a venue for frequent communication between all parties. Regular talks between national security advisers would also advance dialogue and mutual understanding. These talks should be active at all times, not just during moments of crisis.

Short-term recommendations

- Clarify that long-term U.S. interests in Asia are best served by fostering a rules-based order and robust alliance relationships. Repair bilateral relations with Seoul by resolving outstanding cost-sharing negotiations; and assure Tokyo that the U.S. will make positive contributions to the rules-based order. Absent strong U.S. bilateral relations with Seoul and Tokyo, any effort to pursue trilateralism will inevitably fail.
- Signal intent to pursue strong bilateral and trilateral diplomacy with early, high-level visits to the region.
- Utilize virtual formats to adopt a “whole-of-government” approach to alliance relations, including by addressing global public health and climate change at the working level.
- Prioritize quiet, behind-the-scenes efforts at trilateral diplomacy over flashy, high-level trilateral summits. The immediate focus should be on strengthening communications and diplomatic activities to restore trust in Washington.

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Medium-term recommendations

- Focus on ensuring that an alliance vision coheres on regional threat perception, rather than pursuing trilateralism as an objective in and of itself.

- On North Korea, the discussion should focus on how to maintain leverage, the conditions under which sanctions will be lifted, and incentive sequencing.
- The Biden administration also needs to articulate a multilateral strategy for responding to China's economic coercion.
- After bilateral trust is restored, regularize trilateral dialogue through a 2+2+2 framework with the leading diplomatic and security officials to establish continuity in trilateral communication.
 - These meetings can begin bilaterally and build toward trilateral agendas.
 - Track I½ and Track II dialogues can provide a functional and more flexible complement to these official efforts.

It is important to broaden the aperture of trilateral relations to build habits of trilateral cooperation on global issues.

- Broaden the aperture of trilateral relations to build habits of trilateral cooperation on global issues.
 - Seek synergies between the Biden administration's climate goals and the carbon neutral pledges of Tokyo and Seoul.
 - Other transnational and global issues in which the three countries share common interests include defense and commerce in the cyber domain, Arctic research, demographic challenges, and space exploration.

Traditional Security Issues

Security Cooperation

- Seoul and Tokyo should coordinate in protesting against Chinese and Russian intrusions to their ADIZ both militarily and diplomatically, and Washington should endorse these statements.
- All three sides should expand intelligence sharing in the cyber domain.
- Japan and the ROK should strive toward realizing the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ASCA). Washington should quietly support this process from behind.

Contingency Planning

- Bolster virtual and physical Trilateral Tabletop Exercises (TTX). Continue to jointly hold TTX on North Korean scenarios and other regional contingencies involving China.
 - Invite and engage a larger pool of experts.

- Think tanks should hold both private and public events in Seoul and Tokyo to conduct virtual war games on regional contingency scenarios, including on the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and the East and South China Seas.
- Strengthen public understanding of the value of trilateral intelligence sharing and how each country would benefit from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in the event of regional contingencies.
 - If not leaders, security experts should inform the public of the tangible benefits of intelligence sharing between Japan and the ROK. More intelligence is better than less.
- Bring Korean strategists into discussions on regional issues.
 - Invite retired ROK military officials as an observer in some unofficial discussions of Taiwan contingency between the United States, Japan, and Taiwan.
 - Inform Seoul about the U.S.-Japan security dialogues on the East China Sea scenarios.

Non-Traditional Security and Economic Issues

Trilateral Cooperation on COVID-19

- Expedite entry of business/government representatives among the three countries.
- Aim to make the Tokyo Olympics a celebration of pandemic recovery through international cooperation. Tokyo should take the lead while Seoul and Washington support.
- Seoul, Tokyo, Singapore, and Taipei should work together to lead pandemic recovery efforts in the region by sharing best practices.
- Use the opportunity to distribute vaccines as a way of humanitarian and development assistance in the region, including in North Korea.
- Use vaccine distribution as a way to resume talks with Pyongyang:
 - This offers a good opportunity for Japan to carve out a specific role in the nuclear peace process, which has been largely missing in recent years.
 - It will also allow the Biden administration to signal its desire to engage with North Korea as well as pursue values-driven diplomacy that emphasizes human rights.

An informal platform of like-minded states should be established to exchange views and discuss measures against China's economic coercion.



PHOTO: M-FOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Containing the COVID-19 pandemic is the most urgent domestic priority of all three countries, and presents opportunities for functional trilateral coordination and cooperation.

Measures against Economic Coercion and Coercive Diplomacy

- In the first year of the Biden administration, an informal platform of like-minded states should be established to exchange views and discuss measures against China's economic coercion.
 - Participants should include recent targets like Australia and the ROK, but also be open for other interested parties.
 - Business leaders, such as representatives of business associations from each country, should also be part of this dialogue.
 - The U.S., Japan, and ROK could set up a joint fund or relief network to compensate for companies that suffer directly from economic coercion activities.
- The three countries should also offer diplomatic support for and coordinate against coercive behavior that targets compliance with U.S.-led economic sanctions.
 - Iran's recent seizure of a Korean vessel in the Persian Gulf should be resolved expeditiously with trilateral diplomatic support. Protective measures are warranted in case other sanctions targets resort to similar leverage tactics.

- There needs to be top-level and working-level discussions on how to keep middle powers such as the ROK and Japan from weaponizing economic interdependence and the far-reaching consequences that follow.
 - Rather than attempt to start such discussions within the World Trade Organization (WTO), an informal trilateral framework would be a good starting point.
- In the medium to long term, it is imperative to establish principles of economic statecraft as coercive means become available to more diverse actors.
 - As the U.S.-China rivalry escalates, it will take more than protective and conflict-resolving measures to reduce collateral damage from economic coercion. The ROK and Japan can play a mediating role in building rules and norms, first by setting a good example and clearing the air between themselves.

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Sequencing Entry into CPTPP

Given the strategic nature of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) as a regional economic framework, Japan should take the lead in sequencing the actions to expand this framework as below:

- Japan should work with CPTPP members such as Australia, Canada, and Singapore to collectively welcome and endorse the entry of the ROK into the CPTPP.
- The ROK should join the CPTPP before the United States and China in order to alleviate sensitivities about choosing sides.
- The CPTPP members should welcome Xi Jinping's statement about China's potential entry, yet should emphasize the high standards for protection of labor rights and intellectual property as a strong demand for China to liberalize its economy.
- The Biden administration should work with trade-skeptic Democratic Congressional leaders as well as the China caucus for reentry to the CPTPP.
- Once the U.S. joins the CPTPP, Washington and Tokyo should work behind the scenes to enable Taiwan's entry into the CPTPP.

Climate Change

- The three countries should establish a trilateral Track II working group on combating climate change and achieving pledges to net-zero emissions by 2050.
 - This group should include occasional participation by government and nongovernmental leaders in Europe that are working toward regional solutions to climate change.

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Information and Communications Technologies for Development (ICT4D)

- The U.S., Japan, and the ROK should share best practices for enhancing information and communications technologies (ICT) in their countries as well as in the broader East Asia region. This includes setting standards for evaluation and planning for greater connectivity and digital sovereignty.
 - The Suga administration's focus on digitalization of administration work¹ and the ROK's reputation as a global leader in ICT² provide natural synergy in this area.

Capacity Building in ASEAN

- Continue to commit to capacity building in Southeast Asian countries through respective regional policies—the U.S.' Indo-Pacific Strategy, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the ROK's New Southern Policy.
 - A potential area of trilateral cooperation is in digital empowerment projects such as education and training, building smart cities, and expanding the ICT infrastructure.
- Washington should look for ways to augment the work that is already being done by Tokyo and Seoul, rather than duplicate efforts, as well as share best practices.

Cooperation on Abduction Issue

- Tokyo and Seoul should cooperate on resolving the abduction of Japanese and South Korean citizens by North Korea.
 - Setting up a joint committee to investigate records in North Korea in exchange for Japanese support on a phased deal to build peace and reduce North Korea's nuclear

1 Kaneko, Kaori. "Japan PM Suga says to compile basic policy on new digital agency by year-end." *Reuters*. 22 September 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-suga/japan-pm-suga-says-to-compile-basic-policy-on-new-digital-agency-by-year-end-idUSKCN26E0EL>>

2 "How the Republic of Korea became a world ICT leader." *ITU News*. 12 February 2018. <<https://news.itu.int/republic-korea-leader-information-communication-technologies/>>

armaments could unlock progress on a longstanding humanitarian issue while getting regional buy-in for nuclear negotiations.

Cooperation on Women's Empowerment

- Japan and the ROK should pursue broader cooperation on national and global women's rights issues beyond the historical issue.
- The United States should provide a neutral platform for discussing women's issues between the three countries, whether it is about breaking the glass ceiling; preventing sexual violence in conflict; or elevating the role of women in conflict prevention and conflict resolution.
 - The ROK government's second annual international conference, "Action with Women and Peace," could be a potential model for initiating a broader conversation about women's rights that is more future-oriented and more inclusive of voices outside of government.³
- The three countries should jointly develop a whole-of-government action plan to elevate women's participation in foreign policy and national security.

The U.S., Japan, and the ROK need to have more frequent connections at the societal level in order for trilateral relations to truly take hold.

Greater People-to-People Exchanges

- The U.S., Japan, and the ROK need to have more frequent connections at the societal level in order for trilateral relations to truly take hold. The three countries should bring together experts to strategize on expanding people-to-people exchanges.
 - The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat is fostering similar exchanges for China, Japan, and the ROK.⁴ These efforts should be studied and emulated.

³ "The 2nd International Conference on Action with Women and Peace: Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict, Ensuring a Survivor-Centered Approach." ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 24 November 2020. <<http://awp.or.kr/?lang=en>>

⁴ "The 7th China-Japan-ROK Committee on Exchange and Cooperation among Universities." Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat. 4 September 2019. <https://tcs-asia.org/en/board/news_view.php?idx=3189&type=on&pNo=1&topics=28>

Domestic Constraints

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic recovery will be top of mind for policy-makers on both sides of the Pacific. Yet closer trilateral cooperation is needed, not necessarily as a vehicle for addressing the changing balance of power in East Asia but as a way to build trust across people in the United States, Japan, and the ROK and to bolster international institutions that the three countries depend on for peace, security and prosperity in the region.

United States

When Joseph Biden enters the White House on January 20, he will face intense pressure to focus on domestic issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the economy. On foreign policy, President-elect Biden has pledged to work with allies to solve global problems, but has not clarified what that means for managing its relations with two of its closest allies in the world—Japan and the ROK. Trilateral cooperation on governmental and nongovernmental areas could maximize impact at a time of resource scarcity and build goodwill, particularly between Japan and the ROK.

At the same time, there is a growing chorus in Washington that is calling for a zero-sum approach toward China, even though such an approach would drive a security dilemma with Beijing, confirm China's worst fears about a perceived intention to contain and weaken China, and undermine the U.S.' broader interests in East Asia. Those who advocate for such a strategy will strive to frame U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation in ideological terms (i.e. democracies vs. authoritarianism), rather than as a force-multiplier to address common challenges. But American policymakers should be careful not to describe these trilateral efforts as anti-China.

Japan

There is broad consensus among Japanese foreign policy and security experts that trilateral cooperation would be beneficial across various policy agendas. Unfortunately, there is growing pessimism about the weakest link of the triad—the Japan-ROK relationship—that seems unable to move past historical issues. The Moon Jae-in administration's attitude toward history issues has generated negative feelings within the Japanese public ("Korea



PHOTO: JO GALVAO / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

The Tokyo Olympics will mark a major milestone in global COVID-19 pandemic recovery, and provide opportunities for international engagement and creative diplomacy.

fatigue”) and a sense that South Koreans will never accept Japan’s apology. According to a survey conducted by the Cabinet Office last year, over 70 percent of respondents said that they do not feel any affinity toward South Korea.⁵

Given this reality, Japanese political leaders are unlikely to make any overtures to the ROK absent a positive vision and some level of participation from a United States that seems interested in playing a mediating role. This is especially the case for Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, as his party looks to the 2021 general election and LDP reelection. Suga’s attitude toward the ROK was shaped by his past experience: as Chief Cabinet Secretary in the Abe Shinzo administration, Suga helped negotiate the comfort women agreement signed by Abe and then-President Park Geun-hye, from which President Moon withdrew upon entering the Blue House.

Divergence in policies toward China and North Korea between Tokyo and Seoul has also contributed to a challenging bilateral relationship. Some Japanese security experts are concerned that the Moon administration’s relatively accommodating approach to China and North Korea, and its reluctance to enhance trilateral cooperation on defense, could negatively impact Japan’s security environment. Japan has responded to these perceptions by redoubling its investments in other like-minded countries such as Australia and India.

5 Kanaya, Shohei. “Japanese sentiment on South Korea sinks to 41-year low.” *Nikkei Asia*. 21 December 2019. <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Japan-South-Korea-rift/Japanese-sentiment-on-South-Korea-sinks-to-41-year-low>>

The ROK

The Moon Jae-in administration recognizes the value of trilateral cooperation but views it primarily through the lens of multilateralism in the region. This is different from a “networked security architecture” as stated in the 2019 U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, and is intended to hedge against perceived threats associated with great power competition between the United States and China. Ideally, this network would include like-minded countries such as Australia, France and Germany, which share the ROK’s interest in forming a norms-based multilateral international order, rather than the America First order led by the Trump administration or China’s authoritarianism.

The pandemic, which has taken more than 400,000 American lives at the time of this publication, is a clear reminder that systemic underinvestment in domestic priorities compared to the military comes at a cost.

Unfortunately, animosity between Seoul and Tokyo has made cooperation difficult. Among South Koreans, progressives and conservatives are generally united in their negative attitudes toward Japan, fueled by issues stemming from the Japanese colonial period as well as concerns about Japan’s intentions to reconstitute its military. This history-centric approach toward Japan could impair the ROK’s ability to make sound choices on foreign policy. Re-litigating the past fuels mistrust and animosity on both sides. At the same time, the DPRK continues to expand its missile and nuclear capabilities, exacerbating the ROK’s and Japan’s security dilemma vis-à-vis North Korea.

Given the myriad domestic constraints facing the United States, Japan, and the ROK in pursuing closer trilateral cooperation, it is important to put forward new ways to improve relations and foster greater understanding.

The U.S. Role in Asia

The world is undergoing major changes—in East Asia, the rise of China as a major military, economic, and technological power will have profound consequences for the region. In response to China’s rise, the United States has doubled down on regional military dominance and stoked the fires of hostile ideological competition, whose excesses the Biden administration will need to curb. There is also an ongoing debate in Washington about why the U.S. military absorbs more than half of the discretionary budget. The pandemic, which has taken more than 400,000 American lives at the time of this publication, is a clear reminder that systemic underinvestment in domestic priorities compared to the military comes at a cost.

In this context, what is the meaning of “American global leadership”? If the United States insists on leading everywhere, it will provoke resistance from some while tempting others to let Uncle Sam bear a disproportionate share of the burden.⁶ Closer cooperation between Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul could be a cost-saving way to advance mutual interests, from combating climate change to advancing global health to pursuing regional stability. In general, the United States should defer to Japan and the ROK on when it is best to emphasize trilateral alignment and when it is advantageous to keep a low profile so as to avoid mischaracterizations that could lead to retaliation or coercion by other countries in the region.

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Expanding Cooperation Beyond Governments

Domestic constraints notwithstanding, a case can be made for closer trilateral cooperation in areas of mutual concern. While political landmines abound,⁷ working-level relations between the three countries are likely to continue, even in sensitive areas such as intelligence-sharing. More should be done to advance trilateral cooperation at the governmental level that goes beyond defense and intelligence.

Non-governmental areas of cooperation will be critical for sustaining the relationship, which in the past has focused too heavily on technocratic partnerships without public involvement.⁸ More intellectual work is needed to explore how civil societies in the three countries can contribute toward building goodwill and trust on future-oriented issues.

Overall, there is a need for sustained, comprehensive dialogue across the three countries beyond Track I (government-to-government) to Track I½ and Track II dialogues (i.e. academics, think tank leaders, foundations, students).

6 It is possible that over the next 10 to 20 years, the United States will transform its military presence in Asia to one of maintaining a balance of power with China and helping U.S. allies defend themselves from coercion or attack. This would require allies like Japan and the ROK to invest more in their own defense, adopt denial-oriented capabilities such as resilient coastal and air defense, and work in tighter coordination with dispersed U.S. forces. For more information, see Michael D. Swaine, Jessica J. Lee, and Rachel Espelin Odell’s report, “Toward an Inclusive & Balanced Regional Order: A New US Strategy in East Asia.” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*. 11 January 2021. <<https://quincystat.org/2021/01/11/toward-an-inclusive-balanced-regional-order-a-new-u-s-strategy-in-east-asia/>>

7 Choe, Sang-Hun. “South Korean Court Orders Japan to Pay Compensation for Wartime Sexual Slavery.” *New York Times*. 7 January 2021. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/world/asia/south-korea-comfort-women-japan.html>>

8 Phan, Xuan Dung. “How the US Can Mediate the Japan-South Korea Dispute.” *The Diplomat*. 16 December 2020. <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/how-the-us-can-mediate-the-japan-south-korea-dispute/>>

Creative Diplomacy on North Korea

In order to achieve closer policy alignment on North Korea, Tokyo and Seoul would need to agree on a common agenda. President Moon has made improving inter-Korean relations a top foreign policy priority, which has entailed maintaining a relatively accommodating approach toward China. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Suga appears to support maximum pressure against North Korea while shoring up Japan's deterrence capability against North Korea's "strategic weapons." The Suga Cabinet recently decided to deploy two more Aegis ships and standoff missiles. South Koreans may view these efforts as destabilizing and counter to its diplomatic efforts on the Korean Peninsula. With a new administration in Washington, it will be critical for the United States, the ROK, and Japan to figure out a way forward, rather than passively wait for Pyongyang to do something provocative that could further divide the triad.

It is important to avoid "hijacking" specific issues to force a trilateral lens.

It is important to avoid "hijacking" specific issues to force a trilateral lens. For example, the 2021 Tokyo Olympics could present an opportunity for the Japanese and ROK governments to improve ties through public diplomacy. Handled right, such efforts could provide a politically friendly environment for a win. But without sufficient communication on the part of all countries as well as the International Olympic Committee, which ultimately decides which countries are invited to the Olympics, such effort will be cast as overly opportunistic and polarizing.

Future-Oriented Partnerships

The 2019–2020 Japan-ROK trade dispute and the ROK's threatened withdrawal from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) show the danger of historical issues dominating relations between Tokyo and Seoul. Some have said that Suga, compared to Abe, is less ideological and more pragmatic about these issues. Nevertheless, it will still be difficult to compartmentalize history issues from other areas of cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul if history remains the dominant frame of reference.

Trilateral cooperation must be more future-oriented. Some of the ideas for building new partnerships were laid out in the 2017 trilateral vice foreign ministerial meeting, including women's empowerment, space policy, and humanitarian assistance.⁹ There should be

⁹ "Key Outcomes of the U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministerial Meetings." *U.S. Consulate and Embassy in the Republic of Korea*. 5 January 2017.
<https://kr.usembassy.gov/010517-key-outcomes-u-s-japan-rok-trilateral-vice-foreign-ministerial-meetings/>

renewed attention to this effort, now that then-Deputy Secretary Antony Blinken will be Secretary of State and bring significant institutional knowledge to this matter.

To forge new, future-oriented partnerships, there will need to be domestic constituents that demand it. The business community could be one such constituency. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), and the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry could host an annual trilateral meeting to explore areas of trilateral cooperation that would provide new business opportunities in each country and how they are adapting to the new trade and investment environment as set forth by CPTPP and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Universities may also find strategic value in closer relations between the three countries.

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be more future-oriented.*

Regional Context

The United States, the ROK, and Japan will continue to play important leadership roles in the Indo-Pacific region in the areas of diplomacy, economy, technology, and public health. Given a wide variety of regional interests and values they have in common, their close coordination and cooperation will have a force multiplier effect for the entire Indo-Pacific region.

Yet such trilateral cooperation in the region has been constrained by diverging threat perceptions and prioritization of policies toward China and North Korea. Faced with increasingly more belligerent behaviors of China in multiple domains, the United States and Japan are strengthening their security and economic ties not only between themselves but also with other like-minded countries. The ROK continues to hold a strategically ambiguous position between the two great powers due to China's prospective role in North Korea's denuclearization and trade relations. These diverging threat perceptions and policy prioritization distract the three nations from recognizing and tackling substantial issues of shared interests, which include a nuclear North Korea, protection of the freedom of the seas, and Sino-Russian challenges to the ROK and Japan's air defense. Over the last few years, sour relations between the ROK and Japan and the lack of U.S. leadership during the Trump administration only presented missed opportunities for cooperation. As the new U.S. administration takes office, policymakers from all three states should focus on incentivizing the three countries to work on shared interests and convergence of threat perceptions to deepen mutual trust.

Economic Coercion and Coercive Diplomacy

The increased use of weaponized economic interdependence has taken a toll in the region and the world. China has used its economic heft to coerce other states and impose its political will on Norway (2010), Japan (2010), the Philippines (2012), the ROK (2016), and Australia (2020). Other targets include companies and private associations such as airliners, hotel chains, and the U.S. National Basketball Association. Recently, China sanctioned Australia's wine and beef exports after its inquiry for an international investigation on the origin of the deadly coronavirus in Wuhan. As a result, a social and political movement erupted to buy Australian beef and wine. Since 2010, Japan has begun joint exploration and development of rare earth minerals with the United States and Australia to reduce dependence on China. In the fall of 2020, India, Japan, and Australia also started a joint dialogue on the topic of securing supply chains.

It is worth noting, however, that the use of economic coercion has not been China's prerogative. It is at play between allies, such as Japan and the ROK, and between the U.S. and China amidst the trade war. Therefore, the three countries must consider addressing the following questions: 1) how to create protective measures against China's economic retaliation, 2) how to discourage/moderate the expansive use of economic statecraft among middle powers, and 3) how to rebuild trust with and among allies and partners that are witnessing complex domestic politics.

There are also rising concerns about coercive behavior that challenges compliance with U.S.-led economic sanctions writ large. In early January 2021, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards seized a Korean tanker near the Strait of Hormuz. Although the seizure was based on claims that the vessel was violating environmental laws, the Iranian government has demanded Seoul release \$7 billion of its frozen assets under U.S. sanctions. This diplomatic standoff is one area where trilateral coordination to offer diplomatic support can make a meaningful difference. The incoming Biden administration should be prepared to address this issue, given the linkage to U.S. sanctions against Iran. Meanwhile, Japan can voice concern over the issue in the name of freedom of navigation and safe passage, as a sanctions-abiding ally of the U.S. with vessels sailing in the Persian Gulf for economic and security purposes.

Economic Integration

The Indo-Pacific region is the center of gravity for economic prosperity and growth, where regional frameworks for economic integration continue to be key geostrategic tools. The recent signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) highlights the importance of taking a leadership role in such a regional economic integration framework which involves *all* key players in the region including ASEAN countries.

However, as the RCEP is far from the level of standard achieved by the CPTPP in terms of trade liberalization and protection of labor rights as well as intellectual property, the CPTPP should be the guiding mechanism for the region's future. President Moon's publicly expressed interest in the CPTPP presents a window of opportunity. Given that the ROK already has FTA agreements with many of the CPTPP members, its entry into the CPTPP is more of a political signaling. On the other hand, President Xi's expressed interest in the CPTPP should be seen as a strategic bluster against the backdrop of the U.S. absence in these regional economic frameworks after the U.S. withdrew from the TPP.

Economic integration led by free and open societies such as the United States, the ROK, and Japan is also critical in securing international space for Taiwan and protecting Taiwan from China's economic coercion, thereby maintaining the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Unlike UN organizations which require a one state, one seat system, these economic

frameworks are open to include Taiwan as one economy without triggering thorny issues of state recognition.

Furthermore, as the U.S.-Japan digital trade agreement of 2019 shows, the advancement of digital rules and norms, based on the liberal disciplines, highlights the evolving role of economic integration that is beyond simply trading “tangible commodities.” Hence, as stakeholders of advanced technological, intellectual, and digital rights, the three nations share even more interests in a more rigorous economic integration, such as the CPTPP.

Security Cooperation: ADIZ, ACSA, and Contingency Planning

China and Russia’s repeated encroachment into the ROK and Japan’s airspace and the alleged Sino-Russian coordination behind such activities present serious threats and important opportunities for the latter two countries to cooperate in protecting their overlapping Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and maritime territory in the East Sea/Sea of Japan. The current threat posed by China and Russia should be an incentive for political leaders on both sides to shelve the territorial disputes over Dokdo/Takeshima and expand their security cooperation.

The United States, the ROK, and Japan need to deepen intelligence cooperation not only on conventional and nuclear domains but also in the cyber domain.

The debates over intelligence sharing or logistics cooperation with Japan are often contentious in ROK domestic politics, as progressive leaders have raised concerns over the potential risks of having Japanese boots on the Korean Peninsula. This concern has been amplified as Japan’s military role in the region has grown over the years. Some in the Moon administration see GSOMIA and the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ASCA) as potential steps toward a treaty alliance with Japan.

However, as the Moon administration’s careful handling of the continuation of GSOMIA has shown, there is no need for the ROK to overreact to closely coordinating with Japan on common security challenges, and the two countries should look for ways to move forward with the ROK-Japan ACSA.

Regarding skepticism in the ROK about the efficacy of intelligence sharing via GSOMIA, political leaders and elites must better appreciate the strategic value of such a framework and make positive gestures to convey this appreciation to the public. Furthermore, the United States, the ROK, and Japan need to deepen intelligence cooperation not only on conventional and nuclear domains but also in the cyber domain as North Korean, Chinese, and Russian cyber threats pose severe national security risks.



PHOTO: JOSHUA DAVENPORT / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

The differing approaches and interests in resolving the North Korea nuclear threat through diplomacy need to be managed among the three countries without expectations of a united trilateral strategy.

Furthermore, the most salient but least discussed security item between Japan and the ROK is coordinated contingency planning on North Korea, let alone the East and South China Seas or the Taiwan Strait. Given that political impediments have hampered further trilateral cooperation in this area, the two countries should work towards raising public awareness on the importance of trilateral contingency planning. In addition to ensuring the continuation of the U.S.-ROK joint military exercises, the United States must close the strategic, operational, and tactical gaps between Japan and the ROK by sponsoring simulation exercises on not only North Korean but also Chinese aggression in the region.

Global Health: Cooperation on COVID-19

Although the winter surge of infections presents major challenges to many capitols, the ROK and Japan have dealt relatively well with COVID-19. With the upcoming Tokyo Olympics in mid-2021, there should be room for trilateral cooperation in the procurement and distribution of vaccines and treatments once the first rounds of inoculation have been completed.

Trilateral Security Cooperation

The United States, the ROK, and Japan have no shortage of security challenges in Asia. Amid intensifying U.S.-China competition and an unconstrained nuclear-armed North Korea, the regional environment is in flux. In recent years, however, the fundamentals for effective trilateral cooperation have eroded primarily as a result of growing mistrust between Seoul and Tokyo. This mistrust has manifested in the military realm—for instance, a December 2018 incident involving a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force surveillance aircraft and a Republic of Korea Navy vessel underscored the potential for friction between the two countries. Separately, the prospect of the ROK’s non-renewal of the 2016 GSOMIA further exposed rifts.

Bridging this recent rift in the Japan-ROK leg of the trilateral relationship will not be an overnight occurrence. As 2021 begins, Seoul and Tokyo appear to be taking steps to repair their diplomatic relationship. In general terms, however, trilateral cooperation in the near term should proceed according to a realistic and pragmatic appraisal of recent difficulties. This includes a management of expectations on all three sides, including in the United States, where enthusiasm for trilateral security coordination has historically been the strongest. The Biden administration should pursue a restoration of a stronger trilateral relationship between the three countries in Northeast Asia, but it should also listen attentively to concerns in both Seoul and Tokyo.

Traditionally, even while Seoul and Tokyo have their disagreements, shared threat perceptions, primarily over North Korea, have facilitated security cooperation. It was precisely these threat perceptions that facilitated the finalization of GSOMIA between the two countries in 2016 and promoted trilateral military coordination on ballistic missiles, for instance. In 2021, however, it remains unclear if the ROK and Japan will return to a shared threat perception on North Korea. Accordingly, policymakers should not count a return by North Korea to regular missile testing and other threatening behavior as an enabling factor for trilateral cooperation. Instead, political will in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo will be the primary driver.

Similarly, threat perceptions about China are divergent among the three countries. The Biden administration will calibrate a China policy that will continue some themes from the Trump administration while restoring a cooperative agenda with Beijing on issues that the Obama administration had prioritized (including on climate change). Japan’s threat perceptions concerning China significantly outpace those of the ROK. Both countries, meanwhile, maintain robust economic relationships with Beijing, which also moderate their willingness to fully bandwagon with the United States to contain China.

In recognition of the challenges ahead, effective trilateral trust-building work is best done outside of the Northeast Asian strategic environs. To this end, there are a range of activities for the three countries to cooperate on in the diplomatic and military realms in other regions, including off the Horn of Africa, in the Arctic, and in Southeast Asia.

Above all, a “Do No Harm” principle should be at the foundation of trilateral cooperation in the short-to-medium term. None of the three countries should take steps to erode the existing pillars of security cooperation, including on intelligence-sharing, ballistic missile defense, and strategic coordination. Instead, the driving principle for trilateral security cooperation should be to maintain a positive trajectory for strategic convergence between the three countries. A longer term objective is the construction of a more secure, sustainable security partnership that is premised on mutual respect and understanding of strategic differences among the three countries, and which is embedded in a larger global network of American/democratic alliances and partnerships.

The driving principle for trilateral security cooperation should be to maintain a positive trajectory for strategic convergence between the three countries.

Areas for Functional Cooperation

In the past, bilateral cooperation between Japan and the ROK has often been obstructed due to both parties’ use of diplomatic issues as variables in domestic politics. Therefore, in order to improve both bilateral and trilateral cooperation, emphasis should be placed on the implementation and continuation of functional cooperation that is acceptable to the domestic politics of both countries or that can be conducted outside the domestic political interests and micromanagement by Seoul and Tokyo.

The current alliance coordination structure, in which the U.S.-ROK alliance is supported by the U.S.-Japan alliance in the case of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula, is a legacy of the Korean War of 1950. In other words, the alignment between the U.S.-ROK alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance could be maintained because the commander of USFK had his own area of responsibility for operations around the Korean Peninsula, while Japan was a safe logistical support area that could not be attacked by North Korea. However, now that North Korea has nuclear and missile capabilities capable of striking Japan, it may be time to revisit the existing military arrangements. Japan’s legitimate security risks arising from the North Korean nuclear program warrants greater inclusion in military decision-making concerning the security and stability of the Korean Peninsula than before. For this reason, the current command and control structure on the Korean Peninsula, centered on the U.S.-ROK alliance, needs to be redesigned in a way that appropriately reflects the weight of the responsibilities assumed by each country.



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All three countries have a strong interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in the region and around the world.

For example, the realignment of U.S. forces in the ROK and Japan, as well as the issue of wartime Operational Control Authority (OPCON) transfer, is not only a problem for the U.S. and ROK, but, in Tokyo's eyes, also spills over into the U.S.-Japan alliance. Increasingly, these issues will need to be viewed as trilateral issues rather than bilateral alliance issues. In the event of a major realignment of U.S. forces in the ROK and Japan, or if wartime OPCON has been transferred, the existing various combined operational plans will need to be reviewed and revised. At that time, combined/joint operational plans among the three countries for various situations should be formulated and re-calibrated. Likewise, in this work, in order to strengthen the credible extended deterrence, nuclear-conventional integrated operational plans should be formulated, and annual tabletop exercises among the three countries involving not only USFK but also STRATCOM and INDOPACOM should be conducted to test them. To avoid a repeat of the December 2018 incident, Tokyo and Seoul should also set up hotlines between their respective foreign and defense ministries.

In the near to medium term, prospects for improved military-to-military relations stand the greatest chance of success outside of Northeast Asia. Efforts to maintain mutual trust at the military level through cooperation further abroad, for example, joint training between the Japanese MSDF and the ROK Navy under the guise of improving anti-piracy capabilities in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, would be effective. It would also show a signal that the three countries are working together to maintain open access to the Indo-Pacific.

In addition, although the threat perceptions of Japan and the ROK toward China and Russia are different, prospects for greater coordination do exist owing to the fact that neither Washington, Seoul, nor Tokyo wishes to see greater Sino-Russian strategic cooperation. Incidents like the first long-range joint patrol by Chinese and Russian bombers in July 2019 around Takeshima/Dokdo, an attempt to drive a wedge between Japan and the ROK over an area of territorial dispute, are likely to increase. All three allies must prepare themselves for the eventuality that Moscow and Beijing are likely to continue to stage probing and limited pressure campaigns in an effort to weaken trilateral ties, and pledge to consult among themselves before responding to external provocations.

In order not to give an opening to such Chinese and Russian probes or to spur further deterioration of bilateral relations, the U.S., Japan, and the ROK should conduct consultations on Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) at the military-to-military level to avoid accidental collisions in these areas. For example, consultations on SOPs for dealing with Chinese and Russian military aircraft and information sharing should be held on a routine basis. In particular, prior consultation on air traffic control could be applied to the non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs) in contingencies.

Moreover, while the trilateral alignment remains the cornerstone of alliance cooperation in Northeast Asia, the problems the three countries face cannot be solved by the three countries alone. In fact, Canadian and Australian patrol aircraft and vessels have been operating in the surrounding areas through the framework of UN forces to monitor illegal ship-to-ship transfer by North Korean vessels. The surveillance operations of the various agencies have resulted in the gathering of information on North Korea's illegal activities in the Enforcement Coordination Center (ECC), which includes personnel from the United States, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. This information sharing and redistribution function to the intelligence communities of various countries and the United Nations by ECC is extremely important for strengthening multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia and should be maintained.

Finally, the U.S. should encourage the ROK and Japan to continue to develop their bilateral connections with other democratic allies and partners of the U.S. Although typically conducted unilaterally, efforts to deepen consultation and coordination between NATO and the ROK and Japan could potentially foster greater bilateral coordination among the two capitals, helping to improve the prospects for trilateralism.

All three allies must prepare themselves for the eventuality that Moscow and Beijing are likely to continue to stage probing and limited pressure campaigns in an effort to weaken trilateral ties.

NCAFP Emerging Leaders Working Group Bios



Kuyoun Chung is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Kangwon National University. Her research focuses on US foreign policy and Indo-Pacific security issues, including competing regional security architecture, maritime security, grey-zone conflict, and hybrid warfare. Her recent publications include “South Korea’s Perspective on Quad Plus and Evolving Indo-Pacific Security Architecture” (*Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 2020), “American voters’ threat perception on North Korea and their voting behavior: Analysis on the 2018 midterm election survey data” (*Journal of Parliamentary Research*, 2020).

She received her Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 2011. She was previously a lecturer in the Department of Political Science at UCLA (2011–2012), visiting professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy (2014–2015), policy advisor to the Vice President of the Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation (2015), and research fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification (2015–2018). She also joined the US State Department’s International Visitor Leadership Program (2017) and currently serves as a member of the policy advisory committee of the Ministry of Unification, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Republic of Korea Navy. She also currently serves as Assistant Executive Director at the International Policy Studies Institute Korea (IpsiKor) and Editor-in-chief for the *Journal of Maritime Security* at the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy.



Saeme Kim is a Ph.D. candidate in International Relations at King’s College London. She was a former Korea Foundation Fellow at Pacific Forum and a researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification in South Korea. Her research interests include East Asian regionalism, East Asian security, and middle power diplomacy. She received her M.Sc. in International Relations at the London School of Economics and B.A. in International Studies at Ewha Womans University.



Bo Ram Kwon is an Associate Research Fellow at the Center for Security and Strategy, one of five research centers at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA) since 2013. She is currently a visiting scholar at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore. Her areas of expertise include U.S. security and defense strategy, ROK-U.S. alliance cooperation, nexus between U.S. foreign policy and domestic politics and economic sanctions. As adjunct professor, Dr. Kwon has taught U.S. foreign policy at the Korea University Graduate School of Policy Studies since 2017. She was a member of the National Unification Advisory Council (2019) and the National Assembly Futures Institute Advisory Committee (2018).

Dr. Kwon received her B.A. in political science and business administration from Ewha Womans University, her M.A. in international relations from Korea University, and Ph.D. in political science from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (2013). She received the Fulbright Graduate Student Award (2006–2008) and Undergraduate Student Scholarship from the Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS, 2000–2003). Dr. Kwon also completed an internship at the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Bangkok, Thailand on receiving the scholarship for Future Women Leaders from the Ministry of Gender Equality (2004).



Jessica J. Lee is a Senior Research Fellow for East Asia at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Her research focuses on East Asian alliances and U.S. strategy toward the Asia-Pacific region. Previously, Jessica led the Council of Korean Americans (CKA), a national nonprofit organization that supports Korean American leadership development. Prior to CKA, Jessica was a Resident Fellow at the Pacific Forum in Honolulu and a senior manager at The Asia Group, LLC. She began her career in Washington as a staff member on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. She also served as a senior legislative assistant on foreign policy for a member of Congress on the Ways and Means Committee. Jessica is a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a member of the Council of Korean Americans. Jessica holds a B.A. in Political Science from Wellesley College and an A.M. in East Asian Studies from Harvard University. Jessica is fluent in Korean.



Sara Bjerg Moller is an Assistant Professor at the School of Diplomacy and International Relations at Seton Hall University, where she directs the International Security concentration. Her research explores the organizational design and effectiveness of alliances and coalitions in Europe and Asia. An expert in alliance military force postures, her current research addresses planned changes to the US-Republic of Korea (ROK) military command relationship, including the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON), and its implications for regional security. Her commentary and policy analyses have been featured in the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Boston Globe*, *National Interest*, *Lawfare*, *War on the Rocks*, *Middle East Times*, and *World Politics Review*. In 2018, she was an Eisenhower Defense Fellow at the NATO Defense College (NDC) in Rome. Moller has also held fellowships with the Modern War Institute at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Security Studies Program at MIT, Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, and Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. She received her Ph.D. from Columbia University and has a Master's degree in Security Studies from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.



Masashi Murano is a Japan Chair Fellow at Hudson Institute. His research areas include U.S.-Japan defense cooperation and nuclear/conventional deterrence analysis. Prior to joining Hudson, he was a Fellow at the Okazaki Institute (a Tokyo-based think tank). Masashi received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Takushoku University in Tokyo, pursuing undergraduate work in Asia-Pacific studies and graduate work in security studies.



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Ankit Panda is the Stanton Senior Fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. An expert on the Asia-Pacific region, his research interests range from nuclear strategy, arms control, missile defense, nonproliferation, emerging technologies, and U.S. extended deterrence. He is the author of *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea* (Hurst Publishers/Oxford University Press, 2020).

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A widely published writer, Panda's work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, the *Diplomat*, the *Atlantic*, the *New Republic*, the *South China Morning Post*, *War on the Rocks*, *Politico*, and the *National Interest*. Panda has also published in scholarly journals, including *Survival*, the *Washington Quarterly*, and *India Review*, and has contributed to the IISS Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment and Strategic Survey. He is editor-at-large at the *Diplomat*, where he hosts the Asia Geopolitics podcast, and a contributing editor at *War on the Rocks*.



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Andrew regularly publishes articles on topics concerning U.S.-Asia affairs. He received a B.A. in Political Science, International Studies, and Asia Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and M.A. in Asian Studies from Georgetown University.



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The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) identifies, articulates, and helps advance American foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective within the framework of political realism. Founded in 1974 by Professor Hans J. Morgenthau and others, the NCAFP is a nonprofit policy organization dedicated to the resolution of conflicts that threaten U.S. interests.



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