

The Changing Regional Architecture of the Asia Pacific: Opportunities and Challenges for the U.S., China, Japan, and South Korea

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Executive Summary

The international security environment is changing. In the Asia-Pacific region, intensifying major power competition has given way to concerns about the rise of “bloc confrontation” between the East and the West, once seen during the Cold War. Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has had a profound impact on changing security perspectives in the region, contributing to an overemphasis on the role of nuclear weapons in a country’s defense and questions about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. Global cooperation on nontraditional and transnational security threats like climate change and pandemics have been rendered virtually impossible as major powers place blame on each other to score domestic political points and avoid responsibility. Middle and smaller powers in the region are caught in a dilemma of balancing against growing concerns about China while sustaining managed interdependence with major economic and trading powers.

Recently, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy’s (NCAFP) Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) convened an in-person Track II dialogue with high-level scholars and former officials from the U.S., People’s Republic of China (PRC), Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) to assess the current state of security cooperation in the Asia Pacific, including prospects for dialogue on the Korean Peninsula, and the future of regional security architecture and multilateral institutions’ ability to prevent conflict. At a minimum, the countries of the region, including the U.S. and China, should work together to prevent conflict and promote international problem-solving. But in today’s geopolitical environment, it will not be easy to do.

Policy Recommendations & Major Takeaways:

- Minilateralism has become the defining feature of the regional security architecture, supplementing—not supplanting—ASEAN-based institutions. Participants from the U.S., Japan, and ROK described minilaterals like the Quad and AUKUS as more effective in addressing concrete, specific agenda issues through flexible arrangements that advance cooperation and generate momentum not seen in broader multilateral fora. However, it was also recognized that minilaterals are, by default, less inclusive, given the grouping of countries that share similar interests. With the proliferation of minilaterals, there will ultimately be a need for consolidation and prioritization among the different groupings of the Asia-Pacific region to support a more inclusive, region-wide framework for effective dialogue and coordination.

¹ This report reflects the notes and observations of the authors alone and is not a consensus document.

- The U.S., Japan, and ROK should all seek constructive and stable relationships with the PRC, and Washington should welcome engagement by its allies and partners with Beijing. In particular, all parties should seek to reactivate and strengthen communication channels, including the resumption of the China-Japan-ROK trilateral summit. The last trilateral summit was held in Chengdu in 2019; Japanese and Korean participants suggested President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida offer to host the next two summits in order to generate momentum in restarting this trilateral dialogue.
- Japan-ROK relations are also important for shaping the future of regional order, and the two countries should maintain the positive momentum in bilateral rapprochement between the Yoon and Kishida administrations. Furthermore, the U.S., Japan, and ROK should institutionalize their trilateral dialogue in order to preserve the progress achieved under current administrations and to prevent backsliding with the changing of administrations and shifts in domestic politics.
- Geopolitical competition should not preclude dialogue. The U.S. and China should restore high-level military-to-military, as well as military-civilian, dialogue as soon as possible. American participants expressed their disappointment in Beijing's denial of a meeting between U.S. Secretary of Defense Austin and PRC Defense Minister Li Shangfu on the margins of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, as well as the inability to resume military-to-military exchanges following U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken's visit to Beijing.
 - It is worth noting that China and Japan established a functioning hotline between the two militaries in May; while China and Singapore announced in June that the two countries would also work toward establishing a high-level defense communications hotline. U.S. participants hoped that both defense hotlines could serve as (but not replace) indirect channels of communication between the major powers.
- All relevant parties should explore the possibility of resurrecting the Six-Party Talks and establish denuclearization of the DPRK as an end goal of a long-term process, rather than as an entry point for dialogue. Practical, small-scale cooperation among these countries is possible, despite geopolitical competition—a U.S. participant pointed to the January 2023 agreement between Japan and Russia on reciprocal fishing access in each other's exclusive economic zones (EEZs).
- All four countries should promote the resumption of normalized and safe academic exchanges. While there was unanimous consensus about the utility of being able to meet in person again after a three-year hiatus on international travel, participants from the U.S., Japan, and the ROK acknowledged that there are still fears among scholars and experts in their respective countries about possible detainment when traveling to China. It was also recognized that Chinese experts in STEM and others faced greater scrutiny and discrimination in the U.S., further hindering much needed people-to-people exchanges.

Great Power Competition and Regional Cooperation

The Asia-Pacific region is operating under conditions of elevated great power competition. The most powerful players in strategic competition, the U.S. and China, lack meaningful dialogue despite some high-level Track I communications. As a result, the region is seeing an emergence of a northern triangle (Beijing, Pyongyang, and Moscow) versus a southern triangle (Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo.) However, despite the focus on U.S.-China relations, strategic competition is not just a two-player game. The major powers tend to view other countries as grounds for competition, when in reality, they need to recognize the agency of other countries in the region to pursue policies that advance their own interests.

For Japan and the ROK, bilateral relations with each other and with other like-minded partners remain important—there are deepening ties among allies and partners, aside from the U.S., that are being driven by diplomacy of partners in the region who are concerned about their own security environment. Japan’s new national security and defense strategies are the result of several compounding factors including China, North Korea, and Russia; and President Yoon is driving the ROK-Japan rapprochement and strengthening bilateral relations with Vietnam, Indonesia, the Netherlands, and France, among others.

It was acknowledged that ideological confrontation is the ultimate driver of differing threat perceptions, noting that deep polarization in many countries’ domestic politics are exacerbating perceived bloc confrontation. A Chinese participant observed that during the Cold War, the Helsinki Process resulted in greater cooperation between Eastern and Western Europe, and that there should be a similar effort made today for a regional process that can help the countries of the Asia Pacific foster cooperation among all regional parties against the backdrop of geopolitical competition.

Relations with China

There was consensus that deepening strategic competition has made it virtually impossible for the U.S. and China to cooperate bilaterally on crisis prevention and management, with suggestions that broader, regional confidence building measures and crisis prevention could be more productive. Such measures can include reassurances to not shoot missiles into each other’s EEZs and information-sharing through a regional missile launch notification mechanism. Short of major progress on intractable security challenges, there is an urgent need to ensure that a crisis or accident does not escalate into conflict.

The elephant in the room when discussing crisis prevention was the lack of an ongoing, formal mechanism for military-to-military dialogue between the U.S. and China. U.S. participants emphasized that U.S. sanctions (levied on Chinese Defense Minister Li Shuangfu in 2018 because of Chinese purchases of Russian military equipment) do not constitute a legal hindrance to dialogue, but Chinese participants asserted that a meeting while sanctions are still imposed on General Li would be regarded as “diplomatic humiliation,” especially since such sanctions were levied against China and not against others importing Russian equipment.

Participants from all four sides were gravely concerned about what it will take to achieve real security cooperation between the U.S. and China. Several participants from both the U.S. and

China feared that a 21st century Cuban Missile Crisis type of event will need to happen for the two major powers to be able to resume normalized security contacts.

Reengaging North Korea

Participants expressed frustration that the international community has not been able to deter the DPRK's objectionable behavior, which has allowed the Kim regime to continue to develop and test its nuclear weapons program. Leverage over the DPRK is more diminished now than ever before as a result of the DPRK's self-isolation and the failure of the UNSC to agree to put forward any new sanctions in response to provocations. Participants from all four countries shared concerns about the DPRK's attempted launching of a spy satellite and its preparations for conflict as a form of brinkmanship to set conditions in its favor for negotiations.

Sincere and creative efforts to reengage the DPRK are still needed, despite the international community's focus on the war in Ukraine and in spite of U.S.-China competition. A U.S. participant noted that the relevant parties have traditionally been able to get the DPRK to mitigate its behavior through engagement, citing Dr. Victor Cha's research demonstrating the correlation between international engagement and DPRK provocations—"when we are talking to the North Koreans, there is less testing."² The U.S. has offered to talk without preconditions, but the North Koreans are not interested. If the past is any guide, the DPRK will return to the negotiating table, but the onus is on the relevant parties to prepare for such a scenario, especially as it appears that the DPRK will reopen its borders to a greater extent sometime this year.

When negotiations are able to resume, participants agreed that denuclearization should remain a common end goal to the long-term process. Participants especially argued against abandoning denuclearization in favor of arms control discussions. An ROK participant noted that the DPRK is the only country to have developed a nuclear weapons program as a member of the NPT. If the international community implicitly recognizes the DPRK's program at the beginning of an arms control process, it would be damaging to the NPT regime. A Japanese participant emphasized that this is one issue where multilateral cooperation is imperative—there is a need for coordination among the four parties on the North Korean nuclear issue, rather than presented as a single country's problem. A Chinese participant averred that the only way to make progress on the DPRK nuclear issue is if the five relevant parties first agree on a strategy and present a united front to the DPRK. The current situation, where various parties have different assessments of how to proceed, gives the advantage to Kim Jong Un.

The Power of “Third Powers”

The regional security architecture is evolving in response to the changing international security environment, shifting from focusing on ASEAN-plus frameworks to minilateral arrangements like the Quad and the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral. Existing ASEAN-based and broader multilateral institutions (like the UN, WTO, WHO, etc.) are still relevant but not central to the regional architecture. These institutions are still important for providing venues that bring together leaders in an environment where it might be difficult for leaders to visit each other's countries. However, these multilateral institutions have also become venues that showcase major powers

² <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/database-north-korean-provocations/>

blaming each other. Global transnational issues once deemed entry points for broader cooperation, even among major powers, are now politicized. Japan and ROK participants highlighted the WHO's failure to effectively address the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of U.S.-China competition. These participants argued that major powers need to exercise restraint in multilateral fora and to not let domestic political interests override the interests of humanity; U.S. and Chinese participants did not disagree with their Japanese and Korean colleagues.

Minilateral groupings have emerged partly as a reaction to the inability of existing institutions to address critical issues of the day. These groupings are taking on increasingly substantive roles as they are more narrowly focused (and not exclusively security-focused). These flexible arrangements, where each member country can participate in its own way to address its security interests in the region, are also subject to the political will among the parties and responsive to changes in the international environment.

Chinese participants expressed concerns about "bloc confrontation" and U.S. dominance of regional security affairs through its alliances and minilateral coalitions. In particular, there is also concern in Beijing about the introduction of "external players" like the EU and NATO to regional security issues. From a Chinese perspective, cooperation through ASEAN+3 or ARF would be more appealing to and inclusive of China.

U.S. participants countered that Washington is not moving in the direction of promoting an Asian NATO or bloc confrontation. It was recognized that none of the parties involved at these discussions are seeking another cold war, nor is there support for containment strategies. If anything, all parties, including the U.S., should seek to preserve interdependence with China.

Japanese and Korean participants argued for "third powers" (not U.S. or China) to lead the way and make regional institutions enticing for major powers to join when they are ready to do so. "Third powers" should talk among themselves, and Japan and the ROK should take advantage of improved bilateral relations to push forward an agenda for regional cooperation among such powers. A Chinese participant agreed that there is value to having a smaller mechanism to address East Asian security issues, and that "third powers" should feel empowered to not take sides between the U.S. and China and to put pressure on the major powers to insist they behave responsibly. However, in order for multilateral and regional institutions to work, there needs to be legitimacy and inclusiveness.

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FORUM ON ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY
PRESENTS**

A U.S.-CHINA-JAPAN-REPUBLIC OF KOREA TRACK II DIALOGUE

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