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Trilateral Missile Defense System a Step Towards Asian NATO



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The United States, Japan, and South Korea will fully operationalize a missile warning system “by the end of December.” While justified as a means to counter North Korea’s missile launches, more worrisome, it escalates tensions in the region with China through

the “NATOification” of all three countries, agreed upon in the “Spirit of Camp David” agreement.

The agreement was hailed as a “new era of trilateral partnership” during the August 18 press conference following a meeting between the heads of state of all three countries. Western media echoed the sentiment, calling it “historic” and “unprecedented.” China, listed in the agreement as a regional concern, accused the United States of creating a “mini NATO in Asia.” In response, United States National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan emphatically stated that the trilateral alliance is “nothing new” and certainly “not a new NATO for the Pacific.” Yet despite such dismissals, this meeting between the U.S. and its strongest allies in the region lays the foundations for NATO-level military cooperation—a common threat, interoperability, and security coordination—that threatens China and escalates tensions in the region.

‘Collective Interests and Security’

While the United States has had bilateral agreements under the San Francisco System with South Korea and Japan for decades, the August 18 Camp David meeting institutionalized trilateral cooperation among the three nations, changing the scope and nature of their relations from the hub-and-spoke bilateral alliances to trilateral annual summits (covering finance, commerce, industry, foreign policy, and defense) and joint military exercises. As Victor Cha of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) states: “This [unprecedented] institutionalization of the trilateral relationship... transforms these alliances into something quite new.” This was a historical breakthrough for the United States, which first pursued a NATO-level alliance built around Japan in the 1950s. Yet, unresolved grievances around Japan’s colonialism (enabled by the U.S. decision to prioritize its security interests over rectifying Japan’s war crimes and colonialism), and the different security interests between South Korea and Japan forced it to settle for bilateral agreements with governments it installed and propped up. Nonetheless, as noted in Foreign Policy magazine, this U.S. “military preeminence in the Pacific gave Washington the luxury of not needing a collective security agreement.” Today, as the U.S. “has lost its preponderance of military power in the maritime domain... [the U.S. and its allies face a] threat comparable to what NATO confronted in Europe during the Cold War.”

The conservative, pro-U.S. Yoon Suk Yeol administration’s 2023 decision to normalize relations with Japan (casting aside a South Korean Supreme Court ruling against Japanese companies for the wartime conscription of Koreans) paved the way towards establishing

the trilateral alliance that the U.S. had sought for the past 70 years. While the Spirit of Camp David Agreement is not yet a full-fledged mini Asian-NATO, combining two of the United States' closest allies in the region into military cooperation with each other is a step towards it. The agreement contains the seeds of a NATO-level trilateral alliance based on mutual self-defense. More specifically, it calls for consultation and coordinated responses “to regional challenges, provocations, and threats that affect our collective interests and security.” As Kurt M. Campbell, Biden’s Asia strategy architect, has stated: a “fundamental, foundational understanding” of the Spirit of Camp David statement is that “a challenge to the security of any one of the countries affects the security of all of them.”

‘Integrated Deterrence’

One of NATO’s strengths, which enhances and expands U.S. power projection in the region, is the synergy achieved by greater interoperability (i.e., the ability to effectively “achieve tactical, operational and strategic objectives”) between member countries. All of these are being built up and pursued through the trilateral security cooperation agreement.

This agreement lays the groundwork for trilateral interoperability to achieve “integrated deterrence” against China. This integrated deterrence is key in the U.S. containment of China. It allows the United States to carry out provocations (e.g., former U.S. House Speaker’s Nancy Pelosi August 2022 visit with Taiwan’s president) while limiting China’s response options.

A key component of integrated deterrence is joint military cooperation and coordination through a common operational picture. In other words, all parties need to be looking at the same operational picture informing their operational decisions. The recent normalization of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) by the Yoon Administration lays the foundation for this. Previously, under the 2014 trilateral information sharing agreement, South Korean and Japanese intelligence would be shared between each other through the United States and would be limited to threats from North Korea. GSOMIA, first signed in 2016, and reinstated by Yoon (after former President Moon allowed it to expire in 2019), allows comprehensive intelligence sharing between South Korea and Japan directly, including “threats from China and Russia.” On August 29, the United States, South Korea, and Japan held joint ballistic missile defense drills to “detect and track a computer-simulated ballistic missile target, and share related information.” The system is expected to be fully operationalized by the end of December

2023. While ostensibly against North Korean intercontinental ballistic missiles, given the scope of GSOMIA, this missile defense system can just as well be applied to China.

At a time when regional power is maintained through an “extended deterrence” to determine the outcome without a bullet even fired against an adversary, the United States’ missile defense system allows it to project its power in the region by neutralizing China’s anti-access and area-denial capabilities. Furthermore, it threatens to neutralize China’s ability to respond to a first strike by the United States. The United States’ “extended deterrence” containing China and China’s “extended deterrence” safeguarding its economic rise leaves both jostling for military advantage. In effect, U.S. actions are triggering a set of actions and counteractions that are escalating tensions in the region.

Members of the Biden Administration extol the Camp David Agreement as historic and unprecedented and as a qualitative leap forward in the United States, Japan, and South Korea military cooperation and coordination. At the same time, they oppose its characterization as a mini-Asian NATO. And while the agreement has not yet reached NATO status, it is clearly laying the groundwork toward that objective. It has also driven China, North Korea, and Russia to strengthen their own coordination, effectively consolidating an opposing bloc. Ultimately, the fight to establish competing “extended deterrence” is the beginning of war. To stop war, we must shift from military posturing and escalation to diplomatic solutions and respect for the security concerns of all countries.

This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

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