

How to institutionalize the tripartite cooperation

THE ASAN INSTITUTE
for POLICY STUDIES
Yoon Young-kwan
Chairman
2023.8.26

The strategic landscape in East Asia is undergoing fundamental changes. Leaders of South Korea, the United States and Japan pledged all-around trilateral cooperation during a landmark summit at Camp David on Aug. 18. The deepened partnership has been precipitated by the menacing North Korean missile provocation last year, worsening confrontation between the United States and China, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Such geopolitical shifts have prompted Joe Biden's administration to tighten the loose ends of the trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the United States and Japan and institutionalize their partnership structure to ensure uninterrupted cooperation regardless of the changes in the governing power in their respective countries. Beijing may have enjoyed strategic benefits from tensions between Seoul and Tokyo, Washington's two core allies in East Asia. But since China can no longer revel in the strategic advantage, it strongly criticized the first exclusive tripartite summit at Camp David.

The Biden administration's diplomatic feat was possible thanks to South Korea's reconciliatory gesture toward Japan. The Yoon Suk Yeol administration's bold proposal in March to solve the diplomatic impasse with Tokyo over the wartime forced labor compensation issue was approved by only 30 percent of Koreans, while 60 percent opposed the idea of compensating survivors through a third-party foundation. Yet President Yoon Suk Yeol pressed ahead with the plan regardless of opposition at home to break the ice with Tokyo. President Biden took advantage of the improvement of relationship between the two allies to systematize the trilateral cooperation.

The question is whether institutionalizing such tripartite cooperation will stay effective in the future. Two factors can determine its success.

The first variable is uncertainties in international politics — in other words, what reactions China, North Korea and Russia will show to the tripartite cooperation system and how effectively South Korea, the United States and Japan can deal with them. China so far has been less assertive and offensive towards South Korea. But if China chooses to retaliate on South

Korea economically, as it did over the deployment of the Thaad antimissile system in the South — and if the U.S. and Japan react lethargically as in the past — the Korean people will deem the trilateral collaboration as just political rhetoric. Or if the United States continues to discriminate against Korean companies through the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act, it will deepen Koreans' skepticism about the trilateral cooperation. The Yoon administration must let the United States recognize such concerns from South Korea.

The Fumio Kishida government of Japan also must demonstrate a proactive response to the Yoon administration's reconciliatory gestures. The political air has turned amicable between the two countries, but a sudden upset from Japanese politicians' provocative comments related to the past issues can harm the institutionalization of the three-way partnership.

The second variable is the change in domestic politics of the three countries, particularly of South Korea. The low approval rating of President Yoon could represent public disapproval of his steps to improve ties with Japan and strengthen the trilateral cooperation. The question is how the government can overcome these obstacles.

To help achieve the tripartite cooperation, the governments must show their people tangible outcomes from their deepened ties as early as possible. As suggested by some experts, the idea of establishing the office for cooperation in Seoul could be a good idea to help Korea play a key role in putting the Camp David agreements into action.

Generating visible economic and technology benefits from the three-way cooperation is as important as strengthened security from the summit. The three countries must go beyond the instant sharing of information on core supplies and reach the level of common responses. If state-invested laboratories of the three countries elevate cooperation in artificial intelligence and other innovations and cooperate in technological development and design in technological standards, it will significantly contribute to reinforcing Korea's future power. People will then come to understand the far-sighted foreign policy of the Yoon administration.

When female role and participation is escalated according to the women's empowerment initiative of the trilateral agreement, Korean women will be able to feel the benefit of the new trilateral relationship. If Korea meticulously prepares for the first trilateral Global Leadership Youth Summit to be held in Busan early next year, young generations of the three countries can experience the advantages from their closer ties.

The U.S. presidential election in November next year will be the make-or-break factor to the institutionalization of the trilateral cooperation. Although Korea's next parliamentary elections

are held in April, the continuity of the government's policy will not be affected since the election results do not mean the change of the governing power in the country. But if Donald Trump is re-elected, all foreign policies of the Biden administration, including its upgraded partnership with Korea and Japan, could be upended. Only God may know the outcome of the election, as it is beyond the realm of human predictions.

* The view expressed herein was published on August 26 in the *JoongAng Sunday* and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.