The Cornerstone and the Linchpin: Securing America’s Northeast Asian Alliances

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During an era in which strategic gravity is shifting to Asia, the United States cannot be careless in tending to its alliances with Japan and South Korea (the Republic of Korea, or ROK). The three countries face persistent threats from North Korea and from China’s semi-transparent bid for regional hegemony. Meanwhile, rocky relations between Tokyo and Seoul are jeopardizing vital U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific. The latest disagreement between America’s premier allies raises new questions about alliance strategy, commitment, and burden-sharing. These fissures have become exacerbated as the U.S. pressures allies to increase their contributions to regional security and reciprocal trade.¹

Real and perceived disarray among three of the world’s top democracies bodes ill for a future order. Now is a poor time to raise doubts about the durability of U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia. Indeed, this is a time when solidarity among like-minded states should lead them to reinforce commitments to a rules-based order and check potential aggression in all its forms. The alliances are not just discrete relationships but part of a post–World War II system that is generally favorable to U.S. interests and values.²

The Trump administration’s vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific is founded on the defense of these partnerships.

Photo caption: Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe and U.S. President Donald Trump hold a joint press conference in the Rose Garden at the White House in Washington, D.C., on Thursday, June 7, 2018. (Photo by Cheriss May/NurPhoto via Getty Images)
free and open region, in turn, requires effective alliances and partnerships. Allies and partners are critical to reinforcing a postwar system that is under siege by revisionist powers.\textsuperscript{3} Alliances are still some of the best means to achieve common ends, and they remain a unique advantage not enjoyed by a rising China. The foundation of U.S. regional policy begins with ironclad bilateral alliances in Northeast Asia. As the Defense Department’s regional strategy report states, the “U.S.-Japan Alliance is the cornerstone of peace and security in the Indo-Pacific”\textsuperscript{4} and the “U.S.-ROK Alliance is the linchpin of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia, as well as the Korean Peninsula.”\textsuperscript{5}

While the alliances were once fit for purpose, both security trends and internal frictions suggest that change is needed. Deterring North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs requires strength. In addition, China’s ambition to be world dominant in critical dual-use technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) puts extra stress on market democracies to remain united. If allies are part of the solution to twenty-first-century security challenges, however, they are also part of the problem. For both America’s long-standing and newer partners, emerging threats and challenges have transcended the political will and flow of resources needed to counter them. Although President Donald Trump’s strategy documents underscore the value of alliances, the president’s political constituents embrace his call for others to bear more costs.

This report seeks to explain why the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances are still a vital means of achieving overlapping strategic interests. At the same time, it also argues that keeping these alliances fit for purpose requires radical change rather than business as usual. Both a rapidly changing security environment and growing intra-alliance squabbling pose dangers that require U.S. leadership. This report concludes with specific ideas for advancing bilateral and trilateral cooperation in the coming months and years, without trying to achieve too much too quickly.
I. WHY ALLIANCES ARE INDISPENSABLE

Alliances matter. They matter especially in Northeast Asia at a time when major-power strategic competition is resurgent. They matter when market democracies are at risk from state capitalism and authoritarian governance, and when the United States appears to be losing its long-standing advantages in critical technologies. They matter when China and Russia seek to change existing rules and norms, mainly through unconventional means. They also matter when North Korea’s Kim family dictatorship clings to nuclear weapons and missiles of all ranges.

Over the past year, historical grievances between South Korea and Japan have reemerged, escalating into punitive trade and security measures. Court rulings in Seoul were followed by a military incident, followed by punitive trade measures, followed by Seoul ending a bilateral intelligence-sharing accord. The resulting weakness in the Seoul-Tokyo leg of trilateral relations with the United States redound to the advantage of common adversaries. Specifically, the fraying ties between Seoul and Tokyo help Pyongyang with its divide-and-rule tactics and could undermine deterrence in a crisis. Further, “alliance drift” — including the growing chasm between Japan and South Korea — impedes the cooperation needed to manage an increasingly assertive China. It also plays into Beijing’s narrative that U.S. alliances and the postwar San Francisco system are anachronistic. Finally, the contretemps between the pair

Photo caption: People watch a television broadcast reporting on North Korea’s test launch of a new ICBM at the Seoul Railway Station on November 29, 2017 in Seoul, South Korea. (Photo by Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images)
of Northeast Asian allies exacerbates the rising nationalism, protectionism, and unilateralism throughout the region.

While the United States wants its allies to shoulder fair burdens, especially for their defense, South Korea and Japan are two allies that have shown they are willing and able to do more. They are irreplaceable as vital partners in pursuing shared interests in a free and open Indo-Pacific. A critical examination of the division of labor within each alliance is welcome, but U.S. policymakers should not focus on burden-sharing at the expense of shared strategic ends. It is easy to underestimate the sunk costs that have gone into creating the regional architecture and the fragility of the security system that the alliances uphold. Instead, when Washington entreats Japan and South Korea to contribute more, it should understand that it is working toward common goals with these two allies.

But none of this has stopped some Americans from doubting the value of alliances. There are those who want allies to pay more of the costs of maintaining U.S. forces forward, while others remain skeptical about the merits of American leadership and the U.S. penchant for intervening in hotspots around the world. Even those who remain strong supporters of the popular alliances with Tokyo and Seoul can differ on their strategic focus and ways to adapt to an evolving security environment. A public browbeating of allies, at the very least, reduces certitude about the future of the alliances and about America’s continuing support for providing the public good of regional security far from its shores. Business deals falter and businesses go bankrupt when there is too little capital; alliances are hollowed out when there is a deficit of trust.

The quarrel between important allies should cause the U.S. to redouble its focus on why these alliances matter in the first place. Effective partnerships can deter countries from engaging in conflict, dissuade them from unilateral attempts to change the status quo, and if conflict breaks out, improve the allies’ chances of winning, or at least not losing. Ideally, allies share sufficient overlapping interests and values to subscribe to a shared strategic vision, even if operationalization is harder. For decades the United States, Japan, and South Korea have played by the same rules, and each has an equal stake in preserving the rules-based order, in the region and internationally. Those rules include the equality of nations regardless of size, norms against settling disputes through force, and support for independent, sovereign states that in turn support the open global commons rather than allowing arbitrary power to undermine agreed-upon rules. These overlapping goals are being translated into greater interoperability, for instance, with Aegis-capable ships, F-35 fighter aircraft, and missile-defense systems. The defense policies of North Korea and China seek to weaken cooperation among the three democracies. This is because the two countries know that the democracies’ combined power poses a severe challenge to their quest for advancing their strategic aims.

But let us put these and other U.S. alliances in historical perspective.

In the wake of World War II, the United States sought to center international security on the United Nations. After the North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950, this vision quickly gave way in Asia to a network of mostly bilateral alliances, with the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-South Korean alliances serving as the pillars. These alliances have evolved and matured, but the relevant question for the 2020s and beyond is this: Are America’s twin alliances in Northeast Asia still fit for their purpose? Do they need to be preserved, or reformed, or significantly modified, if not scrapped altogether?

But perhaps first we must ask about the genesis of these alliances.

At the wartime Yalta conference, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin suggested a postwar order maintained by a collective security system under a United Nations. That vision faded quickly after the war, however, as Soviet meddling in Europe, along with the
fall of China and the Korean War, led the United States to take a military approach to the strategy of containment that George Kennan proposed in 1947.

The United States chose to create a series of mostly bilateral alliances — with the Philippines, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand — and a bipolar global and regional order emerged. At around the same time, September 8, 1951, the wartime Allied powers signed a formal peace treaty with Japan in San Francisco. The U.S. mutual defense treaty with South Korea was signed in 1953, just over two months after the armistice.

The heart of the San Francisco peace order is a hub-and-spokes system of alliances. While cast in idealistic terms, the Asian order, as Michael J. Green notes, sought “to contain the expansion of Soviet and Chinese communism and to secure the offshore island chain.” Of course, the alliances also provided an efficient means for the United States to exercise control over both communist adversaries and newfound allies. Tight bilateral engagement could “Rhee-strain” South Korean president Syngman Rhee and reassure Asia that Japan would not remilitarize.

The new order included a defense treaty with the Republic of China (Taiwan) that endured until Washington normalized relations with Beijing in 1979. This situation continues to complicate relations with America’s two Northeast Asian allies, and indeed, the question of which countries would go to Taiwan’s defense if it faced direct Chinese aggression is becoming relevant once again.

U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea are hampered in part because the two Northeast Asian democracies have different legal and political foundations.

Japan’s defeat in 1945 gave way to U.S. occupation, a 1947 peace constitution, and a 1951 security treaty. Less than a decade later, in January 1960, Japan and the United States signed the Treaty for Mutual Cooperation and Security, thereby signaling the arrival of a more even-handed partnership. Although the treaty calls for mutual assistance, Japan is not required to go to the defense of the United States but the United States is required to help defend Japan. Article V notes that “each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety.” However, the treaty adds that in such a circumstance, “Each Party would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes.” Japan’s defense of U.S. interests, on the other hand, is confined to broader international rules and security issues in the “Far East,” a phrase without precise geographical boundaries. While Japan has gradually enlarged the scope of its contributions and activities, even President Trump has noted that the alliance falls short of reciprocity. Of course, in no small measure this is due to historical circumstances: the United States first fought Japan, then began working to transform it into a pillar of regional and international order.

The opposite is true with South Korea. America’s postwar demobilization no doubt contributed to North Korea’s decision to invade its southern neighbor on June 25, 1950. However, the U.S. decision to fight for and with South Koreans under the banner of the new United Nations forged a robust and reciprocal alliance. The U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, signed weeks after the 1953 armistice ended open hostilities with North Korea, stipulates that “each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties … would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.” Korean soldiers would go on to serve in Vietnam (where some 300,000 of them deployed over ten years), both Gulf Wars, and the war in Afghanistan. More recently, Korea is singularly focused on the peninsula, while Japan stakes out an Indo-Pacific strategic vision that became a model for Trump administration thinking.
Unlike South Korea, Japan adopted a pacifist posture, and the resulting legal framework constrained participation in combat operations with the United States. This legal barrier is enshrined in the 1947 constitution’s Article Nine, which commits the Japanese people to eschew the use of force to settle international disputes. The U.S. influence on the constitution, and a subsequent lingering desire to keep a proverbial “cork in the bottle” of potential remilitarization, restrained Japan from fielding a more active defense force. Japan’s enormous self-restraint would not start to change in visible ways until the 1980s, when the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force took on responsibility for closing down critical chokepoints in a war with the Soviet Union.

Questions continue to percolate in the region about whether Japan will eventually become not just a civil power, but a power comfortable with the use of force. Japanese society remains skeptical about the use of force, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is not quick to embrace military solutions to problems. His Liberal Democratic Party had a strong showing in the July 2019 upper house election, but it fell short of allowing him to change Japan’s constitution without a serious fight. Moreover, the constitutional changes mooted thus far center on issues unlikely to stir international controversy. For example, Abe has focused on clarifying the legal right of the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) to exist, which would merely codify in the constitution something that already exists in reality.

A deteriorating security environment and questions about the alliance and Japan’s growing network of bilateral relations with countries like Australia, India, and the UK raise further questions about the future. Japan scholar Sheila Smith asks how Japanese officials will use force if compelled into offensive action, how “Japanese thinking about their military [is] changing as the possibility of a military conflict in Northeast Asia becomes more easily imagined.”

The U.S.-ROK alliance is “ironclad — forged in blood, shaped over 65 years of combined military operations and training, and hardened by the crucible of war.” However, current attempts at negotiating an end to the armistice on the Korean Peninsula, as well as the hope of a denuclearized peninsula, raise profound questions about the future shape of security in Northeast Asia. While the Kim regime needs an external threat to justify the family dictatorship, it is also true that the “clear and present nuclear threat” of North Korea has helped to unite allies and resolve conflicts of interests in favor of ensuring the ability to neutralize North Korea.

Both the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliance were founded on “preserving peace in Northeast Asia by stemming the spread of communist influence and precluding single-power
domination of Eurasia,” and both have bolstered regional and global stability. While the alliance with South Korea focused mostly on preventing a communist takeover of the peninsula, the U.S.-Japan security treaty, as Yukio Satoh notes, “is essential not only for the defense of Japan but also for the security of South Korea.”

Regionally, Japanese ports house more than twenty U.S. Navy vessels, including the only aircraft carrier homeported outside the United States. Without bases in Japan, the United States would wield less influence in the Indo-Pacific.

The alliances also have helped to reduce the threat of regional nuclear proliferation. North Korea’s gradual buildup has come at enormous cost to that country. Even now there is still some hope that a testing moratorium will lead to a rollback of Pyongyang’s arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Meanwhile, protection under a U.S. nuclear umbrella was a huge draw for Japan to form a strong bilateral relationship as it regained independence after America’s postwar occupation. It also meant that the Japanese government would not have to develop its own nuclear weapons program, which would have required it to work against the strong anti-nuclear sentiments of the populace. Consequently, Japan remains a champion of the global non-proliferation regime.

Alliances are paradoxically constraining and empowering. The classic fears of alliance entrapment and abandonment speak to the enduring concerns of relying on others for one’s security. Alliances — all partnerships — constrain the choices of national leaders, place a premium on military power over economic and diplomatic relations, and compel a degree of security orthodoxy that may feel like a strait-jacket in an era of rapid change.

Not many leaders want to alienate a rising China, the number one trading partner of some 150 countries. The Australian election of May 2019, for instance, highlighted a debate over the need for Canberra to exercise greater independence from Washington and improve ties with Beijing despite concerns over human rights and political influence.

Similarly, the U.S. embrace of strong bilateral security ties does not stop allies from seeking greater economic relations with China. For all the burdens of formal alliances, they can strengthen governments by adding aggregate power, deterring aggression, dissuading risk-taking by potential adversaries, and reassuring democratic societies. Both Tokyo and Seoul continue to embrace their alliance with the United States for these reasons, while they simultaneously seek more latitude for foreign and trade policy.

In recent years, the United States has encouraged its regional allies to expand ties with other allies and new partners as part of a trend away from a tight hub-and-spokes alliance system and toward a looser, more agile network of security partners. But even hard-fought gains in trilateral security cooperation among Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington appear at risk because of resurgent nationalism in all three countries. But deep-seated enmity between Seoul and Tokyo may be the most pernicious development because the South Korean government is signaling that it still does not trust Japan to play a larger security role in the region. The severing of the bilateral intelligence-sharing agreement between Japan and South Korea marks a low point in post-normalization relations and undercuts trilateral cooperation. Weaker bonds among the three countries are likely to slow coordinated collaboration with other partners throughout the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

The present tension between South Korea and Japan should remind Americans how vital these two countries are for protecting their peace and prosperity and should tell the world how far Seoul and Tokyo have come since the end of World War II. But at the moment, alliance strains are outweighing recognition of these substantial gains.

While Japan-South Korea relations have a problematic history, dating back to the Japanese occupation of Korea
from 1910–45, this pair of Northeast Asian democracies can boast of cooperative milestones in recent decades. Each became a pivotal bilateral ally of the United States, crucial for regional security and peace on the peninsula. Nevertheless, increasingly, these cornerstone alliances appear misaligned, a perception that undermines the open postwar security system they are meant to reinforce. Each government needs the other more than it cares to admit, and yet officials in Tokyo and Seoul garner domestic political rewards for standing up to the other rather than for cooperating. Leaders need to find some mutually beneficial areas of policy cooperation that can help soften, if not reverse, knee-jerk nationalism. Moving forward, the United States needs to be mindful of potential strategic divergences, disputes over burden-sharing, and powerful domestic forces in all three countries.
At least three broad strains afflict current relations among the United States, Japan, and the ROK. The first is historical and territorial grievances. Next is trade imbalances, burden-sharing, and domestic politics. Last are disagreements over strategy toward common threats and subsequent doubt over the raison d’être for U.S. alliances and the ROK-Japan partnership.

Though America’s two allies in Northeast Asia normalized relations in 1965, they have suffered periodic fits of pique. The issues between them, sometimes reduced to the label of “history,” generally stem from Japan’s colonization of Korea from 1910 until 1945 and the difficulty both governments and societies have had in burying the hatchet. Specific flashpoints include the Korean women forced into prostitution (so-called comfort women); Korean men forced into hard labor by Japanese firms during wartime; statements about history in textbooks or by politicians; and the complex and ongoing issue of conflicting territorial claims. The main territorial dispute is over the Dokdo islets in the Sea of Japan, administered by South Korea and claimed by Japan, which calls them Takeshima.14

Over the past year, a number of issues have beset bilateral relations: Korean court rulings in October and November 2018 that require Japanese companies to pay compensation to
Normalization never meant forgetting the past, but instead building a positive future in spite of it. While normalization widened the path toward amity, Japan-South Korea relations have continued to experience periodic crises, and the events of the past year represent the latest dip in goodwill.

If Koreans have doubted the sincerity of Japanese apologies and the amount of Japanese compensation, many Japanese have doubted whether Koreans would ever forgive past wrongs. Thus, in early 1995, a Japanese attempt to compensate female victims of sexual slavery during World War II provoked an outcry in South Korea. Many former comfort women refused Japan’s attempt to distribute a combination of private and public money through an “Asian Women’s Fund” and accused Tokyo of evading wartime responsibility and failing to offer an official apology.20

Conversely, Korean constitutional court rulings in the fall of 2018 sparked outrage in Japan. In November, the South Korean Supreme Court delivered a judgment stating that Japan’s Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Limited must compensate Koreans forced into labor in World War II. A similar decision by the same court was handed down the previous month against Nippon Steel and the Sumitomo Metal Corporation. Democracies enjoy an independent judiciary, and the Korean courts followed their country’s interpretation of domestic law. Tokyo, however, viewed both rulings — along with President Moon’s failure to respond quickly to blunt their effect — as a betrayal of the 1965 treaty. The resulting toing-and-froing demonstrate how quickly old wounds can be reopened. In July, Japan announced new export restrictions on three materials essential for producing Korean smartphone semiconductor chips and electronic screen displays.21 The next month, South Korea reciprocated by dropping Japan from its whitelist of preferred trading partners, thereby adding additional barriers and restrictions to bilateral commerce, and President Moon proposed a peace
economy with North Korea while castigating Japan.\textsuperscript{22} Despite penalizing each other, Japan and South Korea’s earlier tiffs did not preclude some cooperation. For instance, in February 2015, Japan and South Korea let a currency-swap program expire, ending a serious goodwill effort that allowed Seoul to secure loans through Tokyo in the event of a major financial crisis like that of 1997.\textsuperscript{23} Even so, in 2016, South Korean president Park Geun-hye and Prime Minister Abe approved a bilateral information-sharing agreement formally known as a General Security of Official Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).

Another recurring flashpoint in bilateral relations centers on the Dokdo or Takeshima islets. In the summer of 2012, despite improved security cooperation between conservative South Korean president Lee Myung-bak and Japan, the two countries stepped back from cooperation. Japan’s annual white paper, issued in July of that year, reaffirmed its ownership of the islands.\textsuperscript{24} The following month, President Lee visited the disputed islets, escalating popular passions in both countries. Today, South Korea continues to express its dissatisfaction with Japan by conducting new military exercises around the islets.\textsuperscript{25}

Even amid allied feuding, there is teamwork. For every instance of ill will that surfaces in Japan-Korea relations, there are amicable acts that demonstrate overlapping interests and insulate bilateral ties from a free fall. For example, on August 4, 1993, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono took direct responsibility for comfort women with a sincere and public apology. Kono acknowledged Japanese military involvement in establishing and managing the brothels, stating: “The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those … who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.”\textsuperscript{26} Similarly, on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama called on all Japanese to heed the lessons of the past. “During a certain period in the not too distant past,” Murayama said, “Japan, following a mistaken national policy, advanced along the road to war, only to ensnare the Japanese people in a fateful crisis, and, through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations.”\textsuperscript{27} Accepting what he called “irrefutable facts of history,” Murayama stated that “Japan must eliminate self-righteous nationalism, promote international coordination as a responsible member of the international community and, thereby, advance the principles of peace and democracy.”\textsuperscript{28} He launched a government-sponsored “peace, friendship, and exchange initiative” to encourage historical research on modern relations between Japan and its neighbors and to expand exchanges between them.

Less controversial acts of cooperation have included everything from a $10 billion bailout of South Korea during the 1997 Asian financial crisis\textsuperscript{29} to jointly hosting the 2002 World Cup.\textsuperscript{30}

A second problem impeding alliance cohesion is the fight over trade and burden-sharing. The Trump administration is trying to rebalance power, not just vis-à-vis a rising China, but also with established allies. Recalibration includes pressure to correct trade imbalances as well as demands for the allies to shoulder greater regional security burdens. Korea, and especially Japan, are expected to raise their level of defense spending, and both are being asked to contribute more financial support for hosting U.S. forces.

While U.S. forces stationed forward contribute to U.S. national security in numerous ways, they also provide a high degree of security for the host nations and thus contribute to a degree of “free riding,” whether intended or not. The United States and South Korea remain locked in negotiations over a new, long-term special measures agreement (SMA) that would require Seoul to pay more than it currently does to maintain U.S. military forces on and around the peninsula.\textsuperscript{31}

The third problem is that each of the three governments has different threat assessments. Thus, each has a slightly different
interpretation of the reason for the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliance. This is even more true for Japan-ROK relations, which lack an airtight justification for their existence.

Shared threat perceptions provide alliance cohesiveness, and differing threat perceptions invite policy divergence. America’s two Northeast Asian allies have contrasting views of how to manage North Korea, China, and Russia, and those differences weaken the glue that should hold them together despite historical events or current domestic pressures.

Similarly, today’s disagreement between Seoul and Tokyo over how to deal with North Korea is not the first. The first two progressive governments to run a democratic South Korea, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, like Moon, focused on reducing inter-Korea tension and engagement, even at the expense of relations with Japan. Kim’s 1998 “sunshine policy” was far more conciliatory to North Korea than Japan thought warranted by Kim Jong-il’s behavior. Differences were reduced through diplomacy led by former secretary of defense William Perry, whose “trilateral, alliances-first approach” to negotiating denuclearization with North Korea reinforced
a unified approach that liberal South Korean leaders had strayed from.³³

The government of President Moon Jae-in is committed to seeking inter-Korean peace with Kim Jong-un, even if little progress is made on critical issues like denuclearization. Japanese prime minister Abe is determined to maintain pressure on Pyongyang by preserving both military capabilities, such as missile defense, and economic sanctions. The United States under President Trump is committed, at least for now, to negotiating peace and denuclearization with the North Korean regime. Progress could raise different challenges for the unity and commitment of the alliance. However, Trump could far more easily reverse course than Moon if events required him to.

Ironically, the recently deepening Tokyo-Seoul rift is the result of Japan’s clampdown on trading certain chemicals with South Korea. These chemicals, such as fluorinated polyimide and hydrogen fluoride, are used in semiconductors and display screens and could be used by North Korea for its defense programs. Japan delisted South Korea from an export whitelist of preferred trading partners, and Seoul reciprocated by ending Japan’s preferential trade status. As Victor Cha opined, these steps have taken relations “five steps backward.”³⁴

The challenges of China and Russia expose even deeper fissures among the allies. Seoul is pleased to be courted by Chinese president Xi Jinping and certainly appreciates Chinese and Russian pressure on the United States to deal with Chairman Kim. The Moon administration seems less concerned about Chinese coercive pressure and long-term ambitions and more focused on possible short-term gains from President Xi’s support for Moon’s diplomatic gambit. Even though the Chinese and Russians conducted air patrols in the air defense identification zones of South Korea and Japan in the East China Sea in July 2019, the three allies are failing to coalesce around what seems an obvious attempt to sow further alliance discord.³⁵ The Abe government has engaged with Russia and, more recently, China, but remains fully invested in a durable alliance with the United States as the best means of protecting Japanese interests. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is effectively categorizing both China and Russia as revisionist rivals, even if President Trump seeks to maintain a close rapport with Xi and Putin.

Washington has forged ahead with a new bilateral trade accord with Tokyo,³⁶ and the United States and Japan should take the lead in negotiating higher standards in Indo-Pacific trade — for instance, in digital rule-making and for state-owned enterprises.³⁷ In September 2018, President Trump signed a revised U.S.-Korea trade agreement that included progress toward opening Korean markets.³⁸ But the trade war with China has only partial support from Seoul and Tokyo, not least because of shared concerns about Washington’s resort to tariffs and growing calls for restrictions on high technology. Japan and South Korea fear that pressure on China will result in disruption of supply chains as well as a downturn in the global economy and their direct economic fortunes. They are also more uncertain than the United States about the extent of the security threat posed by doing business with China’s national champions, such as Huawei.

Americans remain staunchly committed to the defense of Japan and South Korea, and two-thirds support bases in both countries. However, they also like the idea of sharing more of the burdens with allies and partners, and nearly one-in-four Americans would like to see the United States reduce its responsibilities abroad.³⁹ Just as there is broad public support for avoiding wars of choice, there is also a desire to lighten the disproportionate costs the United States bears as the principal provider of global and regional security.⁴⁰ Some criticize America for this leadership role, claiming it is trying to act as the world’s policeman. However, even if sometimes it overreaches, it is also true that sometimes its allies underreach.
President Trump has tapped into broad domestic support for seeking to adjust the division of labor and burdens with U.S. allies. However, he has also been roundly questioned about possibly eroding alliance trust and reliability. Preserving and adjusting alliances at the same time requires a difficult balancing act for Washington.

In order to address the forces that are undermining the relationships among the United States, South Korea, and Japan, Washington will need to implement a set of policies that simultaneously help: (1) repair the ROK-Japan relationship; (2) establish greater cooperation on areas of overlapping interest; and (3) strengthen U.S. relations with both countries.
III. MAKING ALLIANCES MORE FIT FOR PURPOSE

To keep America’s alliances in Northeast Asia strong and fit for purpose in the years ahead, Japan and South Korea must manage their differences and the United States must go beyond changes in burden-sharing. Getting allies to do more is a means to an end but not the main objective. Specifically, Washington needs to stabilize Japan-South Korea relations, refocus cooperation on overlapping interests, and strengthen U.S. bilateral ties with each ally.

Repairing the Damage

Burden-sharing is a long-standing issue for those responsible for managing the alliance. The best advice is to try to arrange an equitable deal quietly while establishing a process for periodic reviews that do not call into question the entire enterprise.

Photo caption: U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, and Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono participate in a joint press conference at the foreign ministry on June 14, 2018 in Seoul, South Korea. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited South Korea to meet South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in and Japan’s Foreign Minister following a landmark meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. (Photo by Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images)
Are America’s allies sharing enough of the burden (and enjoying enough of the power-sharing)? The U.S. approach will need to (1) move toward equitable cost-sharing; (2) move toward equitable power-sharing; and (3) win public support in both countries.

Ironically, over the past decade, South Korea has consistently spent more than 2.6 percent of its GDP on defense. Even so, this higher-than-NATO rate has not prevented some from arguing that the South Koreans are rich enough to fend for themselves. (This argument finds some support on both the right and the left, the former driven by a desire to reduce America’s burdens and the latter by a desire to end dependency on a foreign power). As noted, the United States and South Korea are negotiating a new multiyear SMA over how much Seoul pays to keep U.S. forces on the peninsula. Currently they are operating under a one-year deal, struck in February, which requires South Korea to pay roughly $1 billion in host-nation support. Some reports suggest that Washington is seeking as much as $5 billion. If this is true, it might have contributed to the Moon administration’s decision to scuttle the intelligence-sharing accord with Japan.

Hal Brands recently argued in favor of the approach taken by a classical school of alliance management, which advocates remaining focused on common ends, not relatively minor disagreements over means. He worries that Japan, Korea, and European states such as Germany “would presumably be in the crosshairs, given that Trump has repeatedly derided them as ungrateful free-riders.” Leaving aside that this generalization does not apply equally to each of the three countries, his concern — and one which this author agrees—is about charging a one-size-fits-all percentage or premium on top of existing fees. In his criticism of the Trump administration’s search to secure larger contributions from allies hosting U.S. troops, which protect them as well as U.S. interests, he argues that the notion of a “cost plus 50” approach “is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of why Washington has alliances in the first place, and it is more likely to undermine U.S. interests than to put America first.”

Although the United States would like Japan to increase its defense spending, the specific challenge of hosting U.S. forces is more a matter of local politics and central government finances. Japan currently pays about $1.67 billion a year to help station about 50,000 U.S. troops. A majority are based in Okinawa, where there is substantial political opposition to a military footprint that is shrinking overall but still includes the controversial Futenma replacement facility, a Marine Corps air station being built in the Camp Schwab Marine base. But plans to relocate some Marines to Guam have been slow to be realized, partially due to a decision to divert funds for new facilities in Guam to pay for the construction of a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. In addition to about 18,000 Marines who are part of III MEF (Marine Expeditionary Force) in Okinawa, there are about 6,000 sailors in the U.S. Naval Forces Japan based in Yokosuka on the main island of Honshu and another 13,000 sailors in the U.S. Navy’s Seventh Fleet.

South Korea has consistently increased the amount of its burden-sharing in recent decades and currently hosts more than 28,000 U.S. forces. It has also shouldered the significant costs of building Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, the largest U.S. overseas military base. Construction of the camp is intended largely to enable most U.S. forces to be moved out of prime real estate (and immediate rocket range) within Seoul, where U.S forces have been headquartered for some seventy years. But the two allies failed to reach a multiyear deal on a new SMA in December 2018, instead striking a one-year, $1 billion deal that created considerable political ill will within South Korea. Given that negotiations with North Korea on reconciliation and denuclearization are hanging in the balance, the lingering uncertainty over the U.S. troop presence and cost-sharing between allies is less than ideal.

When allies prosper while the United States bears a disproportionate share of the costs for military forces, it is inevitable that America, as a democratic society, will ask for more burden-sharing. There are several short answers to these concerns.
First, the United States learned the hard way that its security is better protected with effective allies, partners and forward-deployed forces. As one historian has written, “A key lesson of World War II was that it is critical for the U.S. to preserve favorable balances of power in Europe, East Asia and the Middle East — to ensure that an aggressor does not dominate one of these regions and harness its resources.”

Second, no other country rivals the size and military capabilities of the United States, making alliances almost always inherently unequal.

Third, it is better to try to find an intelligent division of labor and then calculate the overall return on investment in an alliance than to try to match 1 to 1 every capability, deployment, or expenditure.

Fourth, host-nation support must also be tailored to the local circumstances, and no one formula will work for all allies. This does not mean that alliances have a life separate from resources and political goals — they can indeed end, especially when the threat recedes. But the overlapping objectives of allies should catalyze ideas about the means and ways to achieve the desired strategic results, rather than lead to a decision to end the alliance or an ultimatum to an ally over burden-sharing.

**The Rationale for Current and Future Alliances**

The U.S. alliance with South Korea is still focused on deterring North Korean aggression, though over the years it has adapted to deal with a range of North Korean contingencies (from limited provocation to regime change). The U.S.-ROK alliance has taken on broader regional and global missions too. The success or failure of ongoing negotiations with Kim Jong-un could fundamentally alter the rationale of the alliance and profoundly affect the security of Japan and the region.

The alliance with Japan remains a cornerstone for preserving regional stability and interests (including the defense of Japan and Korea). This is especially true in light of major-power revisionism led by a rising China. Increasingly, the U.S.-Japan alliance is trying to manage a comprehensive competition with China in technology, space, and cyberspace, and with regard to so-called gray-zone operations, which represent gradual attempts to challenge the status quo, mostly through unconventional or non-kinetic means.

Alliances are based — or should be based — on common or at least complementary interests. Formal treaty alliances, sometimes described as “latent military communities,” are different from lesser forms of alignment and partnership. They are intended, at least in part, to rely on military cooperation to deter and defend against threats.

The rationale for the U.S.-ROK alliance remains centered on the Korean Peninsula, and the ROK/U.S. Combined Forces Command is an effective bilateral force capable of deterring aggression and defeating North Korea should war break out once again.

As South Korea has prospered and grown stronger, the alliance with the United States has also broadened beyond the peninsula. In recent decades, common values of support for democracy and free markets have strengthened the defense bonds forged in blood during the Korean War, even as South Korea has also begun to flex its middle-power muscle. While Korea dispatched troops to Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the North Korean threat remains the glue ensuring a cohesive alliance. The consensus about the purpose of the alliance might not withstand the sudden disappearance of a clear and present North Korean threat.

For Japan, deterring North Korean nuclear-armed missiles and Russian adventurism remains important, but the long-term challenge is centered on China’s growing power and apparent desire to exert regional hegemony. In Asia, China is seeking to create preferential rules that serve its own interests even
if they infringe on the rights of neighboring states or violate international law (for example, rejection of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration tribunal ruling on the Philippines in the South China Sea). Some refer to this as “rule by law” rather than the rule of law (as those in Hong Kong can attest).

The end of the Cold War produced some drift before Washington and Tokyo created a new set of alliance guidelines encouraging closer intelligence sharing and even greater Japanese roles in areas such as defending against a possible North Korean missile threat. China’s rise and growing assertiveness over the past decade or so have prompted Japan to increase its defense capabilities; shift its focus to defending the vulnerable Southwest Island chain, including the Senkaku Islands; enhance security partnerships with like-minded countries such as Australia, India, and the United Kingdom; and advance capabilities in relatively new domains such as cyberspace and outer space.

Japan's Operational Role

As Koreans reconsider the future of the long-standing alliance machinery, the United States and Japan are still in the early stages of debating whether to further integrate the JSDF with U.S. armed forces stationed in Japan. Though the future is uncertain, the status quo is likely to hold. Even so, debates within all three countries may reveal newly congruent or divergent policies, especially in response to shifting perceptions of the threat environment.

Japan long ago stopped being just a nation hosting major naval and air forces. At least since the time of Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone in the early 1980s, Tokyo has aspired to take on much greater responsibilities for Japan’s defense — to be “an unsinkable aircraft carrier,” as Nakasone put it. It has also sought more responsibilities for regional and out-of-area missions. Although it has a pacifist constitution that prohibits offensive war (and even appears to proscribe armed forces altogether), Japan has shown a steady improvement in its defense capabilities over the past two or more decades.46

However, despite Japan’s strengthened capabilities and its alliance with the United States, it lacks a combined operational command and control capability. This is partly because the alliance developed at a time when Japan’s armed forces were deemed unlawful, and partly because until recently, Japanese governments did not believe that the constitution provided a right to collective self-defense. One question that has arisen in recent years is this: Should there be an operational command — not just, for example, continued forward basing of the U.S. Navy Seventh Fleet? Should there be a standing task force around the Southwest Island chain? Should there be a more concerted effort to combine command and control for detecting and responding to a possible missile launch or cyberattack?

The 2015 U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines underscore the need for greater Japanese capabilities, intensified cooperation in cyberspace and outer space, and more effective responses for dealing with China’s gray-zone operations. They also note the need to ensure a seamless spectrum of operations from the Japan Coast Guard to the JSDF to potential alliance operations. The most recent five-year defense program guidelines for the JSDF, issued in late 2018, point to an ever-more-capable Japanese force. While Japan claims that it now spends more than 1.3 percent of GDP on defense, the reality is that Japan is spending about $50 billion a year on defense compared with some $700 billion a year by the United States.47

South Korea’s Operational Role

Since the Korean War made it necessary to create a United Nations Command, led by the United States, unique circumstances apply to South Korea’s operational role.48 The U.S. forces that remained in Korea after the armistice were already part of a U.S. Forces Korea Command. The ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) was created in 1978 by Strategic Directive 1 of the Military Committee, which consisted of representatives from the ROK and U.S. National Command and Military Authorities. The Commander of the ROK-U.S. CFC
answers to the Military Committee and the Military Committee provides strategic guidance and oversight.

In 1994, peacetime operational control was returned to the ROK under Strategic Directive 2 of the Military Committee. Since then, CFC has not had forces permanently assigned to it. However, under the war plans established by the ROK Commander of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and the U.S. Services provide designated forces to CFC on the decision of their governments. This in effect makes the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff and USFK, among others, “force providers” to CFC. The CFC has responsibility for war planning and training and is authorized to conduct exercises with forces from both the ROK and the United States. But no permanent forces are assigned to CFC. Its role is ultimately to deter conflict from resuming or defeat aggression should it occur.

Although the U.S. possesses no operational control of ROK forces now and the ROK government will not have operational control of U.S. forces in the future, the issue of operational control transition remains a sensitive one inside South Korea. Theoretically, the transition of operational control should be settled with the ROK-U.S. CFC remaining intact but commanded by a four-star ROK officer, with a four-star U.S. officer serving as deputy commander. The decision to locate the ROK-U.S. CFC at Camp Humphreys would appear to solidify the future relationship. But just as political sensitivities on alliance military command and control have flared up in the past, so, too, could they diverge once again if Seoul and Washington diverge over their national interests.

In the past seven decades, Korea has gone from a country poorer than North Korea to a top-12 economy with arguably the most highly educated citizenry of any country. It is also a high-tech leader with a first-rate military operating state-of-the-art equipment. Politically, South Korea has been transformed from a military dictatorship to a flourishing democracy. As the country has grown, it has sought to exercise greater independence on defense and on its global posture as a middle power.

For both South Korea and Japan, extended deterrence is likely to take on greater urgency as North Korea builds a robust nuclear force and China and Russia advance new hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence (AI), and quantum computing, combined with nuclear weapons, missiles, anti-satellite weapons, and electronic warfare systems. These advanced systems will greatly call into question the credibility and capability of U.S. systems and political will, at least in the minds of some Koreans and some Japanese. Alliance options run the gamut from incremental improvements to conventional forces and modernizing the U.S. nuclear arsenal, to considering redeploying U.S. nuclear weapons to the peninsula or supporting South Korea and Japan should they decide to build independent nuclear forces. Needless to say, this last idea has virtually no official support in any of the three capitals.

**Shifting Threat Perceptions**

The U.S.-Japan alliance was designed by the United States to be a keystone for regional security after World War II. The U.S.-South Korean alliance, in contrast, was forged in combat to beat down North Korean aggression. But the differences in power and strategic objectives between Washington and its allies have always favored the U.S. perspective on the role of these alliances. The question is whether that asymmetry of power and purpose can be reformed to ensure effective and sustainable alliances for the future.

This is not a new problem. Henry Kissinger, in an exquisite but sympathetic critique of NATO, once described the crux of the alliance problem as follows: “The United States and Europe have too often conducted their dialogue over technical implementation of a blueprint manufactured in Washington.” Today, when Asia is ascendant, the question as to whether Cold War alliances in Northeast Asia are still fit to purpose or should be revamped must be viewed from the perspective that the alliance should involve reciprocal partnership.
Northeast Asian alliances cohere around overlapping security interests, especially in response to threatening power. But just because allies share major interests, this does not mean they are immune to centrifugal forces that can dissipate their clout and transform strength into vulnerability. Such appears to be the case today with America’s alliances with Japan and South Korea.

A powerful and ready U.S.-South Korean alliance is essential for preserving peace on the peninsula, and a tighter U.S.-Japan alliance is a springboard for promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific. But growing divergences and even friction within and between America’s two keystone allies in Northeast Asia may embolden potential adversaries and pose new risks to the post–World War II security system that all three countries helped to erect.

Are U.S., South Korean, and Japanese threat perceptions mostly continuing to converge, or have they been diverging in recent years? After all, even within the United States it is a challenge to galvanize public opinion around a clear set of national security challenges and threats.

North Korea and China remain the central, shared concerns between the U.S. and South Korea, on the one hand, and the U.S and Japan, on the other. Despite changes of government, the allies have shared a basic common threat perception for decades. There is no reason to expect that this will be different in the years ahead, especially assuming North Korea does not fundamentally change. But increasing risks and challenges can be expected, as opinions vary among the U.S., ROK, and Japan over the type of threats posed by Pyongyang, Beijing, Moscow, and others.

Managing North Korea is easier when the threat is shared, but will the United States and ROK maintain an ironclad alliance if denuclearization talks break down, or will South Korea still pursue reconciliation even without denuclearization? Negotiating tactics are a harbinger of future problems with the rationale for the alliance. For instance, since talks with North Korea took off in 2018, questions of allied readiness have arisen because annual exercises are being scaled back. According to the top U.S. commander in Korea, General Robert B. Abrams, there is little evidence to suggest North Korea has stopped building dangerous weapons. He even wondered whether the allies were assured of early warning if Pyongyang made a surprise move.

The United States and Japan are closely aligned over China, but South Korea is less so, at least in public. Even Tokyo and Washington could diverge over China because of looming trade deals and debates. Moreover, China searches for possible seams in the alliances, challenging Japan through gray-zone operations and exploiting the progressive South Korean government’s weaker support for missile defense systems such as Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD).

Regarding Russia, Japan has lobbied hard to improve ties with Moscow. Its goal is to weaken Russian-Chinese alignment, if not also to seal a formal end to World War II and determine the status of the Northern Territories. Russian president Vladimir Putin, however, has not rewarded Abe for the more than two dozen summit meetings the two have held. Seoul seems to look at Moscow only to the extent that it can play a role in inter-Korean diplomacy. And the United States — apart from President Trump — has a deteriorating relationship with this second revisionist major power (as the administration’s National Security Strategy emphasizes).

Taiwan is increasingly back in Beijing’s crosshairs, and it is likely to come under heightened pressure from Beijing as it conducts democratic elections in January 2020. Tokyo actively supports the government and people of Taiwan, but it does not wish to see a confrontation turn into overt conflict. Meanwhile, Seoul wants to move toward a common economic union, if not unification of the two Koreas, even if that movement would leave Taiwan and Mainland China looking like the only remaining “divided nation” problem in East Asia.
The United States and Japan are both focused on deterring China’s gray-zone operations in the South China Sea through various joint measures, including building partner capacity, advancing strategic trade, and building maritime domain awareness. They are also seeking to work in tandem on further economic development, including through Japan’s strategic use of official development assistance. South Korea retains relations with ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, but dealing with North Korea is the priority, and this reduces the scope for cooperation off the peninsula.

In contrast to the situation in recent decades, at the moment, global issues like climate change and out-of-area issues like transnational terrorism or Afghanistan or Iraq offer little scope for cooperation among the three countries.

With the recent reemergence of great-power competition — particularly competition so driven by advances in fourth industrial revolution technologies like AI, quantum computing, autonomous vehicles, and robotics — the three high-tech allies will have to put much greater emphasis on how to cooperate with China in areas that intersect with economic and security policy.

Beyond the San Francisco System:
From Hub and Spokes to Networked Security?

Will tight bilateral alliances (hub and spoke) continue to give way to networked security, or to something else entirely?

There is not necessarily a contradiction between maintaining strong bilateral alliances and creating other bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral arrangements. Indeed, the Asia-Pacific region has seen the rise of many such arrangements over the decades, and they have not undermined the U.S. alliance with either South Korea or Japan. But it seems probable that Japan and Korea will continue to build security relations with other U.S. allies and partners, and perhaps even between themselves.

South Korea’s alignment could stay where it is, with Seoul locked in a tight bilateral alliance and still in a cold war with North Korea. Alternatively, it could move in one of three directions: focusing on the peninsula to deepen reconciliation, if not to achieve unification; leaning more toward China, despite Beijing’s heavy-handedness, evident in the 2016 deployment of a THAAD battery and coercive economic penalties it imposed on South Korea; or a deeper alignment among maritime democracies including Japan, which seems a more distant possibility at present.

Japan is eager to shore up a new network of security partners to hedge against a more powerful China and an uncertain American ally — uncertain in terms of future political will and capability.

The United States and Japan agree on a vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, but there appear to be differences over priorities and the pace of implementation.

Meanwhile, the U.S. post–World War II consensus on the value of forward presence and strong alliances seems to have softened, with recent critiques by U.S. allies in Europe and Asia echoing old arguments about the sustainability of what some see as one-sided alliances.

U.S. pressure and leadership are needed to help the Japanese and Koreans find a path back to growing cooperation and away from hostility that jeopardizes all that the United States has worked to establish in the region and internationally. Washington needs to arrest doubts about its leadership and political will, even as it asks its prosperous allies to shoulder greater burdens than in the past.
America’s cornerstone and linchpin alliances in Asia must be secure. Although U.S. alliances with Japan and Korea may be on a knife’s edge because of internal tensions and a rapidly shifting external security environment, the Trump administration should play a central role in helping repair the ROK-Japan relationship. To preserve and adapt America’s Northeast Asian alliances, it is imperative to stem the rancor and deescalate tension between Japan and South Korea; refocus on the common security challenges posed by revisionist powers, led by North Korea and China; and strengthen U.S. bilateral alliances.

1. Repair Japan-South Korea Relations

First, the United States should help Tokyo and Seoul repair trust over what constitutes sensible standards and processes to prevent high technologies and materials from flowing to...
sanctioned actors like North Korea. The U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, supported by interagency officials as needed, should meet with counterparts in Seoul and Tokyo to create a step-by-step roadmap for repairing trust on export control policy.

Second, the U.S. president should meet with Prime Minister Abe and President Moon, possibly behind the scenes at a major global summit, to demonstrate solidarity and show that all three countries are prepared to address contingencies as necessary. Ideally this would underscore recent progress in relations among the three countries. However, even without such tangible progress, a clear commitment to a seamless North Korea strategy would be reassuring — a process in which both diplomacy and pressure remain essential for seeking peace while preserving defense and deterrence.

2. Refocus Trilateral Cooperation on Selective Areas of Overlapping Interest

Third, the U.S. secretary of defense should work with his counterparts to develop a trilateral defense plan for countering nuclear and missile threats should North Korea fail to move in the direction of denuclearization in spite of the current diplomatic process. The discussion could take into account not just the three countries’ integrated air and missile defenses in light of new North Korean missiles, but also opportunities arising from the demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which restricted intermediate-range missiles.

Fourth, regardless of progress on diplomacy with North Korea over nuclear weapons and missiles — or the absence of progress — Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul should elevate cooperation on North Korea’s mounting cyber threat. Importantly, because the 2014 Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement among the three countries is limited to Pyongyang’s missile-related activities, preserving the GSOMIA intelligence-sharing framework between Japan and South Korea should be an essential national security priority for America’s all-important Northeast Asian allies.

Fifth, to reinforce the forward-looking nature of relations, the three governments — perhaps as part of the trilateral leaders’ meeting recommended above — could announce a new trilateral strategic dialogue to deal with influence and cyber operations under the banner of a twenty-first-century information-power strategic dialogue. All three democracies share an interest in upholding a democratic election process free from foreign interference. Further, all three should wish to create safeguards against a growing range of cyber threats that could undermine major events, such as the 2020 Olympics, or enable sanctions to be bypassed (such as North Korean cyber theft of crypto currencies). The digital age may be driving the global economy, but it is also being hijacked to subvert sovereignty and the truth. While some issues may be taboo for the three countries, clearly, helping to devise standards and procedures that protect democracy while combating disinformation and cyber interference is something needed at home and internationally. New steps are needed to prevent intellectual property theft, cyber theft, and strategic surprise on the basis of emerging technologies. The United States, Japan, and South Korea are well positioned to help craft the rules and safeguard high technology to prevent China from unilaterally imposing its will on others.

3. Strengthen the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-South Korea Alliances

Even if Tokyo and Seoul choose rancor over cooperation, Washington should put a priority on improving its bilateral alliance with each. Thus, sixth, the White House, building on a new bilateral trade agreement with Japan, should embrace a bipartisan Senate proposal for an Office of Critical Technology and Security to help remain competitive in high technology. It should go even further by creating a new joint initiative with Japan as part of the Office of Critical Technology and Security to study the threats posed by emerging technologies. In addition,
both U.S. and Japanese leaders should talk about their visions for a free and open Indo-Pacific, announcing a new plan for a common public-private initiative to work with an emerging strategic partner such as Vietnam or Indonesia.

Seventh, the United States and South Korea should create detailed plans on the impact of various security guarantees and assurances, for North Korea and for the two allies. Plans should be made in case there is real progress with North Korea, even if that progress takes longer than desired. However, both teams should also consider the very real prospect of diplomatic failure and where that leaves security arrangements on the peninsula. Meanwhile, Washington and Seoul need to work together on specific key elements of North Korean diplomacy. These include how to provide development assistance in exchange for denuclearization; security guarantees; and building up ROK military forces so they are ready for the transition to wartime operational control. Because the security of Japan and the peninsula is operationally integrated, and Japan bears many risks and responsibilities in support of the U.S.-ROK alliance, Japan’s role must also be reflected appropriately in the decision-making process. For instance, building on cooperation to monitor North Korea’s illegal ship-to-ship transfers of goods at sea, all three countries should be coordinating with other countries to prepare for possible noncombatant evacuation operations. Finally, all three need to be asking the same strategic questions: What do we need from North Korea and what can we give it in return? What are the redlines on which we will not compromise? Even if America’s allies have different answers to these questions, they must be considered before moving forward with security assurances.
ENDNOTES


5 Ibid., 24.


12 Ibid.


25 “Japan Protests to S. Korea over Military Drill on Disputed Islets,” Mainichi Shimbun, August 6, 2019, https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20190806/p2g/00m/0a9/004000c.


For instance, despite close, long-standing trans-Atlantic relations, more than half of Americans polled last year said the United States should not be obligated to defend NATO allies who do not contribute enough for collective defense. See Phil Stewart, “Nearly Half of Americans Link Defense of NATO to Allies’ Spending; Reuters/Ipsos Poll,” Reuters, July 18, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nato-voters/nearly-half-of-americans-link-defense-of-nato-to-allies-spending-reuters-ipsos-poll-idUSKBN1K82QK.


This trend can be tracked by major publications over the past two decades, including Michael Green, Japan’s Reluctant Realism (2001); Christopher Hughes, Japan’s Re-emergence as a “Normal” Military Power (2004); Kenneth Pyle, Japan Rising; Richard Samuel, Securing Japan (2007); Andrew Oros, Japan’s Security Renaissance (2017); and Sheila Smith, Japan Rearmed (2019).

Robin Harding, “Japan Seeks to Resist US Pressure on Military Spending,” Financial Times, April 9, 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/be60c66e-5ab1-11e9-9dede-7a5a5a081a.

I am indebted to David Maxwell for helping me to understand the complex command machinery.

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28 Ibid.
39 For instance, most Americans would fight to defend South Korea or Japan if they were attacked by North Korea. However, more

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