

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

Looking Forward: The Future of United States-Japan-Korea
Trilateral Relations

**Panel 2: The Next Generation: The Future of Trilateral
Cooperation**

DATE

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FEATURING

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Laura Rosenberger

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CSIS EXPERTS

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Transcript By

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Ambassador
Derek Mitchell:

(Off mic) – second panel, and afternoon session, the post-lunch session, always the most difficult one. I imagine folks who might be cluing in from home, they also grab a bite in the half-hour in between.

My name is Derek Mitchell. I'm a former senior fellow here, now a senior advisor to the Office of the President and the Asia Program at CSIS. It's my pleasure to be moderating an exciting panel of good friends, and a couple folks I am just meeting now. This is – you know, the entire session is about – or, entire day is about looking forward. This is particularly about the new generation. And we'll have the new generation represented by the four to my left. Not that the folks in the previous panel are going to step aside anytime soon. They're also quite vital here at the table. But none of us are going to step aside necessarily soon in Washington. You never do. But we have fresh perspectives here that really very interested to jump in.

We talked, interestingly, this conference – we were talking offline that we started very broad, and then we went quite narrow in the last session, of getting very specific about areas of potential cooperation. And I think we're going to go broad this time, go from the micro to more of the macro, and look at the overall political dynamics, the social dynamics, and maybe more of the constraints on the trilateral relationship, as well as the opportunities. But also, where are the limitations? I come from that generation, where this issue of U.S.-Japan-Korea was kind of this lodestar. I mean, those of us who were – you know, we started doing what I was doing it in the '90s in the Pentagon. We just wanted to make sure the bilateral alliances were strong post-Cold War. We kept those fundamentals strong.

And to make that the instinctive kind of thing. When we thought about the U.S. in Asia, we thought about how do we work with our allies? And I think what's being done now – we always had this dream of, kind of, the quintessentially American dream, of since we have our besties in Asia, let's get those together and we can all be happy together. And, of course, it's not that simple. But we have now an opportunity to – and I think it was the point of the Biden administration – is to make this trilateral normalized, to make this trilateral kind of instinctive. So when we think of the challenges of Asia, we think of the challenges of the world, of the Indo-Pacific, that we think what can the U.S., Japan, and Korea do altogether?

So I think the Camp David principles, the outline of the really ambitious agenda, the conversation we just had at a very practical level before lunch, of, you know, the whole list where there's critical minerals, or space, et cetera, it's a way to sort of embed that in our mindsets. That when we think about the big issues that we face, and that frankly we

face together as countries and as allies, we instinctively think what can the trilateral, these three countries, do together? I think that's very healthy. But, as you know, this is not easy. Stated at the end of the last panel, this is maybe exponentially hard to get allies to work together, than it is just to do two and two, et cetera.

So I want to have this conversation, get into some of those next-generation perspectives, some of those dynamics. And we have four wonderful people. I'll just go through the bios very briefly here.

To my direct left is Eun A Jo, who is currently the David and Cindy Edelson fellow in international security at the Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College, and a fellow at Good Authority. She will be, though, an assistant professor coming into the government department at William & Mary. And she is – she received her Ph.D. in government from Cornell University in 2024. She has been a pre-doctoral research fellow at George Washington University, here in Washington, and a Morgenthau fellow at the University of Notre Dame.

To her left is Ayumi Teraoka. She is the incoming assistant professor of politics at Brandeis University up in Massachusetts, post-doctoral research scholar with the Weatherhead East Asia Institute's Japan Research Program at Columbia, where she studied alliance politics and security issues in the Indo-Pacific. She's been a fellow with the Columbia-Harvard China and the World Program and taught a course on Japanese Foreign Policy at SIPA at Columbia.

To her left is Adam Farrar. He's a senior associate, non-resident, of the Korea chair here at CSIS. He is senior economics analyst for the Asia-Pacific for Bloomberg Economics, where he's responsible for the organization's research and analysis on geopolitical risk throughout the region. Prior to joining Bloomberg, he served with the NSC staff from 2019 to 2022 as director for Korea and Mongolia, where he was responsible, among other things, for addressing the threat posed by North Korea. And most recently, he served as special advisor to Vice President Kamala Harris for all things related to the Indo-Pacific space and intelligence.

And last, but definitely not least, my good friend Laura Rosenberger, who has a really – she's extremely young, and she looks very young, but a remarkable resume already. She is currently national security advisor to New Jersey Senator Andy Kim, who will be speaking right after this panel. So stick around for that. And a highly – and during the Biden administration was special assistant to the president and senior director for China and Taiwan on the NSC. She was – her last job with the Biden team was as chair of the Board of Trustees of the American

Institute of Taiwan, in Taiwan. And for those who are not aware, AIT was established pursuant to the Taiwan Relations Act to manage the unofficial U.S. relationship with Taiwan. Before that, in the Obama administration, was chief of staff to a guy named Tony Blinken when he was deputy secretary of state, and before that, special assistant to Bill Burns when he was under secretary and was at GMF, German Marshall Fund, running an operation focused on securing democracy in the United States and abroad. So a remarkable resume, but an Indo-Pacific hand in and of herself.

So a great panel. And I want to get to a discussion and get to audience questions as soon as possible, and really get even some thoughts from the audience on the trilateral. We haven't gotten enough maybe from. But, as an initial question, I'd like to ask each maybe an initial opening kind of salvo. Really looking at – maybe the first is the ties that bind, looking at the fundamentals. What are the things that underwrite this relationship? What are the things that will allow the momentum to continue? You know, what are – how sustainable is this momentum? We have a lot of momentum coming out of the Biden administration, with infrastructure and vision. And also, what are the constraints, the obstacles that we see to sustain that momentum, in realizing the vision that we seek?

So maybe with Eun A first, looking at the Korean angle, we'll go Japan, and go down the list. So, Eun A, to you.

Eun A Jo:

Sounds great. It's a real pleasure to be here. I just wanted to begin by sharing a little bit about the – where the trilateral sits, and then move into the momentum and constraints. I'm sure many people here will agree that the Yoon-Biden-Kishida trio really helped usher in a new sort of level of trilateral relations, that otherwise may have been difficult if were it not for the sort of personal commitments of these leaders involved. Trilateral cooperation to that point had been sort of maintained, sort of, in the shadows. And under these three, it really came to a spotlight.

But since their departure, I think the trilateral has been pretty much at a standstill at the topmost level. And there is a fair amount of anxiety that the ties that bind could eventually come to unravel. And I just want to briefly touch on what I think are the key constraints. And this bundle of constraints, I should call it, really comes from the leadership turnovers and the domestic instabilities, underpinned by Democratic erosion, especially in the United States and South Korea.

So we know that Trump has these transactional tendencies and often focuses on relative gains wherever he can, even with allies and strategic partners. That, in and of itself, could be – could put the trilateral at risk, where trust and not simply quid pro quo had sort of underpinned the relationship. Trump sees these alliances as burdensome, as unfair. And it's unclear who in the administration at the moment is currently championing the causes of maintaining, never mind bolstering, the trilateral cooperation.

I think the picture in South Korea is a little bit more complicated. It's true that Lee Jae-myung's personal stance on the history issue with Japan and skepticism toward the quote/unquote "strategic clarity" as a grand strategy bode ill for the trilateral. But I think the bigger issue here is that it is increasingly difficult in South Korea for leaders to pursue policies that are against type. And what I mean by that is that certain policy issues that are entrenched in partisan politics get reinforced due to polarization.

So despite his early intentions for pragmatism, he may end up pursuing narratives and policies that further politicize the trilateral and cooperation with Japan, in particular. We have seen this in the ideological cycles of South Korean politics with Kim Dae-jung really being the only one who managed to successfully pursue counter-type policy on Japan. So I'll leave it to Ayumi to speak about Japan in greater depth, but my understanding here too is that the Ishiba administration doesn't have much political capital to spend on courting South Korea, should there be a need to offer some sort of an olive branch. And that all bodes fairly ill.

So Trump's disinterest in long-term strategic planning, the tensions in Lee Jae-myung's own track record on Japan and the desired course of action and the internal fragmentation in Ishiba administration, all means that there is less political cover for policies that could be highly unpopular among the core constituencies of the leaders involved. But that said, I think there are broader developments in the region that are pushing toward deepening cooperation between South Korea and Japan.

First and foremost is the rise of China. And here, perhaps, I differ a little bit with what was said in the earlier panel. I do think there is convergent perceptions of threat in South Korea and Japan regarding China. The other is the political disorder in the United States and the growing anxieties that South Korea and Japan share about both American abandonment and entanglement. These structural changes might pull South Korea and Japan together bilaterally, even if the

trilateral might suffer with Trump's disinterest. But I think at this point, right now, leader-level signaling is really crucial to offer confidence to trilateral bureaucracies to continue cooperation, as has been intended at the operational level, I'll leave it there.

Amb. Mitchell: Thank you.

Ayumi, please.

Ayumi Teraoka: Great. Thank you so much. Thank you, Dr Cha and his whole team, to organize this wonderful occasion, addressing really important topic that underpins the peace and stability of Northeast Asia and beyond.

We have had 35 years of sort of the so-called post-Cold War period, in which Japan/ROK/U.S. tried to work as really three democratic allies in the region. And we have had ups and downs. But I believe that we are now entering the critical period of transition. And then whether the – what we do today will really determine whether we can harness this partnership in the next several years to – from the one that was sort of focused on trilateral cooperation that was led by United States – two sort of reluctant allies that are laden with historical animosity but tried to work together under the sort of guidance of United States and leadership of the United States, that tries to work as a facilitator, coordinator of that cooperation – to the trilateral cooperation that is really undergirded by three democratic allies really needing to work together to face a challenge facing those three countries.

But in order to transition that trilateral relationship to more normal, sustainable, mature, rational calculus-based partnership among three democratic allies, Tokyo would really need to overcome these challenges of managing leadership transitions in polarized partners of Asia – South Korea and United States. From Tokyo's perspective, it's always great to have a conservative leader that is more pro-alliance and, by extension, more friendly to Japan. But after decades of trial and error, Japanese government officials and public do understand now that we can't just work with conservatives. We do have to strike a bargain with progressives in Korea. And without that, we cannot make this trilateral partnership into an enduring, sustainable relationship.

Where does Japan do this? Well, Japan does this well in United States. Japan has for a long time committed to this relationship with United States. So no matter who the leadership is in Washington, Japan has had, you know, all these series of sort of dynamics and mechanism to influence U.S. government making to basically make sure that everybody in America, American people, understand the value of alliance with Japan. And I think Japanese now have to really commit to

advancing that approach in Korea, to make sure that both aisles of Korean politics do understand the value of partnership with Japan, and not let this partnership be the topic of domestic political contention within Korea.

Yoon Suk-yeol's courageous leadership in opening up relationship again, to encourage Japan to restart cooperation, was a huge plus. But it is – in that way, it is the progressive government from Korea, Lee Jae-myung, that allows Japan to actually start transitioning that partnership into more bipartisan one with Korea. So this is – can be opportunity, really, to transition this trilateral relationship. And there are ample incentives for these partners to transition that relationship into a mutual partnership.

One is realism. External environment is very severe. I was just in Kyushu talking to people in the self-defense forces. And when they look at Western Pacific or western region of Japan, Japanese borders, yes, they are increasingly aware of threats coming from China, but then they never forget about threats coming from North Korea. And they told me that, yes, Japan now faces threats on two fronts – Korean Peninsula, Taiwan Strait. But it's actually 2.5 fronts, because Russia, after war in Ukraine, is tightening its relationship with China and North Korea. So now Russia really adds complexities because Russian fleet and, you know, military assets are also training with PLA around Japan, and boosting capability of North Korea.

So it's – in order to face 2.5 front threats, Japan cannot better – ask for a better partnership than Seoul. And for them, it's not really debatable whether we have to work with Korea. We do have to work with Korea. It's an indispensable partner. And then we do also have unreliable United States, increasingly capricious and trying to disrupt economic regional order. So with ROK and Japan, I think, have more incentives to work together to collectively bargain with the United States. And this partnership also extends to Australia, Philippines, and other U.S. allies.

Another structural factor I want to point out is this changing power dynamics between ROK and Japan. 1965, when they normalized relationship, ROK's GDP was Japan's one-thirtieth. And in 1990, ROK's GDP was still Japan's one-tenth. Today, I think ROK's GDP is between half or one-third of Japan's GDP. Japanese public is also now used to having really – kind of departs from the status mindset of economic giant as its GDP falls from world's second largest to now fourth, after Germany. So with that humbling experience of its power declining for a long time now, I think Japan can see partners on more equal basis, and look at ROK as really a powerful partner that can work – that Japan can work with.

Second incentive, or source for optimism, is learning. After a decade of a particularly tumultuous relationship between the two, I think both sides – Japan and ROK – do understand that they do not want to go back there. Japanese affinity level toward ROK went down to 26 percent in 2019. Now it got restored to 50 – about 55 percent. And progressives in Korea do understand that perhaps they went a little too far. And now even though they are critical of Yoon Suk-yeol's diplomacy toward Japan, that sometimes they call it humiliating diplomacy, but they still do value this improved public perception of Japanese towards South Korea. So they do not necessarily want to damage that restored relationship.

Learning also happened on the Japanese side. Now that Japan does understand that we can't just be naively counting on conservative partnership, when the martial law was declared and it seemed like Yoon Suk-yeol was stepping out anytime soon, Japanese still continued on working level dialogs, trilateral dialogs that were institutionalized, and did the business as usual, even if the prospect of a progressive leader coming up was pretty high. Japanese reaction was that of calm reaction. And Japanese public government position today is that we will not prejudge what the ROK would do, regard – just because they come from progressive leadership. And that was the sort of the message that Seoul was also delivering to Tokyo, that, you know, we do not want to prejudge what the relationship will be just because leadership is coming from one party or not. Because they may be actually a missed opportunity if you take such a rigid stance. So I think both sides are open for a new way of working together. And there is a, I think, opportunity for that.

Obstacles. Yes. The trust was depleted during the ten years of really fragmented relationship. So I think Japan is still taking pretty cautious approach of sort of a trust but verify approach. So Japan will continue to see what signal is coming from South Korea. And then there may be less opportunity for leadership like Ishiba, who is domestically constrained to take bold actions. So I would encourage South Korea to also seek out partnership with various leaders in LDP who also have some influence over policymaking within Japan, because Ishiba can be an incubator but there are many other actors within Japanese domestic politics that will be influential. And it is in the benefit of interests of South Korea to seek broader consensus with other actors within LDP. I will stop here. Thank you.

Amb. Mitchell: Thank you, Ayumi.

Adam, please.

Adam Farrar:

So, you know, it's a real pleasure to be here. And it's a pleasure to be talking about something that I think is incredibly impactful for not only Japan and Korea, but very much for the United States' relationship globally and its international position. I've spent much of the last week, like many people in D.C., focused on Iran and Israel. And it is a welcome opportunity to talk about this very important issue.

To build on comments already said, I think it's important to take a step back and look at one of the other key driving factors that kind of pushed the decisions that led to the historic meeting at Camp David. Obviously, you have this, you know, decision by personalities – the key leaders, President Biden, Kishida, and Yoon – Prime Minister Kishida and President Yoon – to push this forward and put their own political careers on the line to do it. But at the same time, the geopolitical environment changed so drastically over the past four to five years that in many ways it put them on that path to make that decision, helping transition the thought process of the alliance in each of the countries, similar to what was just commented on, from this idea of a want, right – wanting to see more cooperation, wanting to work together – to a need to do so.

And, you know, as we look at each factor, you see the tension growing throughout this period. So as we start looking at China, the period was characterized by an increasingly aggressive, increasingly forward-leaning Beijing, that pressured both Korea and Japan on multiple fronts and raised questions about the viability of those relationships, that are integral to both of those economies. We had obviously assertive policies in the South China Sea and the militarization of that region, but more directly we also had the introduction of China leveraging its massive economic power for coercion. And the impact of 2017 and the THAAD crisis that, while, you know, somewhat marginal in terms of overall financial impact on Korea, I think has had a real impact on the psyche and thought process of leaders throughout the region.

The idea that China on a whim can turn off billions of dollars of economic aid, stop the flow of cultural content, and pressure a government to make national security decisions based on its own priorities, forced the administration in Korea and in Japan to think about how they could better posture themselves to defend against that. In addition, you also have, you know, unintentional crises, where, you know, in 2021, for example, China faced a power generation crisis and turned off the flow of urea into Korea – urea being a key input for diesel engines. This was not a decision based on malice but rather one based on a core national interest in China that didn't even take into account Korea's interest. And so, yet again, Korea had a realization that they were exposed to this type of action at any time.

Simultaneously, you also have the outgrowth and continued escalation of the engagements around the Senkaku Islands, with China asserting sovereignty and using physical force, via its coast guard and maritime militia, to push back on the Japanese, and escalating its nationalistic trend throughout the – its goals throughout the region. And that has not slowed, right? While we've also – you know, just in the past year we've now seen what is increasingly concerning activity in the West Sea or Yellow Sea, with the Chinese building an odd piece of infrastructure, that they claim is related to fishing, in territory that is well outside of their territorial waters. And Korea now looking to push back, but also reminding Korea on a daily basis that China will continue to push the bounds.

On the DPRK front, we all know the story, right? When we go back to 2017, which feels like the height of tensions, we actually only had about 25 ballistic missile launches that year, including ICBMs. But in 2022, we had the better part of 100, right? Throughout that period, you had an escalation in rhetoric, an escalation in activity, and an escalation in threat from Pyongyang. And all of that reinforcing that Korea, Japan, and the United States had to find a new way to cooperate to try and address this new growing threat. On top of that, you also have Kim Jong-un moving away from the entire unification architecture of the North Korean regime, pushing back against the idea that unification would ever come about, and instead labeling South Korea as a hostile nation – all of which further reinforces the idea that a short-term or even long-term peace is even further away than folks had originally thought.

In addition to those more traditional concerns, we have the emergence of DPRK-Russia, right? With Russia's decision to massively expand its relations with North Korea in a time of need, when North Korea stepped in to fill massive gaps in Russia's ability to produce artillery rounds for its war in Ukraine, which has now exacerbated the question of North Korea's long-term technological capability. What is Russia giving North Korea? What will that mean for North Korea's ability to threaten the region, or its willingness to actually return to negotiations? Every single one of those dynamics has helped transition the mentality of leaders in each of these capitals to recognize that there is a deep need to engage and find ways to push back and demonstrate strength and deterrence against these threats.

Now, in addition to all of that, we have to think about where we are today. I think while these issues all push in that relatively positive direction of trying to drive these three together, we are seeing slight changes that will complicate the situation. On the China front, we are seeing, you know, the emergence of a charm offensive, efforts to

reengage not only with Japan, but particularly with Korea. There's conversation about reintroducing K-culture to Korea, a key issue that was cut off during that THAAD crisis. There's expansive outreach to the new Lee Jae-myung administration, pushing them to kind of reorient and kind of reset and balance ties, which aligns with Lee Jae-myung's campaign promises. And with all of that, that presents a real question mark of where that relationship can go, with that particular pressure point of the United States' insistence that both partners do more to curtail China.

On the North Korea front, we have, in some ways, alignment, right? You have a liberal administration that is more interested in engagement and a president of the United States that also has made no question of his interest in reengaging North Korea. But he is also likely to do that alone, and not engage North Korea or Japan as he does so, which inherently will increase tensions in the relationship and raise questions about the stability of broader trilateral cooperation. Thanks.

Amb. Mitchell: Thank you.

Laura.

Laura Rosenberger: Great. Well, great to be here with all of you. And great to be here with my fellow panelists.

Derek, you asked about the ties that bind. And I want to start there. And I want to just pick up on a few things that my fellow panelists have said. And I don't want to repeat, so I'll just point to a few things. I think we've heard about, sort of, two different categories of ties that bind. The first is the ties from within, the ties from among the three, and the things driving Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo together. And then there's the ties from without, the external environment, the turbulence that we're seeing globally, the forces from China, other forces in the Indo-Pacific, the forces from Washington itself, et cetera. Let me just add maybe two points to the ties from within. And I'm going to focus most of my comments on, sort of, where I think we should aspirationally be looking to go with the trilateral.

Anytime you're thinking about ties that bind in a relationship, the things you want to –thing you want to do the most is thicken and broaden those ties, and create as much stickiness, as much connective tissue, as you possibly can. And I think we've seen a tremendous amount of that. But as others have noted, a lot of it has been driven from the leader level. It has been driven, in some cases, by particular political parties. One of the things I think is incredibly important in all capitals is that we make support for the trilateral a cross-partisan thing.

Now, certainly here in Washington there is bipartisan support for the trilateral relationship. And I know, just as an indication, you had Senator Sullivan speaking earlier, you will have my boss, Senator Kim, speaking shortly, a Republican and a Democrat. And they are amongst a large crowd of members of Congress who are very supportive of the trilateral relationship. I think it's really important that we build out that cross-partisan support in other capitals as well. I think there's been moves in that direction, but I think more work needs to be done there. And I think that's an opportunity for us to be working on that.

On the ties from without, what I would add – we've heard a lot, and I would just agree with what's been said about the regional and global forces that are really driving the three together. I would maybe just also kind of take one more step back, which is to think about where the trilateral sits at a moment of what I think is global reorganization. The entire order, not just in the Indo-Pacific, but globally, I think, is seeing real tectonic shifts. And I want to see a future where the trilateral plays a large part of driving the Indo-Pacific part of that global reordering, and maybe even beyond the Indo-Pacific region, in a more stable direction.

I think one of the dynamics that we are seeing in this realigning is, number one, a question of, prominently, who's going to shape what comes next? Is it going to be the United States? Is it going to be like-minded partners of the United States? Is it going to be China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, in their configuration together? Or some subset thereof? And I think it's decidedly in Seoul and Tokyo's interests for it to be not the China, Russia, Iran, North Korea crowd shaping the future of the global order, but rather for it to be some combination of the United States and our like-minded partners.

And on that, I'd like to pick up on something that – I think it was Ayumi who mentioned – you know, the potential for the future, at least in the near term, of the trilateral relationship to look like a much stronger, frankly, bilateral relationship driving things between Seoul and Tokyo, versus a relationship being more driven from Washington. We've historically seen the trilateral as being more driven from Washington. And I remember back in the days of working, frankly, on the six-party talks with my friend Victor, where it would be everything we could do to try to get the ROK and Japan in the room – the delegations in the room together along with us, to talk about North Korea in the context of the six-party talks, right?

We've come so far from that. And what I actually think would be a good thing is if there is a more equal parity of the sort of tripod, of the stool of the trilateral relationship, for Seoul and Tokyo to be equal drivers of

where we're going. I frankly think that would be aligned with where I see a lot of the future of the U.S.' sort of role in the world going, which is with greater parity with our allies and partners. It's certainly something that the Trump administration is pushing in their own, my personal view, destructive way, of trying to bully your allies and partners into doing more. But I do think there is a need in the shifting landscape that we see globally for our allies to be doing more in concert with us. And I think it's very much in the U.S. interest for that to be the case.

So I see real opportunity here for both Seoul and Tokyo to take the wheel even more in this relationship. I see it as very much in the U.S. interest for that to happen. And I see great opportunities for all of us to work together, not only regionally but as we think about some of the global challenges that connect the Indo-Pacific and European theaters, for instance, to work together on that.

Amb. Mitchell: Thank you, Laura. Thank you all for the outstanding comments, and great way to lay a foundation for the conversation.

On that last point, on the issue of equal partnership, I mean, there are a number of ways – a number of directions we can take that question. But, in my view, aside from maybe the trilateral – where Japan and Korea have had their problems, so the U.S. has had to drive to a degree, though, I think, ultimately, the two worked it out themselves to get to Camp David. But in a lot of ways, I would argue, even during the Biden administration, that Japan was leading from behind. And they have for a time. They are the ones who did the Free and Open Indo-Pacific. They did the Quad. A lot of the initiatives were even driven by Japan. They were having their own thinking driving us. And, you know, I think we're an open door, and all that stuff. But Japan is coming up with its ideas.

Now you have the question where, wither the United States? I think we have to get to that question subsequently. But to this equal partnership question, maybe in this instance, I'd ask, on the Korea side, is Korea prepared for that? Is Korea ready to be an equal partner? I think Korea traditionally has been quite proud, but insecure, in a way, right? We want to stand up for ourselves. You know, we're the small country among the whales. And most of the world now, certainly the United States, says, hey, you are big. You are great. (Laughs.) You have great culture, you've risen, the GDP is developed, whether it's semiconductor, you go through it.

And then Koreans tend to sort of, you know, pull away from that. They talk about global Korea, but then they end up acting about North Korea, about the peninsula and nothing further. Do you think the Koreans are ready? Do you think Lee Jae-myung, do you think the progressives, or

the society writ large, maybe, is ready to be in more equal partner with the others to do more in the region and beyond?

Ms. Jo: Well, I certainly think South Korea is ready to seek equal partnership. And definitely wants the respect and the agency in partaking in these types of minilaterals and multilateral engagements. I think the key constraint there is, what is the direction that different parties want to take things forward? I think there is quite an amount of fragmentation still in terms of what that direction looks like. And the public skepticism regarding – or public support for trilateralism, at the very broad level it exists. But I think when you kind of dig into sort of the nitty-gritty concrete policy proposals, there can be areas where people simply don't agree that that is the pathway in which South Korea should go forward. I think this kind of polarization is far less so in Japan. And maybe Ayumi can speak to that. So building and laying that domestic groundwork for whatever future it may be for that equal partnership is really where the key work needs to be.

Amb. Mitchell: Can you give a sense of those debates? What are the debates within of where – what Korea's vision is for itself, between progressive and sort of conservative?

Ms. Jo: I think there has been some movement. So, you know, we have seen during the campaign that Lee Jae-myung has been championing for a more sort of realist or pragmatic foreign policy. And that's sort of doing the counter-type foreign policy. I will say though, that if you look at public opinion, still to this day support for cooperative policies with Japan, when you look at progressive partisans, sits still at about 28 percent. So when you have key core constituencies that aren't buying into – you know, for deepening cooperation with Japan, whether that's bilateral or trilateral forms, I think those are going to be – going to continue to be constraints for the progressive administration.

That said, I think this is something I like to think about sort of counter-intuitively. Because the progressive presidents do not sort of suffer from the historical baggage that many conservative presidents do, if Lee Jae-myung is able to overcome the partisan constraints then he may actually be at a better spot to pursue more lasting and enduring cooperation with Japan, because there will be less public skepticism over his intentions. And I think it remains to be seen how far and how well he'll be able to, sort of, manage the civil societal pressures for apology and reparations and domestic public opinion, as well as the sort of legislative side of things. But for now, the signs are looking promising.

Amb. Mitchell: Mmm hmm. Only Nixon could go to China. (Laughs.)

Ms. Jo: Yeah.

Amb. Mitchell: Is what you're saying. Adam, you want to jump in?

Mr. Farrar: Just a quick point. I mean, I couldn't agree more. I think there's lots of opportunity, but lots of questions about which way this new government will go. And certainly language that feels like it is turning more inward than certainly the last administration. But all that said, there are key external factors that are, in some ways, forcing Korea out, right? Pulling Korea into the conversation. And there's no place more – where that more clearly occurs than in the technology field, right? Korean companies continue to lead in some of the most cutting-edge and critical technologies on Earth. And as a result, are in high demand everywhere.

And so, you know, that in some ways presents, you know, great opportunity, right? Lots of opportunity in new markets, expansion of Korea's brand, right? The recognition of who Korea is in the United States has shifted drastically over the past four years, with hundreds of billions of dollars of investment by these, you know, Korean companies in those critical areas, particularly semiconductors and advanced batteries, all throughout the United States. Not only bringing that technology and innovation, but also jobs. And in doing so, it puts Korea into the conversation on these big, global questions – on the future of AI, on export controls, on how we're going to approach the expansion of these technologies in, you know, what is a poorly termed Global South, right? And so in that way Korea is being pulled into those conversations on a daily basis.

It does, you know, obviously internally, domestically create some division, though, as well, right? Because every time those companies invest abroad, every time they send money there, they're not investing in Korea. And there is some back and forth and questions about where that money should be going, which could lead to, you know, those who want to pull inward, arguing for that. But I think increasingly these factors will kind of force Korea to the table, and provide an opportunity and a platform for Lee Jae-myung to kind of elevate Korea globally.

Amb. Mitchell: Yeah. Ayumi.

Ms. Teraoka: Yeah. I think there is economic interest-based case to make for global engagement of Korea. And Korean companies are already operating globally. And in addition to technology sector, Southeast Asia is the area where Japan and South Korea, I think, can work much better way and

much more coordinated way. I think much of the U.S.-China competition, as we speak, is about really getting – kind of winning hearts and minds of Southeast Asian countries. That is really the force for growth in Asia. And if you combine direct investment that Japan and – Japanese companies and South Korean companies make, it far surpasses China's investment in the region.

So I think there are many ways that South Korea and Japan can still coordinate in sort of issuing – coordinate on their strategic communication about what U.S. allies can do in East Asia, where U.S. administration might be less interested in engaging those regions. It's even more necessary today. And I think if the new president in Seoul, Korea, Lee Jae-myung, is kind of proud – taking pride in being pragmatic, I think we can make a pragmatic case to him that it might be a way for South Korea's growth and achieving global vision as a proud South Korean government.

Amb. Mitchell: Yeah. I think the goal of the Biden administration was to make – as I said, to make this trilateral institutionalized. They talk maybe, privately, Trump-proof, or whatever it is – or whatever comes later, proof. And maybe that's a question. Do you think that – because we are heading into choppy waters in all capitals, in one way or another, potentially – does this need summits to be driven at this point? Do you think there is enough there? As you say – I think Laura, many of you, made this point, that there – and Adam – that there are external drivers that are driving them together, and internal drivers probably pulling them apart, to some degree. So there are structural factors internally and externally. I mean, it's heart and head, it's emotions versus realism.

But do you need – they have now a vision. There's now discussions on this whole host of things that we talked about in the earlier session. What if there weren't summit meetings? What if it wasn't driven from the top? Can this still gain momentum, do you think, simply by the private sector, or by the need on energy, et cetera? To what degree does it still need that push from above, would you say, in coming years? Laura, do you want to –

Ms. Rosenberger: I'm happy to kick off. I certainly hope to continue to see leader-level meetings. Let me start with that. You know, I think had President Trump not departed the G-7 early we certainly were hoping to see that there. I do think it's really important that Lee Jae-myung and Prime Minister Ishiba did have a bilateral meeting. I think that was important in and of itself.

I think the fact, frankly, that you do have a number of summit meetings on an annual basis, assuming the United States continues to go to those,

that both Japan and Korea are a part of – so, obviously, the G-7, with Korea continuing to be invited, you know, NATO, with the – you know, the plus four from the Indo-Pacific attending, having both of them there too. I think there's a number of opportunities, even if it's not the kind of Camp David-like summits, to still have leader-level meetings that are maybe smaller ambition, but still keep things going at that level. I think that's important. And I certainly hope that we can maintain that.

Now, in the absence of that do I think things can continue? Yes. But I do think that having that blessing from the top, even if it's not with a long list of deliverables or big vision statements, is a really important piece. But the other piece, I'll say, you know, putting on the hat of where I sit now in Congress, I mean, there's other parts of governments that can keep these things going too. And I think the legislatures can and should play a real role here. And I think that there's opportunities to do more on that front. We have a lot of bilateral exchanges. I think thinking about some trilateral exchanges and dialogs would be really suited for the moment, and another way of keeping that momentum and thickening the ties as well.

Amb. Mitchell: And doing it on a bipartisan basis, that shows it's a model for the other countries to bring your parties to the table too, so it institutionalizes it politically.

Adam.

Mr. Farrar: So I agree fully with how Laura described it. I don't think we should foreclose on leader-level engagement. I think there's actually – when you look at how the Trump administration is thinking about its policies towards China, while there's certainly some question about which direction we're going on any given day, the direction of travel is generally clear in terms of trying to compete more, pressure more, and find ways to, in some ways, you know, decouple. And in that storyline, engagement with Korea and Japan is essential. And I think that argument can be made at the most senior levels, from his staff – from President Trump's staff, that having a meeting – maybe without the long list of deliverables and without the deep preparation that has gone in the past – but even just having that meeting sends an important signal, and it increases pressure, and it's another tool in the toolkit to move forward on this broader China policy.

So that, I think, is one, is that there is reason to push forward. And that same driving factor I think we will see at other levels of government, particularly in the Department of Defense. And as they seek to expand posture and change posture in the Indo-Pacific, you know, while there are going to be deep tensions, right? Lots of questions about the future

of U.S. forces on the peninsula, and the role of U.S. forces on the peninsula. In general, though, the idea of engagement with Korea and Japan and expanding that cooperation, better aligning missile defense, in particular, a key outcome of the summits during the Biden administration, all play into that objective. And so I have some faith that the system will keep pushing.

The last thing I will just say, though, is that it will take more from Korea and Japan pushing the United States for things to be in the trilateral format. And so, you know, as was already described, I think Japan has tried to do that itself and will likely continue. There are questions about what the new Korean government will do. But I will point that just yesterday there was a trilateral air exercise involving all three air forces. And so the apparatus knows how to do this. The question is just how long it will keep going. But with pushing from Korea and Japan, I don't think at the working level the United States is going to push back.

Amb. Mitchell: Right. Reverse gaiatsu, as it were. We need it now more than ever to push back on it.

Mr. Farrar: (Laughs.) Yes.

Ms. Teraoka: Yeah. I also think if new government in Korea wants to engage with North Korea in some ways, I don't think Japan or U.S. is completely opposed to that, right? I think that Japan and U.S. are more willing to kind of seek new way of dialog with North Korea in new creative ways. They haven't really decided on what kind of trajectory they want to seek, but I think having that platform to actually constantly engage in dialog among the three countries, so that one wouldn't go too far away from the other two, I think it's going to be actually really critical. And all the institutional platforms that Biden administration led to create will be very helpful, and constantly check at different levels that one is not going too off from other two partners.

Amb. Mitchell: Right. Let me ask the broad question on generational change. This is what the topic of this panel is about, in essence. But looking at it on the ground, maybe, Eun A, you've done studies on history and memory and generations and gender as well, given the polarization in Korea. We've seen the recent elections a lot in that front. How does that play into this? Do you see anything in the poll numbers, in the dynamics at the popular level along those lines?

Ms. Jo: Yeah. I think that the conventional narrative tends to depict generational change as a positive force for both bilateral and trilateral relations with Japan and the United States. I personally think it's a little bit more complicated. The new generation in South Korea itself is very

divided ideologically. And we've seen this in the last snap election, but also the last regular election. You also see that many young women, even in sort of pro-conservative strongholds in South Korea, turn out for progressive presidents. As somebody who studies social movements, I attend a lot of protests and demonstrations on social and historical issues. And you do see – and just based on my own experience – that a lot of these events are driven and participated by young women.

So I think the question of how the generational change will figure into trilateral dynamics really depends on whose voice is going to be heard, who is mobilizing politically and for what. And we don't – you know, there are so many host of factors that can – that can determine that. So generational change can have different sort of directions and pull and push factors for trilateral.

Amb. Mitchell: Right. Ayumi, have you thought about this question?

Ms. Teraoka: So generational divide in the case of Japan is not too clear. But, I mean, the public polling generally suggests that people in twenties and thirties have the highest affinity level toward Korea, because they lived with K-pop and Korean culture within their lives. But people in forties-fifties actually have the lowest view toward Korea. And, actually, the seniors – people senior than that actually have a little bit more nuanced, moderate views toward Korea.

But one thing I would say is that still, overall, Japanese public affinity toward Korea is generally higher. When we think about trilateral cooperation, we often think about Obuchi-Kim Dae-jung statement to be the height of the relationship. At the time, when I look at the public perception, only 45 percent of Japanese were having affinity toward Korea. Now it's about 55 percent. And in 2010 we even reached 60 (percent). So actually, when we had the highest level – leadership level joint statement, in 1998, the public was not too integrated. Now I think people-to-people ties actually are much deeper, connected at a much deeper level. And we cannot discount that. And then I think it's a stability – force for stability.

Amb. Mitchell: Right. I'd like to open it – I have several more questions to ask, but I did want to open it up. If people have even comments. I mean, there are young Japanese and Koreans, I think, in the room, or others who want to provide their own perspectives, or questions, absolutely. There's one over there. There first, OK. And then we'll come over there. Just introduce yourself.

Q: All right. Hello, everyone. My name is Karol Białek, and I'm a student and researcher at University College Dublin, Ireland. But I'm actually

Polish.

But I was having a question, What, in your opinion, like, Korea and Japan should have a – what attitude would have towards cooperation with its European counterparts? Because I'm just curious, because, you know, I was looking very often that in Europe a lot of the countries within NATO would even pay 2 percent on their military budget, which I'm happy with Poland paying almost 4 percent and it's planned to pay 5 percent next year. So just, yeah, curious what would be the attitude of Korea and both Japan towards, like, cooperation with European counterparts? Thank you.

Amb. Mitchell: All right. Did you catch the question? Engage with Europe. Yeah, please.

Mr. Farrar: I can start with your question, particularly on the defense angle. We've done, you know, some recent writing at Bloomberg on this. But, as many of you are tracking, Korea has invested heavily in expanding its defense industry and its defense exports. And one of the largest contracts it's signed and is delivering on is in Poland, with the provision of a large – a very large number of self-propelled artillery, tanks, and some aircraft. The progression that you're talking about opens up lots of opportunities. The pressure from the Trump administration on Europe, particularly in defense but across the board, requires a reevaluation of the relationships that Europe has that define its key industries and its key markets. And I think all of those should point to Korea and Japan.

Now, I think we haven't seen that transition fully or, moreover, it is a slow process. But I think increasingly Korea on defense, but on kind of key industries, trade with Japan and Korea will need to play a higher role – a larger role as, to some extent, Europe seeks to derisk from the United States. And on defense itself, what Korea brings to the table – and to some extent now Japan, with its joint program with the U.K. and Italy for a sixth-generation fighter – is an alternative that provides high – you know, high-end, advanced technology that has deep experience operating with American technology, but also provides it at a lower cost point and with technology transfer, which is key for production being drawn back into Europe and redefining and rebuilding the European defense industry.

Amb. Mitchell: Interesting. Any other thoughts on the Europe angle? Please.

Ms. Rosenberger: I can just add maybe two points. I mean, one is I certainly think the potential – well, I think Japan, in particular, is already doing a tremendous amount with Europe. And I think we saw a real shift in that. I mean, I think that was already – there was already a strong foundation of that, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Prime Minister Kishida's,

you know, real strong public stance on that, really talking about the sort of one theater concept, I think really brought that home. And so I think there's a solid amount of connectivity at the political level and more broadly there.

I think for both Korea and Japan, in addition to what Adam said on the defense side, talking about in the technology space, the role that each of them plays in terms of semiconductors, in particular, with tooling and with the chips themselves, I think an increasingly important role in connectivity there. And there's a number of different formal, informal configurations, in addition to the trade piece that Adam mentioned, that I think will drive that.

And then I think again, kind of zooming back out to a question of sort of global reordering and who's going to be shaping things, my sense is that there will be a tremendous amount of alignment between Seoul, Tokyo, and a lot of European capitals on the direction of travel of wanting to shape, you know, the sort of next decade or two. And so I think there could be a real opportunity for increased cooperation there.

Amb. Mitchell: It's interesting how – and Kurt mentioned this morning – that the new administration is questioning this issue of binding Europe and Asia together, linking the two as one theater.

Ms. Rosenberger: It's a strategic mistake.

Amb. Mitchell: I completely agree. The question is, it may still – Japan and Korea may still continue because they see value. There is practical value. There's still an interest, whether it's corporate or strategic in other ways. So, again, one of the ways that this stuff may have been started that is much more difficult to stop, in spite of U.S. leadership – or, lack of U.S. leadership. So some valuable stuff.

Please, yes. Nope, the other gentleman there. Just around further, yeah, to you. No, no. OK, sorry. We'll get to you, behind. Sorry. (Laughs.)

Q: OK. Thank you all for sharing insights on trilateral cooperation. I am Sherry Chen.

And as part of the next generation, my peers and I will take on the responsibility of safeguarding international security. And now, I have a question for you and Ayumi. How do nationalistic sentiment and historical memory shape the young leaders' perspectives on the trilateral cooperation, and what might need to be reconciled? Thank you.

Amb. Mitchell: Please.

Ms. Jo: Well, thanks so much for that question. I think the issues of historical memory, I think, shouldn't be taken as constant constraint on cooperation. I like to think of it more as a narrative resource in South Korea that can be tapped into by different political actors. Given South Korea's history, I think there is a reservoir of anti-Japanese sentiments that political actors have tapped into, for both good and for bad. That said, public sentiments – public mobilization does not always lead to undermining cooperation.

We've seen certain moments where that has happened. So we can think of, for instance, the public mobilization against GSOMIA under Lee Myung-bak, that was foiled at the last minute. We can also think about how the comfort women agreement became co-opted in broader contention against Park Geun-hye during the last stages of her leadership. But these are sort of more episodic. So I think sort of broader generalized feelings toward Japan don't tend to accurately capture the kind of underlying reservoir of anti-Japanese sentiments or discontent. And those are the things that have to be managed at the political level, and where I think leader-level signaling is particularly important.

Ms. Teraoka: So I haven't done the study of this, but during the 10 years or more of really worse time between Korea and Japan, there was also anti-Korea sentiment within Japan. There was a lot of books on sort of anti-Korea – or, sort of books advocating South Korea passing. And then in that – in that time, Japan also developed partnership with other U.S. allies. And, you know, Japan pretended that those U.S. partnership, whether other like-minded allies, can kind of replace Korea. But it turns out, Korea is not replaceable. I mean, in order to really manage threats from the Korean Peninsula. Australians and Filipinos can't do the same work that, you know, Korea can provide.

So I think we have passed that phase. And I think there's no longer sort of much appetite for that kind of publications. I think that's toning down. That said, younger generation Diet members are very – I think they have a very flat view on facts and then sort of interests that Japan has with Korea. So I think it'll be easier for newer generations of leaders to kind of build trust between them, based on the sort of facts-based analysis of what their interests are.

Amb. Mitchell: Thank you. Yes, Sir.

Q: Hello. My name is Matthew Bragg.

Amb. Mitchell: Oh, is it working? Yeah, it's working. Good.

Q: Hello?

Amb. Mitchell: Yeah.

Q: OK. Hello. My name is Matthew Bragg. I'm a recent graduate from St Mary's College of Maryland.

I want to steer a little bit away from the military security part and talk a bit more about the human security part. Mainly, how this trilateral cooperation can enhance not only just education, job opportunities for people from Korea, Japan, and the U.S., but also medical opportunities that they can have. Because this cooperation, I think, can help a lot of people who just couldn't have those opportunities before, if these countries didn't cooperate. So do you guys see any progress made towards that direction? What is it going to look like in the future?

Amb. Mitchell: Anyone seen trilateralism in the medical and health realm? Certainly seems logical. We've seen it around, I guess, the pandemic in terms of supply chains, in a very corporate way. Any – I think it's a good idea. There's no reason why they couldn't. I don't know that there's been any work on that quite yet, but.

Mr. Farrar: The only thing I would say is that inherently you're correct, these people to people-to-people ties, you know, underpin the entire relationship. And, you know, when we've had momentous moments in the trilateral relationship, a lot of those deliverables, a lot of the things that have been brought to the table is finding ways to expand those cooperation in fields across the board. But, you know, certainly in this moment with the current administration, it's unclear how many of those in and of themselves as programs will continue. But that said, that clearly there's growing relationships between each of these countries. And I take solace in the increased travel between Korea and Japan that's increasingly reported, and the large number of Japanese and Korean students that travel and study in the United States. But I think trilaterally, we haven't leveraged that tool – you know, that structure in that way.

Amb. Mitchell: Yeah. I think the agenda is broad, as we talked today. It could be a whole host of things that we can do together, if there's a choice to do it, if there's a will to do it. On the human dignity side, human rights, on, you know, housing political prisoners or people escaping from – whether it's

Hong Kong or Myanmar or wherever it is. The question is, where is the United States on all this these days? (Laughs.) And then what – how much is there a willingness in these capitals? So I think there's a lot on that agenda. The sky's the limit. The question is what these countries will take up, and how much bandwidth they have to do that. Where are the priorities they want to place, if they have a limited amount of time, to talk about something and prioritize something? Where are those priorities?

And we have time maybe for one more question, one or two more questions. One more? OK, let's go over here. I'm sorry. Go ahead. I'm biased to that side because I'm pointed that way. (Laughter.) I figured I should turn this way. It's my left-wing tendencies. (Laughter.)

Q: Is it on? OK, perfect. Thank you so much for your talk and panel. My name is Tony. I'm currently an undergraduate student at Wisconsin-Madison.

Now, obviously, we're on the topic of next generation. And when we're talking about the younger generation, especially in the context of Japan and South Korea, the one problem we cannot avoid is their demographic problem. So I'm extremely curious. Yes, the U.S. is somewhat experiencing it too, except we do have immigration that's keeping our population numbers up. Do you guys think there's a potential cooperation effort between South Korea, Japan, and U.S. to tackle the demographic situation in South Korea and Japan? Thank you.

Amb. Mitchell: It's a big issue. (Laughs.)

Ms. Jo: Did you say democratic or demographic?

Amb. Mitchell: No, demographic. Demographic, yeah,

Ms. Jo: OK.

Amb. Mitchell: We have a democratic problem, but that's – go ahead. (Laughter.)

Ms. Jo: That too, yes. They go hand in hand. I think demographic issues are sort of existential for South Korea, and probably also for Japan. I think there's a huge need for reform in immigration policies. But the key constraint there is the underlying sort of national narrative of what constitutes Korean-ness, a lot of which I think are sort of historical legacies of the Cold War and the national identity issues that we have. So immigration policies in each context have to be reformed in order for them to both survive economically, but also for there to be political

stability. Where, like, the trilateral cooperation can help with that I have not considered deeply enough. But that seems to me to be a core issue for the trilateral going forward.

Ms. Teraoka: I think there's opportunity for three countries, but particularly Japan and Korea, to kind of work together on sort of automation technology and, you know, how to use that to replace some of the manpower that we may be lacking in the future. But I also see that there may be more competition between Korea and Japan over talent – attracting talents globally, especially on semiconductors. So I think there's a limited pool of talent in the world, and sometimes we may be seeking the same group of talent globally. So but healthy competition's also good. So I wouldn't rule that as only a source for instability. But I think there – because two countries share the same demographic challenges, I think more intelligence – information coordination or cooperation will be, I think, a force for good.

Amb. Mitchell: I imagine our two American friends maybe not – (laughs) – comment on demographics in Korea and Japan. We are at time. So I've been given the signal we have to wrap up. Zero minutes, it says right there. So I guess that means our time's up. (Laughter.)

Just a couple concluding thoughts. First of all, wonderful panelists for today's session. Look, when I went online – you know, I was thinking about how do we sustain this relationship over time. And I went online to look for and to download a copy of the Camp David principles. It switched me over to whitehouse.gov and it said, "page not found" – (laughs) – because the new administration has taken it all off. That's a bad sign. But it is true. I don't want to – I mean, we talked a lot about constraints, and internal constraints, and external maybe facilitators here. I think at the working level, there's a lot – a lot driving it, a lot of things externally. Realism says these three countries should be working together. They have so much overlapping common interest that they should be working together on some of these really critical issues.

And, as many issues these days, we have China to thank for much of it, for pushing countries together. But it's got to be based on more than that. But I think that we can see momentum continue over time. And it needs, again, to be quite instinctive. The one big question we haven't – you know, the one big variable now is we haven't hit a stress point yet. It hasn't been stress-tested. We had a really great run of the three right leaders at the right time with the right staffs, you know, in the White House and elsewhere. But there hasn't really been a hard stress test.

And that will be the real challenge, is what happens if, you know, just taking the United States, if, as we talked earlier, there is a pull out of some troops. What if we do talk – you know, push for strategic flexibility off the peninsula? Or there's more pressure on things like Taiwan, or you can go down a list of issues. And then, of course, historical issues of the World War II end coming up. And there are all kinds of things that can stress test. But the key is people in this room, people in this panel, people within the governments who recognize that this is really critical and, regardless, we have to persist through the choppy waters and see it through at every level, because it's in our interest – normative interest, our values, but also our strategic interests.

So I imagine there'll be many more conversations like this at CSIS and elsewhere. We are very, very thankful to you for coming. And please join me in thanking these panelists for coming. (Applause.) And what now? Back at 2:30 for Senator Kim.

(END.)