

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Online Event

**“ROK-U.S. Strategic Forum 2021: The Road Ahead after
the Biden-Moon Summit”**

***Session III – Trilateralism and U.S.-ROK Alliance in Indo-
Pacific Region***

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FEATURING

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Transcript By

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Victor Cha:

Thank you very much. So welcome to Panel 3 of the ROK-U.S. Strategic Forum 2021 hosted by the Korea Foundation and CSIS. This panel is about “Trilateralism in the U.S.-ROK Alliance in the Indo-Pacific Region.”

Time is quite short, so I suggest that we dive right into the conversation with our panelists, who are, starting from my left, Professor Kim Hyun-wook, who is professor and director-general at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy.

Sitting next to him is Alex Wong. Alex Wong is the former deputy assistant secretary for North Korea in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and former deputy Special Representative for North Korea at the Department of State that he also had within his portfolio, before you took on North Korea regional affairs, as I remember. So thanks very much for joining us.

I don't see Andrew Yeo yet on the screen. There's Andrew. So Andrew Yeo is joining us, I believe, from the Philippines, I think, from Manila, and as many of you know, Andrew is professor and director of Asia studies at Catholic University and he is the new SK-Korea Foundation Brookings Chair at the Brookings Institution. So we're very happy to welcome Andrew with us.

And a special welcome to Professor Kim Ji-young from Hanyang University. I think this is your first time to visit with us at CSIS. So we're very happy to have you join us. Thank you so much.

OK. So the title of the panel is about trilateralism, but I take that, generally, to mean, more broadly, the different multilaterals and minilaterals and quads and other geometric shapes that diplomacy and strategy are taking in the region – in the Indo-Pacific region – these days.

Now, we're going to try to get through four rounds of questioning. So I'm going to ask our panelists to try to be concise in terms of their responses so that we can have a good thorough discussion.

So for the first round of questions, I would like to ask our South Korean participants to offer their thoughts on Korea's interest in these new multilateral groupings, you know, everything from the new southern diplomacy focus on ASEAN states, the northern diplomacy, U.S.-Korea trilateral relations with Australia. There are many of these groupings. I just was curious as to while this has not been – this sort of multilateral interaction has not been new for Korea on the global stage, there is more enthusiasm on the regional stage in terms of these, and I wanted to get at least an initial broad stroke view about what you think about this new apparent enthusiasm for some of these multilateral groupings.

So, Professor Kim, why don't I start with you?

Kim Hyun-Wook: Yes. Thank you, Victor, for chairing this session, and I'm happy that I'm a member of – you know, participating in this nice and important meeting.

Yes, I think South Korea has been very active in regional grouping, too, not only global grouping. I think before, like, the 1990s and early 2000s, it was pretty much based upon, you know, adding into and participating into ASEAN-based regional institutions like ASEAN+3, ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, things like that. And I think that was from the Park Geun-hye government and also Moon Jae-in government, too, that South Korea began to take some initiative about, you know, being more active in informing a Northeast Asia peace – like the Northeast Asia peace and cooperation initiatives or platforms, which have some different names by governments.

So I think that this was some kind of initiative to be more – take more active initiative in regional groupings. But I think that these efforts has not been very successful because – several reasons may be because the linkage between the Korean Peninsula issues and the regional peace initiative has been not very much linked. You know, whenever there was some failure of dialogue and provocations by North Korea, this, you know, initiatives – peace and cooperation initiatives in Northeast Asia has not been very successful.

The second reason, I think, is, you know, it has been the centerpiece of the security and peace, you know, groupings in this region – Northeast Asia region – has been pretty much based upon, you know, alliance – bilateral alliance systems rather than, you know, multilateral multinational groupings. So more focus has been always on the U.S.-South Korea alliance and U.S.-Japan alliances, which has been not very much, you know, in a positive, you know, synergy between alliance systems on one hand and the other, the – you know, Northeast Asia multilateral groupings.

The last reason, I think, is pretty much, you know, related to the U.S.-China competition. Nowadays, as you know, Kurt Campbell mentioned the CPTPP, for example, in part, many of the regional, you know, groupings have some features of, you know, U.S. initiatives, those Chinese initiatives, which makes South Korea, you know, hard time to determine whether it should be participating or not.

CPTPP, when the U.S. took initiative, South Korea was very hesitant then. Now China is taking initiative and, again, I don't think South Korea will be successfully participating in CPTPP. So I'm not sure what's going to be the future. Maybe you will ask some other question. I can answer those questions. But that's pretty much what I'm thinking.

Dr. Cha: Great. Thank you.

Professor Kim, would you like to add any comments about Korea's interest in these multilaterals?

Kim Ji-young: OK. Thank you, Victor. I'm very honored to be here and express my special thanks to CSIS and Korea Foundation to give us an excellent chance to share our opinion. And I pretty much share my opinion with Kim Hyun-wook – Dr. Kim Hyun-wook. And I think – I guess it's not new, because the South Korean effort to engage in this regional multilateralism has actually continued since 1990s, you know, especially after 1997 financial crisis. You know, at that time, Kim Dae-jung administration realized, you know, the importance of reaching out to – more broadly, to East and Southeast Asia, especially.

So as Professor Kim mentioned, you know, the Korean government started to focusing on this ASEAN+3 meetings and FTA, both multilateral and bilateral, and also, you know, recently we. Oh. Yeah. Recently, we saw the successful conclusion of our CEF and et cetera. Each administration actually since then, the Kim Dae-jung administration, came up with various very ambitious plans for regional cooperation.

But I believe they were relatively weak in detail and also practical strategy. And especially the problem is that, you know, those plans of past have been – actually have been self-centered in that they are projected for usually to support – to gain support for each government, North Korean policy, and sometimes overly focused on economic interest.

But now, I believe, South Korean government is trying to shed this image, and by emphasizing this – the mutual prosperity over national interest, you know, with regional members, especially Southeast Asian countries and India. So I think this transition to community partnership is one of the most important change in Korea's engagement in multilateral cooperation at this time.

Dr. Cha: Great. Thank you so much.

For our American participants, I was wondering if I could ask you to comment on the Biden administration's coalition diplomacy, broadly, and whether you think it's been effective. I mean, Dr. Campbell, when he was here, talked quite a bit about this, and Professor Lee's – President Lee's question about the multilateralization of the alliance network.

So I would just be curious to get your thoughts on how successful you think this is and whether it's the right direction. So, perhaps, I could start with Alex Wong.

Alex Wong:

Sure. Thanks, Victor.

You know, I think 11 months into the Biden administration there are kind of two ways to look at this. Number one, looking at the kind of new multilateral frameworks or at least the concepts of how regional cooperation will work from an architecture standpoint it's been pretty good. You know, you look at the Quad. I think the continued commitment to the Quad, a continuation of what the Trump administration tried to do and prior administrations tried to do with the Quad, is a good thing. That's a good concept. That's a good piece of architecture.

I think AUKUS makes an immense amount of sense, so much so that I'm surprised that this idea didn't come around earlier than this year. I think the start of – or least the beginning of this administration's commitment to the ASEAN framework with President Biden showing up at least to the virtual summit is a good start. Many administrations have a good start and, hopefully, it continues.

So looking at the architecture and the concepts I think these are all good. But the second piece is the substance. What are the projects, the cooperative substance that we're going to try to institutionalize through these concepts, these architectures? And that's an open question. I think there's been a lot of good talk from some members of the administration on this.

But the questions are, will there be concrete actions and coordination on deterrence and defense frameworks among these partners for a number of contingencies, including Taiwan. You have to ask are there going to be concrete actions and steps and mechanisms for protecting critical technologies, supply chains, critical infrastructure, and there's – are there going to be concrete steps in these frameworks to embed all of the partners in a web of commerce and a web of defense coordination that will secure a truly free and open Indo-Pacific strategy for Indo-Pacific.

Now, these are all hard and big tasks. They're going to take a number of years, if not decades. But the jury's out on whether we can use these concepts to do the work there. And a big question there is will the Biden administration focus laser like on that project or will they be distracted by other priorities, whether foreign or domestic, in pursuit of that over the next three years, and if there's a second term, the second term?

Dr. Cha:

Right. Thanks, Alex.

Andrew Yeo in Manila, you are joining us, I think, quite late at night or early in the morning.

Andrew Yeo: Yes, I'm in solidarity with our Korean participants for jet lag. It's almost 3:00 a.m. here.

But thanks, Victor. Now, I'll just, you know, add that since the early days of his campaign President Biden has repeatedly stated strong support for U.S. alliances and multilateral institutions, and the president as well as several of his top foreign policy advisors have also been proponents of liberal internationalism, a perspective on global politics that advocates global engagement by strengthening the rules, norms, and institutions that sustain a free and open international order.

Now, the administration's adoption of liberal internationalism is relevant to our conversation about coalitional diplomacy as the overarching objective of diplomatic and security coalitions is to sustain and promote a rules-based order.

Some may argue that the key objective of coalition diplomacy as manifesting groupings like the Quad or AUKUS is to defend states against Chinese aggression. That may be one objective.

However, the Biden administration has been working hard to avoid that impression. The key, I think, for U.S. policymakers is to continue framing the Quad and other trilateral and strategic partnerships as promoting regional governance and shared principles. Groupings like the Quad and trilaterals should stand for something and not just an opposition to one country. And that's why I think we've seen an emphasis on issues like vaccine distribution, cybersecurity, and infrastructure governance, which is, in theory, something that China could participate in as well, at least when we're talking about the Quad.

I think smaller countries will still interpret U.S.-led coalitions as being primed to counter Chinese regional efforts, and I think there are some issues such as standards or emerging technologies where it might be hard not to come down on a particular side. But as Secretary of State Blinken's now well-quoted line refers to, our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be, and that, I think, reflects how the administration has also approached existing and new U.S.-led coalitions.

Now, I do think it's a little bit too early to say whether the Biden administration has succeeded, and we're still waiting for the full details of the Indo-Pacific strategy. But as Alex mentioned, I think, in the first 11 months we've seen a lot of attention, at least, given to coalitional diplomacy and these new different configurations, groupings, and institutions within Asia's regional architecture.

Dr. Cha: Great. Thank you. Thank you, Andrew.

So for our second round of questioning, I'd like to dig a little deeper, now that we've sort of taken the sort of top layer off. And for Korean participants, I wanted to ask you your views on – we've talked about a number of these different coalitional efforts. I'd like to ask your views on which of these multilateral initiatives you feel have the most promise from a Korean perspective. Which of these – you know, whether they're in Southeast Asia or Central Asia or in Oceania or in Northeast Asia, which of these, to you, seem to show the most promise from a Korean perspective?

And then the same question for the United States, but, I guess, the question for the U.S. participants is, from a U.S. perspective in terms of the objectives in the Indo-Pacific, which of these groupings do you feel that the United States thinks it's important for Korea to be a part of?

And so let me go in reverse order and start with Andrew, if I could. So Andrew in the Philippines?

Dr. Yeo: Sure. Thanks. So in terms of which multilateral groupings are important, especially for Korea, I mean, the two that we've been – that we're focused on here today is the Quad and maybe the U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral relationship.

And, you know, as for the Quad, you know, it's been given special attention in this first year of the Biden administration with, you know, Biden holding both a virtual meeting of the Quad leaders in March and then an in-person summit in September. And that's one of the areas where we're actually seeing continuity from the Trump and Biden administration, although I'd say we've seen the shift away from defense – a defense security emphasis on the Quad to a wider range of issues, nontraditional security and economic issues, such as, you know, vaccine partnerships, health security, you know, infrastructure coordination groups and climate change.

And for these reasons, I think, that's why it's important to Korea. You know, it's not just about security and defense and we know that – we've heard from the vice foreign minister that, you know, South Korea wants to maintain positive relations with Beijing and Washington. So you don't necessarily – you know, when you're discussing these economic issues, you know, that's something that's maybe open to South Korea as well, too. I'm not saying that South Korea should jump in and join the Quad, but that's one – that is important for Korea as well and, of course, we have the U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateralism.

The U.S. is strengthening or building its trilateral strategic partnerships, and despite the broken state of Korea-Japan bilateral relations, we've seen the

U.S. continuing to encourage, create space for U.S.-Japan-Korea trilaterals at various levels. And I'm not sure if anyone's keeping count but there's been at least a half dozen of these trilateral working group meetings.

So we've seen – we've also seen developments such as AUKUS, but I don't know if that's as relevant to South Korea at the moment. But I do want to end with just one broader comment about the regional architecture, and right now we're seeing this development of U.S.-centered, you know, groupings – coalitional groupings – and, you know, former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter had talked about a principled security network and I think this is what we're seeing developing out. And I'm curious if the U.S. is favoring this architecture over, perhaps, the ASEAN family of institutions, which has been the basis of multilateral cooperation in Asia since the post-Cold War period.

And I think for South Korea they've always felt more comfortable with, you know, the ASEAN – you know, the ASEAN-driven multilateralism because it includes China and it tries to enmesh China. And now, you know, if the U.S. is shifting towards these more U.S.-led coalitions and networks, trilaterals – the Quad – that might put Korea in a more difficult position within the regional architecture.

But I think that's a broader question that we have to be – we have to be following as these coalitional groupings unfold.

Dr. Cha: Great. Thank you, Andrew.

Perhaps I can go next to Professor Kim, and offer your views.

Dr. J. Kim: OK. So as we actually enter the Indo-Pacific, you know, age, I believe Korea is now focusing on – it's focusing its effort on ASEAN countries especially. You know, in the Asia-Pacific era – age – South Korea, maybe, and Japan were at the crossroad between Asia and Pacific, but in the Indo-Pacific age I believe ASEAN is rising as core countries and there is a growing importance of a strategic role of India as blockade against the westward expansion of China.

So this means that the center of global strategy actually will likely shift from Asia-Pacific to South and Southeast Asia. So I think it is no surprise that Northeast Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and Taiwan are now emphasizing their southern policies, and now Korean government is pursuing so-called new Southern Policy, you know, to expand its interest in India and ASEAN countries, and I believe this may be seen as a struggle or effort to seeking the survival strategy amid increasing tension between the U.S. and China.

We have talked about, you know, whether South Korea should choose, you know, China or the U.S., you know, all the time today, but I think this kind of policy was chosen as a way to avoid, you know, this question or pressure.

So the policy goal is to raise cooperation level – level of cooperation with India and ASEAN on par with four great powers, which is U.S., China, Russia, and Japan. Also, trade relations will, you know, enlarge to reach the size comparable to that of China. In short, I guess new Southern Policy aims to ease Korea's dependence on great powers, and in terms of politics, security, and economy, to diversifying, you know, its – Korea's diplomatic and economic options.

Actually, the emphasis on ASEAN countries is not entirely new for Korea. Past administration actually have come up with many ambitious strategy, but only to end up with little result. So the new Southern Policy is a long list of, you know, repeating this past mistake of emphasizing short-term, charitable, or exhibitionist event.

So I think the most important thing is to maintain the consistency, you know, for successful multilateral cooperation for South Korea government at the moment. Yeah.

Dr. Cha: Great. Thank you, Professor Kim.

Alex Wong, when you were at the State Department before you took on the North Korea portfolio you were working a lot on regional affairs, and so I was curious as to, you know, your experience then. Which groupings did you see as most important in their nascent phases and what do you think of the situation now?

And also, if I could ask you, nobody talks about APEC anymore. Do you have any thoughts on – any thoughts on that?

Mr. Wong: Right. Well, you're right, I did do the regional portfolio, including the Indo-Pacific strategy, at State for about six, seven months before doing North Korea. But it was an interesting six, seven months because it was the – still, the early times in the Trump administration, and it was still the early times, at least in the newly enunciated new Southern Policy of South Korea.

And in that, you know, I want to draft off of the prior statements from my colleagues. You know, I do think a joint focus between South Korea and the United States on the ASEAN countries – not necessarily ASEAN qua ASEAN as the, you know, the multilateral grouping but focusing on what commercial capacity-building trade connections we can both work together on and leverage with particular Southeast Asian countries, I think that works all in both of our countries' favor.

You know, if you look at the ASEAN region, 650 million people, the potential for GDP growth, population growth, trade growth, over the next 10, 15, 20 years is immense compared to other parts that are – you can say are more economically mature throughout Asia.

South Korea already has some very deep economic connections with a number of countries, Vietnam in particular, where, if we – working together, we can both leverage our relationships in the region, and this is strategically in our interest. We want to embed those countries, again, in a web of commerce in a free and open region to balance coercive measures and to keep those countries open to investment, keep those sea lines of communication open, because they are strategically placed.

This something both of our countries can work together on, and when I was in government we were – at least, I tried to begin doing that and I think it has continued and does continue now in the Biden administration. So that would be, I think, the focus.

Now, as to APEC, you're right. You know, it doesn't come up too much. I mean, in my work in government, I didn't have too much interaction with APEC. It was kind of a separate economic grouping.

I will say that it is significant and continues to be for a number of reasons for the United States, number one, because it is one of the few fora where Taiwan participation is quite robust, is accepted, and using that as an example of how Taiwan can contribute to other fora continues to be a valuable piece of APEC. Not the only piece, of course, that's valuable, but one that, I think, particularly in this current environment is quite significant.

Dr. Cha: Thanks. And, of course, Korea played a critical role in bringing Taiwan to APEC back a couple of decades ago.

Professor Kim Hyun-wook, I wonder if I could ask you the same question in terms of Korea's views of which of these – or where is the energy in terms of these multilateral initiatives as Korea looks out at the region?

And then if I can also ask you the – what struck me about Dr. Campbell's remarks on the Quad was that he suggested there was a robust conversation taking place between the U.S. and South Korea about the Quad. So I'd love to get your views on what you think Korea's position should be vis-à-vis the Quad. So over to you.

Dr. H. Kim: Thank you for your question. Maybe – because I'm not a government person, maybe I don't know how the conversation about Quad is going on. Maybe I should have asked, you know, Vice Minister Choi about that in the morning.

I think, you know, Dr. Campbell, mentioned about the, you know, U.S.-ROK summit meeting that happened this May, and I think I totally agree with him that this has been a very important critical juncture for the alliance.

I mean, you know, the U.S.-South Korea alliance has been transformed after the end of the Cold War in 2008, which was very late – very late post-Cold War transformation. At the time, it was transformed into comprehensive strategic alliances. But, I mean, the regional level cooperation was very dormant because, you know, South Korea had to think about the China issues all the time.

The regional stability and peace issue has been always a burden for South Korea. And I think this May – you know, some meeting has changed the alliance, you know, completely. I'm not sure what's going to happen, whether this critical juncture will continue in the future or not.

But for so long time, the U.S.-South Korea, you know, common threat perception was totally disturbed. I think it was distorted. Recently, I don't think, you know, current government is trying to see North Korea as a threat anymore, which, I think, you know, the U.S. is still trying to see North Korea as a threat, even though it wants to look at it as a partner to be engaged with.

China issues – the U.S. wants to use the U.S.-ROK alliance to deal with China, which I think is still – has been a burden for South Korea. But I think this May summit meeting has harmonized many things between two countries. We agreed upon how to deal with North Korea issues, engaging North Korea, and most importantly, Dr. Campbell mentioned it, right. You know, important issues like climate change and health and new technology issues. We have agreed upon our, you know, cooperation on the, you know, global supply chain issues.

And what is more important is that, I think current Biden government Indo-Pacific strategy, one of the characteristics of their policy is they're very flexible issue-based cooperations and formation of minilateralism. It began – these three agenda-setting – climate change, health, and new technology – began at the Quad meeting, part summit meeting, early this year, and then it has been agreed at the U.S.-Japan summit meeting, next at the U.S.-South Korea summit meeting, and also G-7 meeting.

So all the, you know, agendas and issues, the same agenda setting and their agreement upon bolstering the global supply chain on those issues, has been an ongoing issue, I think. It's not the one that has been only agreed at the U.S.-South Korea summit. But I think throughout this summit agreement I think South Korea is completely participating in the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Dr. Cha: Great. Thank you.

Andrew, if I could go to you, just focusing on the Quad for this round. I mean, could you give us your views on Korea's position vis-à-vis the Quad? You know, Korea seems to be trying to operate in parallel to the Quad, producing basically the same deliverables but in a U.S.-ROK bilateral context. But I'd love to hear your thoughts on whether those two should be merged.

Dr. Yeo: Right. I mean, that's what Dr. Kim was saying, that we have these different agendas that you can, you know, break out to different multilaterals, at summit meetings or at forums, you know, like the G-20 or even at COP26. And that enables South Korea to engage with the United States and other like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific region. But that's a key question, whether South Korea should move not in parallel but with – move closer into the Quad or become part of – remain perhaps in the Quad-plus but become – join within some configuration of this quad, rather than moving in parallel.

And, I mean, I think we're going to have to wait until the next – until the Korean elections to know whether we'll move closer in that direction or not, depending on who takes the Blue House. But, I mean, in my mind it seems that Korea is – I mean, there are other questions. It's not just what Korea and the United States wants, but it's the other members of the Quad. How welcoming would Japan be if Korea, you know, wants – or, you know, joins – signs up for the Quad, or what would India's reaction be?

So, you know, it's – so it's not clear whether the Quad is the answer for South Korea. I think more important is making sure that they're staying engaged with the Indo-Pacific. And as I mentioned, we've seen a shift in the Biden administration, leaning on the Quad and other hub-and-spokes based coalitions and strategic partnerships. And, you know, in addition to the Quad, I really think we should be – that South Korea should be looking at this U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral relationship more seriously.

And Korea, you know, may feel it's behind the curve because even with the Quad you have other trilaterals – U.S.-Japan-Australia, U.S.-Japan-India. But this is one – this is the one place where I think Korea can make the most significant contribution. But that means finding a way to work together with Japan. So it's one of the goals towards which the new Kishida government and the next government in Seoul should – you know, they should also move forward towards.

Dr. Cha: Thanks, Andrew. I will get to the question of Japan, but I want to – let's finish this round on the Quad first, and then perhaps I'll have Alex start on the U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral.

But, Professor Kim, could you give us your views on South Korea with regard to the Quad?

Dr. J. Kim:

OK. So let me keep – I mean, I'd like to say a few words about whether or not South Korea should join the Quad, because this is the most important issue in Korea regarding Quad. Actually, I think it is matter of whether South Korea should – can maintain this strategic ambiguity between the U.S. and China. So for now, South Korean government's position – official position is that while I agree with proposal of Quad, it cannot officially participate in Quad because participating in Quad, as we all know, that maybe pose some conflict with China. So since South Korea consider both sides, China and U.S., I think South Korea should be only cautious.

But personally, I believe that attending Quad or not, or Quad-plus membership, shouldn't be the major question, you know, for South Korea. You know, as Dr. Yeo mentioned, one can even question whether Quad member countries, especially Japan are willing to open the door for South Korea, which has been displaying this – you know, the passive attitude toward Quad. And also there is an issue of South Korea-Japan relations. You know, for example, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida's first order of business when he came to the office last month, to have phone call with Quad members – you know, the United States, and Australia, and India. And then he went onto the U.K. and China and Russia. Then, you know, Japanese media commented on this. Actually, this means that Korea has been relegated to the second tier of Japanese diplomacy.

So now I think the key strategic question should be how welcoming will Quad members be toward South Korea, and which issue and field would they work on South Korea, and what kind of contribution can South Korea make in enhancing Quad, you know, capability in resolving the major problems confronting the region? And we know that, you know, there are signs that Quad evolve into more of industrial infrastructure gathering alliance, rather than around a military alliance. So in that sense, I think Korea can make some contribution, maybe in the field of high capability – technical capacity in supply chain resilience, or medical and health care and data access and transmission, and so forth.

So the focus on Quad actually should shift from collective actions – shift toward, actually, collective action to solve more urgent problem in the region, rather than – you know, rather than focusing on whether South Korea should join the Quad – you know, join the Quad or not. So that's my opinion.

Dr. Cha:

All right. Thank you. Thank you very much. Very thoughtful comments.

Alex, I'd love your view on the Quad as well, but also to take us into the next and final round of questions, of course, Japan and the trilateral relationship. It seems that – I mean, at least from a U.S. perspective, what we see is, you know, there's a lot of multilateral activity involving Japan, whether it's in the Quad or the trilateral development alliance with Australia or the strategic – TSD, Trilateral Strategic Dialogue. There's a lot of multilateral or networking of the alliance system with Japan.

And then now we're starting to see more on the Korea side with U.S.-Korea-Australia, U.S.-Korea-ASEAN. But there's nothing connecting these. Of course, the United States is connecting these two, but of course, you know, the big issue is Korea-Japan relations. So I'd love your views on both those things – both on the Quad and then also what we can do about the relationship between Seoul and Tokyo, and the broader trilateral.

Mr. Wong:

Right. Just a short thing on the Quad first, since it's continuing the conversation. You know, I'm a little nervous about going too quick and too broad in, you know, framing certain cooperative, you know, relationships in terms of the Quad, only because, you know, we're very – still quite early in the Quad concept. And it's only really recently that the Quad has really picked up momentum at the leader level, mainly because India is interested in the recent, you know, one or two years. And that's always the question mark in my mind, is if we can keep India focused on being a forthright participant in the Quad.

You know, India is – any grouping, any coalition, any framework is only as strong as its weakest link. And the question in my mind is: Will India be interested for the long term? They have a history of being non-aligned. They have a very small diplomatic corps that, just from a manpower capacity standpoint, makes it hard for them to participate and contribute in these types of frameworks. So this is a big question in my mind, that, you know, when there is not a big threat from the north, or when there's not a particular reason why they're interested now, will they continue to be? So concentrating on the Quad as the Quad before, you know, branching out would be my general approach.

As far as trilateral cooperation and the trilateral relationship in Korea and Japan, you know, just stepping back, I think we're all in agreement when we look at this – when we look at that trilateral grouping, it should make complete sense to all parties involved. We have the same geographic threats and interests. We have the same commercial interests in Northeast Asia. We have, you know, a shared systems and culture of democracy. But clearly, as you all know, there's always the continuing salience of historical issues between Japan and Korea.

So what should really be for the United States a force multiplier of our strategy and a way to save diplomatic resources and be efficient among all the players actually becomes a drain on our political capital, our diplomatic capital every time there is an uptick in Japan-Korea relations, where the United States, you know, for better or for worse, has to play a mediator role, a convener role, a facilitator role. And that takes up resources. That doesn't save resources.

So, you know, instead of, you know, creating these parallel cooperative frameworks, I think, you've mapped out Victor, I think, you know, a focus of each administration – and I'm not sure how much of it is a focus now of the current one. I'm not involved in those discussions. But the watchword for me would be "institutionalization." That if we're going to – if the United States is going to play a facilitator role, a go-between role on any topic – whether it's intelligence sharing, military exercises, discussions of extended deterrence and missile defense, you can throw a lot of things in the basket.

Those shouldn't just be facilitating talks now but conceptualizing institutional frameworks that I think insulate trilateral cooperation from the inevitable flareups in the historical tensions between Japan and Korea. Insulate and protect them, and in the long run save the political and diplomatic capital that we always spend in order to keep the trilateral grouping in a – in a good place.

Dr. Cha: Thanks, Alex.

Professor Kim, you and I in the past have been parts of different track 1.5s and track twos on trying to improve U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateralism. I wanted to ask you, first, I mean, your personal thoughts on that, first of all. And then, second, one of the reasons that foreign minister – Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong Kun was here on this trip is to participate in bilaterals and trilaterals with the United States and Japan, part of the quarterly deputy secretary, deputy foreign minister, vice foreign minister level talks. When Alex talks about institutionalization, right, this may be one of the ways to institutionalize this. So my first question is your personal thoughts. My second question is, do you think that this effort to institutionalize the trilateral relationship among the allies will continue, you know, whichever government comes into power in Korea after the election in March?

Dr. H. Kim: I don't really have a good sense about which candidate's policies about U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateralism. But I think it seems like, you know, still conservative candidate has more tendency to restore the relationship between Japan and Korea, it seems like. Personally, I think for now U.S.-Japan-Korea relationship is in jeopardy, but I think it's getting better because there was a very delicate role played by the United States. Of course, the historical issue has not been solved.

And the track two approach to link Japan and Korea I don't think is very well working right now. You know, historical issue is still there, and trying to form a trilateral cooperation is not working very well because South Korean government suddenly changed its attitude to be very favorable to Japan. But Japanese government is still very anti-South Korea. Maybe domestic politics works, that's what appeals to the Japanese public. But I don't know. But so I think institutionalizing would be very important tool to revive these kinds of trilateralism.

You know, for now it seems like North Korea issues, they have commonality about complete denuclearization. But it seems like Japan emphasizes deterrence more and South Korea emphasizes North-South Korea rapprochement more. And it seems like the U.S. is, you know, focusing on the management of North Korean issues. But I think, you know, North Korean issues, fine. The other issue, I think, should be how the trilateralism evolves into the future.

You know, Dr. Kim mentioned that we are pretty in good shape to cooperate on important global cooperations, like health, and climate change, and new technologies. But what if it evolves into military cooperation, for example? Before we tried – KISA is there and GSOMIA is there. And we tried to evolve into, you know, ACSA, which is Acquisition Cross-Service Agreement to make it more solid trilateralism. And would that be possible in the future? And in order to achieve that kind of military trilateral cooperation, South Korea I think has to deal with China. Everybody knows there has been some sort of promise between the two countries. So those kind of things might be hurdles. But I think for now, institutionalization is something that is very important to restore the trilateralism that has been the case before the historical, you know, trouble in the two countries.

Dr. Cha: So I think we've heard – Andrew, we've heard from both Alex and Hyun-wook about the importance of institutionalization in the Japan-Korea-U.S. relationship. But I guess my question to you is, as also has been suggested, politics is also important in terms of outcomes in this three-way relationship. And I guess my question to you is: You know, we do have a new government in Japan. And even though Kishida went every place else before he went to Korea, we do have a new government in Japan. Kishida was the foreign minister when the 2015 agreement was reached. And of course, we'll have a new government in Korea – and election in March and a new government in Korea in May. So do you think that particular constellation of political forces presents an opportunity or an obstacle to improvement in the trilateral relationship?

Dr. Yeo: Yeah, that's a great question. You know very well that we always say that the constellations have to align between domestic and international politics on

both – in both Japan and Korea. And, you know, these are opportunities – political opportunities to revamp bilateral relations between Korea and Japan. So for Kishida and the LDP, you know, there's some modicum of stability now. So I think they may have a little more diplomatic capital to spend on improving relations with Korea. And for South Korea, as we've heard, I think public opinion in Korea towards Japan has been increasing, in part because of – because of the intensification of U.S.-China rivalry and just Chinese assertiveness in the region.

So things are shifting. And as we run up to the South Korea election, regardless of who comes to the Blue House, and I do think both the conservative and the progressive candidates should try to capitalize on the shift in domestic public opinion. Now, as Dr. Kim Hyun-wook mentioned, the conservative party – the conservative candidates tend to be more prone to, you know, trying to mend the fence with Japan. But, you know, regardless of which candidate comes to power, I think it's crucial to improve the relationship with – between Korea and Japan.

And I do want to mention that what's interesting about the U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral is it's probably the one trilateral that tends to focus very specifically on Northeast Asia. The other trilaterals that the United States have is broader, because you have Australia, you have India. These are really configured to address issues within the Indo-Pacific. But for this trilateral, it's really focused on Northeast Asia and North Korea.

Moving forward, in terms of institutionalization, you know, there may have to be more conversations about how the U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral relationship also addresses broader issues, whether it's contingencies on the Taiwan Straits or, you know, some other issue. And I do think that those more difficult issues will eventually have to be – have to be broached.

Dr. Cha: Yeah. Thanks, Andrew.

And, Professor Kim, I'd like to go to you – Professor Kim Ji-young. It's interesting what Andrew says, because when we think about U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral, we think about it in terms of North Korea. And then we also think about it in a broader, global context, providing public goods – whether it's development assistance. These seem like areas ripe for cooperation. But there is the regional element, particularly with regard to China, I think that's quite sensitive for South Korea. Probably less so for Japan, but more so for South Korea. So, you know, I guess I was curious as to your views on the extent to which this trilateral relationship can focus on questions like the Taiwan Straits or maritime security, or these sorts of things that are important to both – to all three countries.

Dr. J. Kim:

Yeah, actually, China issue is very complicated to, you know, discuss whether – you know, we always talk about whether South Korea have to choose China or the U.S. That has been the important question. But I think as a Japan expert, I like to pay more attention to Japan-South Korea, actually, their relations, you know, in terms of this improving U.S., Japan and South Korea cooperation. As, you know, we all know, the weakest link in triangular alliance has always been the relationship between China and – I mean – Korea and Japan. And we are currently actually experiencing the – you know, the worst situation on that front in recent years as, you know, historic problems broadened into economy and security.

You know, as Dr. H. Kim mentioned before, the worsening of Japan and South Korea relations is not in U.S. interest. And I believe nor in the Japan and South Korean interest. But the United States actually historically imposed pressure to reduce tensions between the two countries, and then I believe will continue to do so in the future. But unfortunately, I think in recent years we have witnessed the limit of this pressure, and because it has been only temporarily painted over. So now I think that Korea and Japan are at the point where they have to be more proactive toward resolving the problem.

So, you know, I have a bit different opinion from Dr. Yeo, you know, for – with this new Prime Minister Kishida. The situation is not that easy, because Kishida is, as you mentioned – Kishida actually considered a dove in South Korea-Japan relations. But as, you know, Dr. Cha mentioned, he led comfort women agreement in 1915 (sic; 2015) as minister of foreign affairs. And also, he was elected as prime minister with support from LDP hardliners. So he stated that Korea is the one that bridged the promise, and also Korea issue – so Korea should come up with the solution.

Moreover, I believe Kishida will be likely to focus more on U.S.-Japan relations than improving South Korea relations – South Korea-Japan relations. So, you know, many scholars actually have suggested that we have taken, like, two tracks – so-called two-track approach. In other words, you know, the problems should be separated from other important issue like economy and security. But now I think it's time to reconsider that method, actually, that we have to take one – you know, one-track approach, in that, you know, we should actually prioritize historical problem, and then we deal with other issue along with historic problem.

So I think now it's really time to – the South Korean government and Japanese government get together and, you know, think about taking this package approach in which, you know, the two governments discuss about the resolution of historic problem, including comfort women issue, and also South Korean Supreme Court decision on forced labor, along with Japan's withdrawal from export control, and also normalization of GSOMIA. And I think this is our own – not only, but how can I say, the very practical way to

actually strengthening the Japan-South Korea, and U.S. relations, triangular cooperation at the moment.

I'm sorry, I don't think I can, you know, answer to your question about China. But I think this is most important thing to strengthening the relationship between these three countries. So that's mine, yeah.

Dr. Cha:

Great. Thank you. Thank you very much for those comments.

You know, I wish we had more time for discussion but, unfortunately, we are at the end of this session. So please join me in thanking our panelists for a very interesting discussion. And thank you to our audience online as well for watching. I'm sorry we couldn't take your questions.