

## THE TRILATERAL LEADERS' SUMMIT AT CAMP DAVID- AN ANALYSIS

By

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



On 18 August 2023, the first-ever stand-alone summit of top leaders of the U.S., Japan and Republic of Korea (ROK) was hosted by President Biden at Camp David. The three leaders reached an agreement on establishing a ‘new era’ of trilateral partnership and reiterated that multi-faceted cooperation among the U.S., Japan, Republic of Korea (ROK) promotes and improves the security and prosperity of the people of the three states, the ‘Indo-Pacific’ region, and the world at large.<sup>1</sup> The pledge for a “new era of cooperation” leaves little doubt that one of the prime objectives of this summit was to portray unity and resolve and send a message to other actors in the region, evidently China and North Korea. However, the U.S. has stated that the summit was not aimed towards containing China’s posture in the ‘Indo-Pacific’ space; rather it was to strengthen trilateral engagement focusing on new areas of cooperation along with peace and security in the ‘Indo-Pacific’ region.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, the summit is a testament that the U.S., Japan and ROK are now more closely aligned than before in their strategic policies, which is further strengthened by commonalities in shared principles and views regarding common threats.

- 1 The White House “FACT SHEET: The Trilateral Leaders’ Summit at Camp David,” published on August 18, 2023  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/fact-sheet-the-trilateral-leaders-summit-at-camp-david/>
- 2 The Korea Times “Camp David Summit is not anti-China’: US ambassador,” published on September 18, 2023  
[https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/09/113\\_359487.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/09/113_359487.html)

## Summit Agenda

### *Trilateral Consultations*

Following were some of the key points of discussion at the summit:

a) **Commitment to Confer**

The leaders of the three states declared that their governments would be more actively consulting with one another on issues of mutual concern in order to synchronize their responses towards pressing regional challenges, threats and provocations which are affecting the collective interests and security of these states.

b) **Annual Leaders' Meeting**

The leadership pledged to have at least one annual in-person meeting in order to build on the strength of the Camp David Trilateral Leaders' summit.<sup>3</sup> Such meetings could be considered an extension or offshoots of the trilateral summit and in these follow-up meetings the leaders can share their evaluations of different geo-strategic issues and also discuss avenues for further trilateral cooperation.

c) **Annual Meetings between Foreign Ministers, Defence Ministers, Commerce and Industry Ministers, and National Security Advisors**

It was also decided that at least once a year, Foreign Ministers from the United States, Japan and ROK will have a trilateral meeting. Likewise, the Defence Ministers, Commerce and Trade Ministers and the National Security Advisors of the three countries will meet trilaterally. The working-level meetings will ensure the execution of trilateral initiatives.<sup>4</sup> The hosting responsibilities will be on a rotation basis. The three countries will also convene the first-ever trilateral meeting of the Finance Ministers.

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<sup>3</sup> The White House "FACT SHEET: The Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David," published on August 18, 2023  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/fact-sheet-the-trilateral-leaders-summit-at-camp-david/>

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Klinger, "2023 Camp David Summit Strengthened Allied Cooperation Against Indo-Pacific Threats," published on September 8, 2023  
<https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/2023-camp-david-summit-strengthened-allied-cooperation-against-indo-pacific-threats>

#### d) **Annual Trilateral 'Indo-Pacific' Dialogue**

The leaders further agreed to start an annual Assistant-Secretary-led 'Indo-Pacific' Dialogue which will focus on coordinating and directing the 'Indo-Pacific' strategies of the three countries with a keen focus on cooperation with the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Pacific Island states.<sup>5</sup>

#### ***Security Cooperation***

The leaders pledged to further fortify mutual security cooperation by increasing trilateral defence exercises, improved information-sharing, and expanded cooperation on ballistic missile defence. Some of the key decisions for collaboration in the security domain are given below:

- a) **Multi-year Trilateral Exercise Plan:** Building upon the previous meetings and trilateral dialogues regarding security in the 'Indo-Pacific', the U.S., Japan and ROK agreed to a multi-year trilateral setup in which a timeline of different trilateral exercises will be laid down which will further deepen trilateral defence cooperation.
- b) **Tri-lateral Working Group on DPRK Cyber Activities:** Another key agreement was to set up a new trilateral Working Group on the DPRK Cyber Activities comprised of the relevant agencies of the three states to counter the illegal revenue generation and suspicious cyber activities by DPRK.<sup>6</sup> The job of the Working Group will be to coordinate responses to DPRK's use of cryptocurrency, theft, money laundering and to interrupt cyber actor operations.
- c) **Countering Foreign Information Manipulation:** Owing to the increased threat of information manipulation and the wrong use of surveillance technology, the three countries will chart out ways and methods to counter disinformation.

#### ***Cooperation in the 'Indo-Pacific'***

The trilateral summit also signified a high-level commitment to position this structure as one of the anchors to recognise a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. By giving an institutional form to this trilateral

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> The White House "FACT SHEET: The Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David," published on August 18, 2023  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/fact-sheet-the-trilateral-leaders-summit-at-camp-david/>

framework, the summit reflects the efforts of the three leaders to further strengthen the already existing cooperation. Some of the major decisions regarding cooperation in 'Indo-Pacific' are outlined below:

- a) **Trilateral Development Finance Cooperation:** President Biden while talking about cooperation in the 'Indo-Pacific' stated that a more "prosperous and peaceful" 'Indo-Pacific' would benefit everyone living there and around the world.<sup>7</sup> A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), and Export-Import Bank of Korea (Korea Exim bank) to fortify cooperation in the domains of Information and Communications technology (ICT ); carbon neutrality; and resilient supply chains in the 'Indo-Pacific' region and beyond.<sup>8</sup>
- b) **Framework for Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation:** In the context of cooperation in 'Indo-Pacific' it was also stated that the United States, Japan and South Korea were establishing a trilateral maritime mechanism to coordinate capacity building of partners in Southeast Asia by focusing on creating awareness regarding the maritime domain through Coast Guard and maritime law enforcement. Undoubtedly, such trilateral engagement is one of the major pieces in this entire framework of multi-lateral partnership.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Economic and Technological Cooperation***

It was reiterated by the leaders that the key objective of this trilateral cooperation is to improve the lives of the people by improving economic security and by promoting inclusive, sustainable and robust economic growth across the 'Indo-Pacific' and the entire world.

- a) **US-led 'Indo-Pacific' Economic Framework and Technology Cooperation:**

It was emphasized that in the light of the recent negotiations over the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Framework, efforts will be made to build shared partnerships in Supply Chain Early Warning

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<sup>7</sup> "Biden's call for 'new era of cooperation' with Japan and South Korea likely to ramp up tensions with Beijing," August 19, 2023

<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/08/17/politics/joe-biden-camp-david-japan-south-korea/index.html>

<sup>8</sup> The White House "FACT SHEET: The Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David," published on August 18, 2023

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/fact-sheet-the-trilateral-leaders-summit-at-camp-david/>

<sup>9</sup> The Washington Post, "Biden declares 'new era' of partnership with South Korea and Japan," August 18, 2023

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/08/18/biden-declares-new-era-partnership-with-south-korea-japan/>

System (EWS) Pilot which will strengthen and identify important products like key minerals, rechargeable batteries, and help build a mechanism for information-sharing regarding disruption of supply chains. Furthermore, cooperation will be increased among national science laboratories and efforts will be made by the three sides to set new standards in the development of emerging technologies.<sup>10</sup>

**b) Initiative to Empower Women**

The leaders emphasized the importance of economic independence of women. It was agreed that by building on the existing trilateral initiatives, more events and programs will be organized on the subject of economic empowerment of women, in order to build partnerships at governmental as well as non-governmental level, to provide education and career opportunities to women in fields of STEM, domestic-care infrastructure, and women's complete and effective participation in all the major sectors of society.

**c) People-to-People Linkages and Global Health Collaboration**

The U.S., Japan and ROK affirmed their full commitment in ensuring high-quality health facilities for their citizens. Promotion of health-security through joint research and data exchange was agreed upon. It was agreed that a trilateral cancer dialogue would commence soon, headed by experts from leading cancer institutes in the three countries.<sup>11</sup> Apart from this, the leaders pledged to strengthen people-to-people contact through educational and professional exchanges. The first tri-lateral youth summit funded by the U.S. Department of State will be held in Busan in 2024. Moreover, training programs on technology policy issues can be hosted for professionals from the U.S., Japan and ROK.<sup>12</sup> The key purpose of this program will be to train the future leaders enabling them to make important decisions regarding emerging technologies and how they can be governed.

The commitments made at the Camp David summit signal a significant upgrading of the security cooperation among the three countries. A clear message has been sent about the depth and strength of America's closer ties with Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Jeffrey Hornung, a

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<sup>10</sup> Yuka Koshino, James Crabtree and Veerle Nouwens "The new economic and security ties announced at Camp David", published on August 25, 2023  
<https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/08/the-new-economic-and-security-ties-announced-at-camp-david/>

<sup>11</sup> The White House "FACT SHEET: The Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David," published on August 18, 2023  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/fact-sheet-the-trilateral-leaders-summit-at-camp-david/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

political scientist at RAND Corporation, noted that a visit to Camp David is much 'rarer' than being invited to the White House.<sup>13</sup> Historically, the symbolic value of Camp David has been self-evident and both Japan and Republic of Korea are fully aware of it. How long this enhanced partnership endures is yet to be seen, however. Furthermore, how this trilateral framework will interact with the other regional actors within the context of the 'Indo-Pacific' is something which will be extremely significant to watch in the days to come.

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<sup>13</sup> Asma Khalid and Franco Ordonez, "How Biden used Camp David to elevate a summit with Japan and South Korea", <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/18/1194220556/camp-david-biden-japan-korea>