



**Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International
Cybersecurity Policy**

“Security on the Korean Peninsula.”

A Testimony by:

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Chairman Van Hollen, Ranking Member Romney, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to share my views with you on this important topic. The views represented in this testimony are my own and not those of any employer or institution with which I am affiliated. In my testimony, I would like to reflect on two recent and important developments with regard to security on the Korean peninsula. From a U.S. perspective, one of these is positive and one is negative.

The Meaning of Camp David

The positive development relates to the vast improvement in trilateral relations between the United States, Japan, and South Korea. I have been studying relations between these three key allies in Northeast Asia for decades. My first book, in fact, was on the trilateral relations among Japan, Korea, and the United States and how invaluable this was to U.S. strategic interests.

During the Cold War, the United States saw the individual bilateral alliances with Korea and Japan as a strategic, trilateral whole when it came to defense and deterrence. The United States had troops deployed in both countries and the “Korea Clause” of the 1969 Nixon-Sato Joint Communiqué and Okinawa Reversion plan affirmed the role that Japan would play in Korean defense.

In the post-Cold War era, Washington saw the trilateral relationship as an institution that could promote democracy, economic prosperity, and support of the liberal international order in a region of the world that did not yet readily accept such values.

Today, the three allies are instrumental to shaping a strategic environment in which to manage China’s rise, and they are critical to consolidating supply chains in emerging technologies.

In this long history of these three-way relations, there have been several memorable moments, but I will focus on two: one good and one bad.

The first, a positive moment, was in June 1965 when the United States brokered the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea. This settlement included massive technological and economic assistance that eventually helped to launch the South Korean economy. It was no doubt a controversial agreement at the time for South Korea, but it was the right decision made by the government in pursuit of Korean national interests.

The second, a negative moment, was in 2022 when Japan-Korea bilateral relations plummeted to one of its lowest points in history. Japanese company assets in Korea were on the verge of being confiscated following a South Korean supreme court ruling about compensation for forced labor during the occupation period from 1910 to 1945. South Korea threatened to decouple from an intelligence-sharing agreement with the United States and Japan (GSOMIA). Japan put South Korea on an export control list. South Korea nullified an agreement with Japan on compensation for comfort women victims. And Japanese and South Korean leaders had fallen into a state of non-dialogue even as threats mounted around them from China and North Korea.

Of course, there have been other difficult periods in bilateral relations, like in the 1970s – when Mun Se Kwang attempted to assassinate President Park and murdered his wife. But what arguably made 2022 more damaging is that Korea and Japan were on the road to actively decoupling from each other’s security – which was a gift to North Korea, China, and Russia, and a major liability for the United States.

It is in this context that the Camp David summit of August 2023 represents the third historic event in the history of trilateral relations. The scope of agreements reached is impressive: the institutionalization of trilateral meetings at the leader level and at the cabinet/minister level; the creation of a new, named set of trilateral exercises; and many other areas of cooperation scoped out in the Spirit of Camp David statement including: (1) securing supply chains, (2) combatting disinformation, and (3) promoting coordinated development assistance. This institutionalization of trilateral relations and the broadened scope of cooperation is unprecedented.

How were the three allies able to accomplish this? I think there are five reasons. First, the external security environment compelled a higher level of cooperation among the allies. Put bluntly, the war in Europe has changed everything. Its ripple effects are felt in Asia and has altered the way leaders think about security. The unthinkable – such as war in the Taiwan Strait or on the Korean peninsula – has become possible. The Ukraine war has made the security environment in Asia unstable, and leaders look for ways to create more stability.

A second factor is China’s increasingly assertive behavior in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and in the Taiwan strait. This alone may not worry Koreans and Japanese enough, but in combination with the war in Ukraine and Taiwan’s election in a few months, there is more uncertainty than ever before.

A third factor bringing the three allies together is North Korea’s unceasing intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) campaign. It has done scores of missile tests during the Biden presidency. In the past months, North Korea has tried to launch military satellites, rolled out a new submarine capable of launching multiple submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and successfully tested its first solid propellant nuclear ICBM. This campaign shows no sign of abating any time soon.

A fourth factor contributing to the cooperation between our Korean and Japanese allies is U.S. domestic politics. Our upcoming elections worry Seoul and Tokyo. The possibility of a return to foreign policy by the United States that denigrates allies in Europe and Asia and views them as liabilities rather than assets creates an impulse to try to institutionalize trilateral cooperation now to avoid uncertainty in the future.

The fifth factor contributing to the success of trilateralism is South Korean president Yoon’s foreign policy. While President Biden certainly has supported coalition-building among U.S. allies in Asia and hosted the Camp David summit, Yoon’s efforts at improving relations with Japan were instrumental. From early on in his presidency, Yoon made Japan rapprochement a top priority. He gets a lot of credit for this from the White House, which refers to Yoon’s efforts as brimming with “political courage.” Yoon basically took on the hardest foreign policy issue domestically and pushed forward even when the Kishida government in Tokyo did not initially reciprocate.

The significance of this trilateral cooperation cannot be underestimated. When the United States, Japan, and Korea are together, each is safer, and each has a stronger ground upon which to deal with China. This is not a trilateral alliance per se because of domestic sensitivities in Korea and Japan, but it is about as close as you can get to one, complete with the new, named trilateral exercises and the commitment to consult.

The New Unholy Alliance

While Camp David was a positive development for security on the Korean peninsula, the negative development relates to the budding relationship between North Korea and Russia. Kim Jong-un's second visit to Russia took place this past month, featuring new military cooperation between these longtime neighbors. Kim's six-day long sojourn was longer than his previous trip in 2019, where he visited the Vostochny space center, Komsomolsk-on-Amur defense industry, and Vladivostok. He toured Russian jet fighters, rockets, strategic bombers, and guided missile frigates. Just when you thought the situation with North Korea could not get any worse, it has with the consummation of this unholy alliance.

It is not new in the sense that there has always been cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow historically, but there are a few elements that are new. First, the North Korean leader arguably has leverage in this relationship for the first time in recent memory. In the past, North Korea was always the supplicant, asking for patron prices for Russian energy and debt relief. Now, Putin needs fresh supplies of ammunition and shells from North Korea to prosecute his unjust war in Ukraine.

Second, the Kim-Putin summit reduces Kim's need to talk to the United States. The Biden administration, despite numerous attempts, has had no success in engaging the North Koreans in disarmament dialogue. It is noteworthy that the administration has stated its interest in reengaging in dialogue with DPRK with no preconditions as to the results of such talks. This is a subtle but significant change that suggests greater flexibility. But the prospects of such talks are even less likely now in the aftermath of the Kim-Putin summit. Indeed, part of the reason for Kim's engagement with Putin is because of the spectacular failure of the previous U.S. administration's summit diplomacy with North Korea. The abrupt end to the U.S.-DPRK summit meeting in Hanoi in 2019 was a tremendous embarrassment for Kim. The country shortly after that went into a three-year Covid-19 lockdown. The only way the North Korean leader could save face was to emerge from the lockdown with a major summit with either Xi Jinping or Putin.

Third, I am concerned that this summit meeting could result in substantial and significant Russian support of North Korea's weapons programs. To put it bluntly, the North Korean leader would not travel all the way to Russia simply for a food-for-munitions deal. The visit to the space station, Russian Pacific Fleet, and other military facilities all suggest that Kim is looking for Russian assistance with his nuclear weapons program, military satellite program, a nuclear-powered submarine, and his ICBM program.

Fourth, the summit will likely lead to more DPRK forced labor being sent to Russia. A [recent report](#) by the Bush Institute details how Russia and China have been major perpetrators of North

Korean human rights abuses. The remittances from these workers do not go to the families, but end up in government coffers to support the weapons programs.

There are several options for the United States in response to these developments.

- *Seek coordinated responses in the form of censure and sanctions through the G7-plus and NATO + Asia-Pacific 4.* It is no longer possible to seek United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) on North Korean misbehavior through the UN Security Council given Russian and Chinese opposition.
- *Coordinate legislative actions on Russia and North Korea among like-minded partners like the United States, Japan, Korea, and Australia.* This becomes even more important because the groupings above do not have any enforcement authority like the UN. Therefore, providing each ally with enforcement tools based on new directives is key.
- *Accelerate and enhance trilateral military cooperation among the United States, Japan, and Korea.* This would include all of the new initiatives enumerated in the Camp David summit.
- *Consider a new declaratory policy to neutralize future DPRK ICBM launches, including pre-emptive action.* This is a risky policy, but it would be aimed at deterring further testing by DPRK.
- *Consider South Korean lethal assistance to Ukraine.* South Korean president Yoon has stated that North Korea's provision of lethal assistance to Russia would constitute a direct threat to South Korea's national security. Seoul has thus far provided only humanitarian assistance directly to Ukraine but has provided indirect lethal support through third parties like the United States and Poland.
- *Consider enhanced South Korean cooperation with AUKUS.* Should Russia provide nuclear submarine technology to North Korea, this might be considered as a response. South Korea has world-class port facilities that could be nuclear certified.
- *Frame choices for China.* Beijing remains ambivalent about this new cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow and has maintained an arms-length distance from military support of Russia's unjust war in Ukraine. The Chinese foreign ministry thus far has refused to comment on DPRK-Russia relations, but foreign minister Wang Yi met Sergei Lavrov in mid-September for four days of consultations. The United States should look for opportunities to widen the divide between Xi and these other protagonists, and should make clear to China that it cannot use North Korea as a vehicle for indirectly supporting Russia's war.

There are some who argue that this new development in DPRK-Russia cooperation is a response to the Camp David summit. I do not believe this to be the case. Russia's need for ammunition alone would have made this cooperation inevitable regardless of U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral cooperation. While it is true that this concatenation of developments in the region is precipitating

an arms race in Asia, this is not at the initiative of the United States or its allies. China's massive nuclear buildup, North Korea's drive to become a nuclear weapons state the size of France, and most of all, Russia's war in Europe have fundamentally changed the security environment in the region and on the Korean peninsula in ways that have compelled countries who support the peaceful status quo to respond.