

**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

WHAT THE RUSSIA-DPRK RELATIONSHIP REFLECTS ABOUT THE WEST'S SECURITY STRATEGY

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At the beginning of 2024, following news that Western allies denounced North Korea for providing Russia with ballistic missiles for its war in Ukraine, Russian and North Korean foreign ministers held a meeting in Moscow.

The deepening of Russian-North Korean relations has accelerated since the second half of last year. In September 2023, General Secretary Kim Jong Un of North Korea met with President Vladimir Putin in Russia. The two countries showcased to the world that they are united militarily through Kim's visit to a Russian spaceport where he [toured a rocket assembly hangar and rocket launch site](#). In the months since, North Korea and Russia's military cooperation has proven to be very real: in November, it was reported that North Korea had exported [over 1 million shells to Russia since August](#). Later in November, North Korea successfully launched a military reconnaissance satellite, and the success of the launch after previous failures is credited to Russian technical cooperation.

Japanese security officials have expressed strong concern about the strengthening of Russian-North Korean ties. Certainly, these developments must be watched closely as a factor that could further heighten tensions in the East Asian region. However, what must not be forgotten here is that Russia and North Korea are uniting not only for Russia's war on Ukraine but also in reaction to the 'U.S.-led camp'.

In recent years, members of this camp have been increasingly cooperating, starting with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative, followed by the quadrilateral cooperation partnership between Japan, the United States, Australia, and India ([Quad](#)) and the security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States ([AUKUS](#)). The United States' deepening relationships with countries in the region has brought Russia and North Korea closer together.

A month before the Russia-North Korea September summit, the leaders of Japan, the United States, and South Korea met at Camp David and decided to regularly hold [summit and ministerial-level meetings as well as trilateral military exercises](#). The Japanese government and media lauded the institutionalization of the Japan-U.S.-South Korea

trilateral cooperation, describing it as “historic” and “welcome.” Very few expressed even partial concerns. However, it was easily foreseeable that such cooperation would lead the anti-U.S.-led camp (that is, Russia, China, and North Korea in this case) to further band together.

The reason the U.S.-led camp reinforced its partnerships and military capabilities was due to China’s expansionist policies, as well as concern about Russia and North Korea, both of which are considered to be in cooperation with China. The Western countries are addressing it as an urgent issue. Yet, as a result of the last several years’ rapid strengthening of Western military cooperation, Sino-Russian joint military exercises are already being conducted around Japan, and [Russia made a proposal to North Korea to conduct military exercises involving China](#). A security dilemma is already unfolding in this region.

Japan, too, is building up military capabilities, deciding to double its military budget and acquire enemy base strike capability. Meanwhile, Japanese people are increasingly concerned about being drawn into a potential contingency in Taiwan, and many are calling for de-escalation of tensions through diplomacy.

According to [public opinion polls](#), 80% of Japanese people are worried about being drawn into a Taiwan contingency, and 70% prefer deepening diplomatic and economic relations with China rather than relying on defense buildup for security reasons. Moreover, as many as [75% of Japanese people](#) oppose deploying the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) in the event of a Taiwan contingency.

East Asia has not seen military conflict in decades, and every effort must be made to avoid war in this region.

Simply increasing military capabilities will only heighten tensions and will not function as a deterrent. To make deterrence work, it is essential to make the opponent think, “Our core interests will not be threatened even if we do not resort to force,” which is to say that reassurance is indispensable. Reassurance requires diplomacy.

If tensions grow and both camps continue to bolster their military capabilities, the slightest event could spark a military conflict, which could easily escalate into a major war due to their enhanced military capabilities. Furthermore, ongoing tensions may paralyze responses to issues that require global actions, potentially making it too late to counter climate change and other threats.

De-escalating tensions must be the primary mission of all countries, including Japan.

Washington, in the meantime, has been supporting the war in Ukraine, calling it a “contest of democracy versus authoritarianism.” It has also sought to strengthen the U.S.-led camp in the U.S.-China rivalry. As a result, however, more countries around the world are expressing a neutral stance and raising their voices. Countries in the Global South wish to avoid military conflicts triggered by escalating tensions at all costs, as well as

entanglement in such conflicts. It is also their sincere hope to escape the economic repercussions that accompany tensions and conflicts. The [Global South](#), constituting the majority of the world, both in terms of population and the number of countries, has rapidly begun to speak out in the past year or two. We are seeing the end of an era, the end of the West being able to determine the direction of the world order.

Ideally, concepts like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law will take root in many countries and become international standards. However, such concepts cannot be coerced or imposed on countries. As President Joseph Biden of the United States reiterated shortly after taking office, the only way to spread such principles to other countries is by “leading by example.”

While FOIP, the Quad, and Japan-U.S.-South Korea cooperation may have functioned as a form of deterrence, they have also had the opposite effect on de-escalating tensions. As Japan makes efforts to maintain a favorable relationship with the United States, Japan must not be overly biased toward strengthening the U.S.-led camp. In particular, caution is needed in enhancing military cooperation so as not to exacerbate tensions.

This requires, above all, comprehensive diplomacy that has expanded channels, deals with a broader range of topics, and is of higher quality. Japan must urgently establish institutionalized channels for dialogue with China at all levels of government and, however difficult, seek direct dialogues with Russia and North Korea. Furthermore, Japan should prioritize multilateral diplomacy on non-security matters with China, Russia, and North Korea and explore and maintain dialogue and cooperative relations.

Additionally, Japan must listen to the interests of the Global South countries and provide support accordingly, rather than extending aid for strengthening Japan’s own camp. The countries will be able to grow and make independent decisions without being swayed by others, including China. Support for the Global South must rest on such a vision for the future.

While making the above diplomatic efforts, Japan, along with the Global South and many other countries, needs to call on the United States and China to de-escalate their tensions.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

This commentary was originally written in Japanese. Both the Japanese version and the translated English version are also available on the [APLN website](#).

ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organization and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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