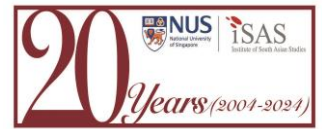


India, Korea and the United States: Imperatives for a New Indo-Pacific Minilateral

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Summary

Any institutionalised cooperation between India, South Korea and the United States might appear an unlikely minilateral in the Indo-Pacific region. The absence of significant strategic engagement between India and South Korea in the past and their very different political orientations tend to reinforce scepticism about its prospects. However, a rapidly changing regional environment, marked by an assertive China and an uncertain America, generates new imperatives for trilateral strategic cooperation between New Delhi, Seoul and Washington.

The last few years have seen the rise of many minilateral institutions in Asia and the Indo-Pacific regions. These include the Quadrilateral Security Forum (Quad), the AUKUS (to promote advanced technology collaboration between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States [US]), the trilateral collaboration between Japan, South Korea and the US for Northeast Asian security, and the quadrangular engagement between Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the US for the South China Sea, and the Chip-4 alliance that brings together the main semiconductor powers – Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the US – to name a few.

All these arrangements are initiated and led by the US. It was during the first term of US President Donald Trump that the Quad was revived. Under the Joe Biden administration, the Quad was boosted to the summit level. Washington's new focus on overlapping mini laterals has been described as a '[lattice work](#)' of overlapping arrangements that form the basis for a new regional security architecture in Asia.

In the past, India was reluctant to participate in minilateral arrangements or ad hoc coalitions. Its preference was for multilateralism or bilateralism. It had a special allergy to US-led arrangements. In recent years, though, this approach has changed. India now is a member of many minilateral arrangements, including the Quad, I2U2 (with the US, Israel and the United Arab Emirates) and the India-Middle East-Europe corridor all of which have US participation. Faced with the breakdown of the multilateral order and the challenges presented by the immense power of a rising China, India is now enthusiastic about minilateral institutions.

It is in this new context that the surprising idea of a trilateral between India, Korea and the US has emerged. The first signs of it is in a [US-South Korea joint statement](#) on critical and emerging technologies in December 2023. The Biden administration has emphasised the importance of building new technology networks with its partners as part of the reorganisation of the Asian security architecture and the reclaiming of US technological leadership that it was losing to China. The reference to the trilateral dialogue with India in

the US joint statement with South Korea was followed by a meeting of senior officials from the three countries in March 2024.

The [statement issued at the trilateral meeting](#) committed the three sides to “expand cooperation on critical and emerging technologies in support of our shared economic and national security interests, including spurring innovation and economic growth, building more resilient technology supply chains, and delivering technology solutions for the broader Indo-Pacific region.”

The rise of South Korea as a power to reckon with in semiconductors, artificial intelligence and advanced manufacturing makes Seoul [an important player](#) in shaping a triangular technological engagement between India and the US and more broadly in developing new rules of the road for advanced technology cooperation and control.

Even as the effort to initiate trilateral technology cooperation, the idea of a broader trilateral to deepen triangular strategic cooperation has come into view. Several challenges, however, confront the prospect of such a trilateral. For one, the strategic engagement between Delhi and Seoul remains weak in comparison to the deep security partnership between South Korea and the US and the expanding collaboration between India and America.

Delhi and Seoul have had substantive economic cooperation since the early 1990s. However, there has been no parallel evolution of the political and security cooperation between the two countries. Although the two sides had announced a [‘special strategic partnership’](#) in 2015, the progress has been slow.

Yet, several new factors have strengthened the imperative for deepening the partnership between Delhi and Seoul and engaging in trilateral cooperation with the US. These include the return of great power rivalry in Asia, the breakdown of the multilateral economic order and the inability of the regional security architecture centred around the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to cope with the current security challenges and the unfolding of a new technological revolution.

The re-election of Trump as US president and his well-known scepticism about alliances has raised questions about American isolationism even as the power imbalance between China and its neighbours has become stark. This has brought forward several new dimensions of regional security in Asia. One is the importance of burden sharing between the US and its Asian allies; given the declining support in the Republican party for external entanglements, there is no escaping the fact that the Asian nations must take larger responsibility for their own security.

It is only by taking a larger responsibility for their own security can the America’s Asian partners hope to keep the US engaged in Asia. An important element complementing the burden sharing is greater security collaboration among the Asian partners of the US. While America remains a key player in Asian security, there is an urgent need to look beyond the traditional US ‘hub and spokes’ model and develop an overlapping network of security arrangements.

Some in Korea and the US feel it is much better to have [South Korea join the Quad](#) as a full member or intensify cooperation on a 'plus one' basis rather than set up a new trilateral. Until a consensus in favour of South Korea's membership or deeper partnership with the Quad emerges, it might be sensible to explore the prospects for trilateral engagement between India, South Korea and the US. A trilateral with the US can help generate the much-needed political trust and comfort between Delhi and Seoul and facilitate more intensive bilateral and regional security cooperation.

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