

President Biden Should Strengthen Alliances During Asia Trip

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Strong alliances in the Indo-Pacific better position the U.S. to confront and overcome the preeminent global security threat: the Chinese Communist Party.

The United States, South Korea, and Japan have all taken steps to augment their security posture and remove points of friction constraining cooperation.

President Biden should use his trip to affirm, augment, and accelerate recent positive trends in both alliances and the increasingly relevant Quad grouping.

During his upcoming trip to South Korea and Japan, President Joe Biden should affirm the U.S. commitment to defending our allies against increasing Chinese and North Korean military threats. China is the preeminent global security threat, and enhancing both alliances are critical to augmenting Washington's ability to counter threats to U.S. strategic interests. Biden should also urge Seoul and Tokyo to assume larger regional security roles.

In Japan, President Biden is expected to meet with the other leaders of the "Quad" grouping, which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. President Biden should take the opportunity to add a maritime security focus to the Quad's agenda and commit to annual leader-level Quad summits.

Biden should also seek to improve strained relations between Seoul and Tokyo from lingering historic

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and sovereignty disputes. However, the three countries' foreign and security policies are now in closer alignment than in recent years, providing optimism for the future.

During May 20–24, President Biden will travel to South Korea for a summit meeting with newly inaugurated South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and a Quad meeting in Tokyo hosted by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. The trip comes amidst ongoing North Korean missile launches and indications of an impending nuclear test.

South Korean Visit

While in South Korea, Biden will meet a new president already in lock-step with U.S. policy priorities. President Yoon sees a strong alliance with the United States as the foundation for enabling a larger South Korean role in resisting Chinese coercion. Former South Korean President Moon Jae-in had been reluctant to criticize Beijing's encroachments of sovereignty in the East and South China Seas for fear of triggering economic retaliation and jeopardizing Chinese assistance in improving inter-Korean relations. Yoon will abandon Moon's fence-sitting attempt to balance Seoul's relationship with Washington and Beijing and will instead more firmly align with the United States.

President Yoon has vowed to engage with North Korea and offer “audacious benefits”¹—but only if Pyongyang agrees to incremental denuclearization. He criticized predecessor Moon Jae-in's conciliatory advocacy for offering North Korea unconditional economic benefits and reducing international sanctions while downplaying Pyongyang's bombastic threats, human rights abuses, and repeated violations of U.N. resolutions.

President Yoon will abandon Moon Jae-in's push for premature return of wartime operational control of South Korean forces before Seoul has fulfilled agreed-upon conditions, as well as a simplistic end-of-war declaration with Pyongyang, both of which have strains with Washington.

Japanese Visit

In Japan, Biden will engage with a Japanese ally more willing to expand its security responsibilities to address regional security threats. Tokyo is now willing to consider doubling its annual defense spending to 2 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) and to develop retaliatory strike capabilities against Chinese and North Korean attacks.²

In recent years, Japan has augmented its military capabilities and steadily increased security cooperation and military exercises with Australia and other regional partners. Tokyo is increasingly concerned about a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan and has been studying possible military responses, including protecting U.S. warships and military planes coming to Taiwan's defense.³

It remains unclear, however, what steps Japan would take in a Taiwan contingency and whether it would allow the U.S. to use its Japan-based forces to assist Taiwan. The Japanese populace remains deeply suspicious of the use of the military as a policy instrument—and fearful that any easing of constraints will lead Japan into military conflict. Each incremental step in expanding the role of Japan's Self-Defense Forces has been immensely controversial.

The Quad

Although there is a national election in Australia on May 21, President Biden is expected to meet with other leaders of the Quad while in Tokyo. It would mark the second in-person Quad summit after the inaugural summit held in Washington in September 2021. (The four leaders met virtually for the first time in March 2021.) A Quad summit in Japan would help set an important precedent for the leader to meet annually, buttressed by ministerial- and working-level Quad meetings held throughout the year.

What Washington Should Do

The Biden Administration has engaged extensively with South Korea and Japan to coordinate policy on common security challenges. Biden should maintain the momentum during his upcoming meetings with President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida while urging greater trilateral cooperation.

The United States should:

- **Affirm its commitment to defending America's allies.** South Korea and Japan are increasingly concerned that North Korea's ability to target the American homeland with nuclear weapons combined with previous U.S. threats to remove military forces have undermined the viability of the U.S. security commitment. Biden should provide unequivocal assurances of U.S. dedication to the defense of our allies and affirm the U.S. extended deterrence guarantee of nuclear, conventional, and missile defense forces.

- **Maintain the Quad’s security focus.** Under President Biden, the Quad has shifted priorities and adopted a new focus on pandemic relief, climate change, infrastructure, and critical or emerging technologies. It would be unwise to remove security issues from the Quad’s agenda.

It is no secret that shared concerns about China helped propel the reconstitution of the Quad in 2017 after a 10-year hiatus. While delivering public goods demonstrates the Quad’s “soft power” to the region, these four countries are uniquely willing and capable to resist Chinese coercion, aggression, and challenges to their vision for a free and open Indo–Pacific. It would be a waste of the Quad’s potential to neglect the “hard power” value the group brings, including through joint threat assessments, intelligence sharing, military exercises, and joint contingency planning.

- **Expand Quad engagement with South Korea.** As president-elect, Yoon made headlines by suggesting South Korea would “positively review” proposals to join the Quad. However, there are challenges to South Korean membership, including overcoming domestic public opposition fearful of Chinese retribution⁴ and potential Japanese resistance due to strained bilateral relations caused by lingering contentious history issues and sovereignty disputes.

Rather than formally joining the Quad, it would be more effective for South Korea to expeditiously engage in multilateral initiatives more directly focused on regional security missions. However, there are ample opportunities for Quad members to work in the near term with South Korea and other like-minded partners in a Quad-Plus format, forming functional coalitions where interests align.

South Korea already participated in one such initiative when a Quad-Plus working group was formed that included regular videoconference calls with South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand to coordinate pandemic responses. South Korea could be a candidate to participate in other Quad Plus coalitions covering maritime security or vaccine distribution, among others.

- **Urge South Korea and Japan to assume larger regional security roles.** While both allies have expressed intent to augment their

regional security role, neither has articulated the parameters of those responsibilities. Biden should discuss additional missions that Seoul and Tokyo can assume for Taiwan and South China Sea contingencies. While Seoul has been resistant before, Washington may find it is now pushing on an open door.

- **Recommend instituting a 2+2+2 meeting of U.S., South Korean, and Japanese foreign and defense ministers.** The U.S. and its allies face common security threats of China and North Korea but have been constrained in trilateral military planning and exercises due to strained South Korean–Japanese relations. President Biden should invite Yoon and Kishida for a trilateral summit to lay the foundation for periodic trilateral cabinet-level meetings to facilitate greater coordination on foreign and security policies.
- **Seek South Korean–Japanese reconciliation to facilitate trilateral security cooperation.** Yoon has pledged to improve bilateral relations with Tokyo, which nosedived during the Moon administration. Washington should play a behind-the-scenes role urging both sides to separate contentious historic issues from present-day security and economic challenges. Seoul should affirm the importance of the bilateral General Security of Military Information Agreement, which it threatened to abrogate, while Tokyo should abandon punitive export controls imposed against South Korea.
- **Coordinate policy toward North Korea.** With Yoon’s election, the U.S., South Korea, and Japan are now in strong agreement on the need for principled engagement with North Korea, which conditions benefits on tangible regime steps towards denuclearization. The allies should publicly affirm their continued willingness for diplomatic resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem. They should also signal Pyongyang that future provocations, particularly a nuclear test, would undermine dialogue and trigger a strong international response.
- **Augment allied regional ballistic missile defense.** Pyongyang’s expanding force of tactical missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles increases the threat to U.S. forces and allies in the Indo–Pacific region. The United States should coordinate with allies South Korea and Japan to ensure that their missile defenses are sufficient to counter increasing North Korean missile threats. A multi-layered

missile defense can incorporate U.S. and indigenously produced systems but should be integrated into a trilateral allied network.

- **Resume allied military exercises on the Korean Peninsula.** During the past four years, the U.S. and South Korea have canceled, reduced, and constrained their military exercises, causing a deterioration in allied deterrence and defense capabilities. Washington and Seoul should return training levels to pre-2018 levels and resume rotational deployments of strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula, including strategic bombers, dual-capable aircraft, and carrier strike groups.
- **Highlight the importance of North Korean human rights.** Presidents Biden and Yoon announced they would elevate human rights as an important component of their policies toward North Korea. Both nations should fill long-vacant positions for special representatives for North Korean human rights while Seoul should no longer abstain from joining U.N. resolutions on North Korean human rights.
- **Encourage Japan to increase its defense budget.** A dramatically escalating threat environment requires a commensurate response by Japan. Tokyo must modernize its defense capabilities by augmenting air, naval, and missile defense forces; amphibious warfare capabilities; and increasing airlift and sealift assets. Doing so requires Japan to abandon its past practice of minor incremental defense increases and work instead toward spending the same 2 percent of GDP on defense to which NATO members have committed.
- **Coordinate with Japan for Taiwan contingencies.** The Kishida administration indicated it would revise Japan's 2013 National Security Strategy⁵ and the 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) and Medium-Term Defense Program (MTDP)⁶. The forthcoming documents should more comprehensively discuss the importance of Taiwanese security to Japan's national strategic interests.⁷ The documents should delineate Japan's threat assessment, security strategy, and potential roles and policies, including its relationships with regional partners. The NDPG and MTDP should identify procurement and deployment decisions to enable sufficient crisis responses.

- **Support Japan developing retaliatory enemy-base attack capabilities.** Tokyo should acquire strike capabilities to reduce missile strikes against Japan and U.S. forces to augment allied deterrence and defense capabilities. However, Tokyo will need to work together to overcome numerous constitutional, legal, budgetary, technical, and bureaucratic obstacles. Such decisions should be made in an alliance framework, in part to allay South Korean concerns that would inevitably arise.

Conclusion

The U.S. is stronger when aligned with Indo–Pacific allies and better positioned to confront regional security challenges. Strong alliances are in the strategic interests of the United States, augmenting the nation’s military, intelligence, and diplomatic capabilities. Close coordination on security and foreign policies is critical for effective deterrence and defense capabilities.

The United States, South Korea, and Japan have all taken steps to augment their security posture and remove points of friction constraining cooperation. President Biden’s trip provides the opportunity to affirm, augment, and accelerate recent positive trends in both alliances and the increasingly relevant Quad grouping.

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Endnotes

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