

**SCOWCROFT CENTER
FOR STRATEGY AND SECURITY**

TO: Leaders of the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea
FROM: Miyeon Oh
DATE: April 18, 2020
SUBJECT: US-Japan-Korea Trilateral Cooperation on COVID-19

BACKGROUND: THE COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC CRISIS

On April 7, 2020, the Atlantic Council's Asia Security Initiative (ASI), housed within the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, hosted a strategy session with a small group of top experts and officials from the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (hereafter, "Korea") to discuss ways forward and offer actionable, practical policy recommendations on where and how the three countries can cooperate trilaterally to lead the global response to COVID-19.

As the COVID-19 global pandemic intensifies around the world, the international community is seeking to prepare for a post-pandemic world order. In this period of uncertainty, countries and international organizations have largely failed to provide strong leadership for a coordinated and effective global response. The United States and Europe continue to struggle with their efforts to battle the coronavirus at home, while those Asian countries on the frontlines of the early crisis that successfully flattened the curves of their domestic outbreaks now face possible second waves of infections. Global trends towards increasing protectionism and de-globalization have accelerated, including national lockdowns and border closures that have disrupted supply chains for goods and services such as medical supplies and equipment. US-China tensions have intensified in response to the outbreak, which has undermined the mechanisms for effectively coordinating a collective response to the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS: TRILATERAL COOPERATION IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The United States must show strong leadership, working with its allies and partners, to shape a collective global response to COVID-19, including measures to enhance global resilience, reduce economic impacts, and safeguard values and principles of the rules-based international system. Achieving this goal will be impossible without strong trilateral cooperation with its key allies Japan and Korea, as stabilized Japan-Korea relations will be essential to executing US strategy and securing US legitimacy as a global leader in the Indo-Pacific. The United States, Japan, and Korea, recognizing this crisis as an opportunity to reinvigorate trilateral cooperation and galvanize the global collective response, should cooperate trilaterally to:

1) Effectively message that democracies have core advantages over autocracies in responding to pandemics. As the United States struggles against the coronavirus domestically, China is moving quickly to position itself as the global leader of the pandemic response through a combination of public messaging and medical aid. Rather than fixating on China's initial response to the virus and the recent failures of some Chinese aid efforts, the United States should focus on working with Japan and Korea to link leading democracies together in a global collaborative effort to overcome the virus and increase resilience against future pandemics. As this crisis continues in the weeks and months ahead, democracies must prove that transparent governments built on public trust are fundamentally better equipped to lead a resilient global health system. Trilateral cooperation on effective messaging also could include the release of a joint statement with other leading democracies that presents long-term guidelines for holding China accountable for any future high-risk behaviors such as disinformation and censorship, which turned the early crisis into a global pandemic.

2) Minimize the pandemic's economic impact by diversifying global supply chains for essential medical goods, followed by additional strategic industries. Most immediately, the three countries must work together to restore and diversify supply chains for essential medical supplies and equipment, particularly personal protective equipment (PPE). For instance, the United States and Japan cannot meet domestic demand for facemasks, as the vast majority are imported from China. Korea is now in a position to export its medical goods to the United States and Japan, as well as to other countries who are in need. The three countries can map existing chains and seek diverse suppliers for these essential goods in order to lead global efforts for effective distribution. In seeking to accelerate long-term economic recovery, the three countries must also intensify their efforts to reduce heavy economic reliance on China by diversifying their supply chains of major industries, building on Japan's stimulus package. Without strong cooperation on these efforts, China is likely to lure back countries and companies willing to trade greater strategic risk for tactical relief in the aftermath of the crisis.

3) Lead efforts to strengthen existing global health institutions while energizing innovative and multilateral approaches, including private-public partnerships. The three countries should take the lead in transforming the broad aspirations outlined in the Extraordinary Group of Twenty (G20) Leaders' Summit Statement on COVID-19 into concrete, measurable actions across the Indo-Pacific and beyond. These efforts should include crafting guidelines on how to globally allocate medical supplies and personnel, distribute an eventual vaccine, as a public good, as well as coordinate to reform the World Health Organization. Additionally, the three countries can take the lead in creating a multilateral mechanism through which the G20 or likeminded countries could enable surge capacity of the healthcare workforce and share real-time data, scientific fact-finding, and lessons learned from COVID-19 containment and mitigation. At the same time, they should invest in more recent innovative approaches like the multilateral, multisectoral Global Health Security Agenda (GHTSA), of which the United States and Korea are permanent members of the steering committee. As there is no existing mechanism for trilateral cooperation on public health, if Japan joined the GHTSA, the three countries could pursue immediate actions to improve the global health security coordination efforts, including strengthening public-private partnerships on vaccines, such as GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness and Innovation (CEPI). The 2021 Tokyo Olympics can be used as a symbolic deadline for trilateral cooperation on public health to achieve initial key objectives.

4) Aid developing countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, as their domestic outbreaks intensify. While the current heart of the pandemic has shifted to Europe and the United States, the battle against COVID-19 in the developing world is just getting started. In particular, though Southeast Asia avoided major outbreaks early on, the region as a whole is seeing a dramatic rise in confirmed cases. As a geopolitically strategic region and important engine of economic growth for the Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia will require significant aid in its fight against the pandemic in the weeks and months ahead. Regional economies including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are suffering from supply chain disruptions of essential medical supplies and other goods and services, as well as labor shortages of Chinese migrant workers, as China is a critical link in the regional trade and production lines. The United States' Indo-Pacific strategy, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, and Korea's New Southern Policy have positioned the three countries well for increased engagement with Southeast Asia, and this crisis is an opportunity to demonstrate their deep commitment to the region. If the three countries fail to act, they will effectively cede crisis leadership in Southeast Asia to China, which is already providing greater assistance to the region while pushing the narrative of itself as a responsible global stakeholder in this crisis. In that case, not only will more people succumb to the virus in Southeast Asia, but the region as a whole will find itself more economically and geopolitically vulnerable in the post-coronavirus era.

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