

South Korea and Japan's Rearmament- A New Security Architecture in East Asia

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South Korean defense minister Shin Won-sik (third from the left) reviews Japanese Self-Defense Force's honor guards before a bilateral meeting with Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara, July 28, 2024

Image: ROK Ministry of National Defense

Introduction

The strategic landscape of East Asia is undergoing a profound transformation. For decades after the Second World War, both South Korea and Japan maintained relatively restrained military posture. They were heavily relying heavily on the United States security umbrella while prioritizing economic development. For decades, the regional security architecture relied on the American "hub-and-spoke" system; a series of disconnected bilateral alliances where the United

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States acted as the central hub stabilizing peripheral spokes like Tokyo and Seoul. However, the rapid shifting of the regional balance of power has strained this traditional model. In 2025–2026, both nations have embarked on unprecedented defense buildups, dismantling long-standing pacifist principles, acquiring offensive counterstrike capabilities, and upgrading trilateral security cooperation with the United States.² This rearmament is not merely a response to immediate threats but a structural transformation reshaping East Asia's security architecture from a U.S.-centric model into a highly networked system of defensive-industrial integration and joint deterrence. Driven by the compounding pressures of an assertive China, an accelerating North Korean nuclear program, and a burgeoning Moscow-Pyongyang axis, both Japan and South Korea have embarked on the paths toward strategic rearmament.

Historical Constraints and the Post-War Security Order

The post-war security order in East Asia was largely built around American military primacy. Japan adopted a pacifist constitution, particularly Article 9, which renounced war as a sovereign right and limited the country's military activities to self-defense. The Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) was technologically advanced, but they remained constrained by constitutional interpretations and political sensitivities.

South Korea, meanwhile, developed a robust military primarily focused on countering the threat from North Korea. Since the Korean War, Seoul relied extensively on the United States–Republic of Korea alliance as the cornerstone of its national security. American troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula served as both a deterrent and a symbol of Washington's commitment.

For decades, this arrangement provided relative stability. The United States acted as the principal security guarantor, while Japan and South Korea concentrated on economic growth. However, the strategic assumptions underpinning this order have increasingly come under pressure.

² Reuters Staff. 2026. "South Korea, Japan Defence Ministers Agree to Upgrade Cooperation." *Reuters*, January 30, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-japan-defence-ministers-agree-upgrade-cooperation-2026-01-30/>.

Japan's Historic Break with Postwar Pacifism

Japan's security transformation represents the most dramatic break from its post-WWII pacifist identity. For seven decades, Tokyo adhered to the so-called "exclusively defence-oriented policy," limiting itself to a Self-Defence Force incapable of power projection and capping defence spending at roughly 1 percent of GDP. In 2022, the government of Fumio Kishida announced a landmark National Security Strategy that fundamentally redefined Japan's defense posture. The strategy committed Japan to increasing defense spending to approximately 2 percent of GDP by 2027, aligning it more closely with NATO standards. This decision represented the largest military expansion in Japan since World War II. By 2025, Japan had requested an unprecedented ¥8.8454 trillion (about \$58 billion) budget for fiscal year 2026, with approximately ¥1 trillion allocated specifically for stand-off defense capabilities designed to target enemy missile launch sites.³ Japan committed to deploying an aircraft carrier for the first time since World War II, buying hundreds of long-range cruise missiles, and fielding other weapons that fundamentally transform it from a strictly defensive military to one that can effectively deter and defeat threats. The budget also funds what Japan calls "all domain" capabilities, meaning that Japan will build a defence capability that organically fuses capabilities across space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum, capable of sustained and flexible strategic activities across all phases from peacetime to armed contingencies.

Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy endorsed counterstrike capability as a minimum necessary self-defence measure. Critics, particularly in China and among Japan's own domestic opposition, argue that this blurs the line between defensive response and offensive capability. But Japanese officials present it as a rational response to the growing threat environment in which North Korea launches missiles with increasing frequency and Chinese ballistic missiles land in waters near Japanese islands.⁴ Japan is on track to reach its 2 percent-of-GDP defence spending target two years ahead of schedule.

³ <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/editorial/yomiuri-editorial/20250917-281528/>

⁴ Takahashi Kosuke. 2025. "Japan Accelerates Defense Buildup with Record Budget and Expanded Unmanned Capabilities." The Diplomat. December 26, 2025. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/japan-accelerates-defense-buildup-with-record-budget-and-expanded-unmanned-capabilities/>.

South Korea's Defense Modernization

South Korea's rearmament and military modernization has followed a somewhat different trajectory. Seoul operates in a more threatening environment, as it shares a heavily fortified border with North Korea. Historically, South Korea's defense architecture was strictly inward-looking, narrowly focused on countering the conventional and asymmetric threat from North Korea. Traditionally, they adopted a peripheral role in broader regional security networks, treating China as an indispensable diplomatic partner for managing the stability of the Korean Peninsula.⁵ However, recent developments have accelerated efforts to achieve greater strategic autonomy. South Korea spent \$47.8 billion on its military in 2025, ranking 13th globally and devoting 2.6 percent of GDP to defence;⁶ almost entirely focused on deterring North Korean nuclear and missile threats while powering an export-driven defence industrial boom led by Hanwha, KAI, and Hyundai Rotem. The investment priorities are: priority programmes include the Korea Air and Missile Defence layered system, the Strategic Strike System known as Kill Chain, the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation capability, and the indigenous KF-21 Boramae fighter. South Korea has also proposed its largest military budget increase in seven years, an 8.2 percent rise with about \$15 billion going toward research and development and weapons systems aimed at deterring Pyongyang's missile programme, a 13 percent rise in that category alone.⁷

South Korea has also emerged as a major global arms exporter. Its K2 tanks, K9 howitzers, and FA-50 light combat aircraft have found markets in Poland, Romania, and Egypt, embedding Seoul in the strategic supply chains of European and Middle Eastern militaries. This export success is not merely commercial; it builds strategic relationships and enhances South Korea's diplomatic weight, making it a more capable and autonomous partner within the US-led alliance system.

⁵ Dian, Matteo. 2019. "Japan, South Korea and the Rise of a Networked Security Architecture in East Asia." *International Politics* 57 (2): 185–207. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-019-00194-8>.

⁶ MilitarySpend Research Desk. 2025. "South Korea Military Spending 2025: \$48B Defense Budget | MilitarySpend." MilitarySpend. 2025. <https://militaryspend.org/country-profiles/south-korea>.

⁷ "South Korea Seeks \$47.6 Billion Defense Budget, Biggest Increase in 7 Years." 2025. Stars and Stripes. September 4, 2025. https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/2025-09-04/south-korea-record-defense-budget-18970959.html.

Trilateral Integration: From Hub-and-Spoke to Networked Security

The bilateral rearmament of Japan and South Korea has been embedded within a broader trilateral framework with the United States. The August 2023 Camp David summit was the defining moment where the United States, Japan and the Republic of Korea moved from episodic cooperation to a trilateral architecture that aims to deter adversaries and sustain regional stability.⁸



On August 18, 2023, President Biden met with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at Camp David for the first-ever stand-alone U.S.-Japan-ROK summit to reaffirm cooperation and the advancement of security and prosperity in the region. Image: Stimson Center

In May 2025, the US, Japan, and South Korea formalized a trilateral maritime cooperation framework involving joint coastguard exercises and capacity-building support for Southeast Asian partners, following the 2024 formalization of trilateral coastguard cooperation through a Letter of Intent based on the "Spirit of Camp David" joint statement. At the military operational level, in January 2025, Japanese and South Korean fighter aircraft escorted US strategic bombers over shared airspace, demonstrating interoperability and the ability to operate together in a crisis. The

⁸ Pacific, Asia. 2025. "Trilateral Momentum: U.S., Japan & South Korea Forge Deeper Strategic Alignment | beyond the Horizon ISSG." Behorizon.org. October 2, 2025. <https://behorizon.org/trilateral-momentum-u-s-japan-south-korea-forge-deeper-strategic-alignment/>.

third round of key trilateral multi-domain military exercises was “Exercise Freedom Edge” which was held in international waters off South Korea's southern island of Jeju in September 2025.

The institutionalization of this arrangement extends beyond the military domain. The allies launched an Early Warning System to monitor supply-chain disruptions and share real-time information on key commodities; first endorsed at Camp David and operationalized in early 2024 — demonstrating a proactive approach to prevent shortages of semiconductors and critical minerals from undermining their economies. In July 2025, senior officials from the three nations met in Seoul to discuss strengthening the partnership into "a future-oriented, comprehensive strategic alliance" in the face of an evolving regional security environment. The trajectory is clear: what began as an alliance of shared threat perception is becoming an integrated security architecture with its own institutions, habits of cooperation, and strategic logic.⁹



Gen. Dan Caine, from left, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Kim Myung-soo, then chairman of the Republic of Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gen. Yoshihide Yoshida, then chief of Japan's Joint Staff, meet in Seoul, South Korea, in July 2025. REUTERS

In January 2026, Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and South Korea's President Lee Jae-myung met to discuss deepening security and economic ties to counter growing tension in East Asia, aiming to move past decades of strained interactions stemming from Japan's colonial rule. Most significantly, on January 30, 2026, the defense ministers of South Korea and Japan agreed

⁹ <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/editorial/yomiuri-editorial/20250917-281528/>

to upgrade defense cooperation, planning to work together in incorporating artificial intelligence and unmanned weapon systems, executing joint naval search-and-rescue exercises, and developing joint AI, space, and drone development to stabilize the region against growing missile threats. They committed to holding mutual visits and meetings annually to enhance defense collaboration and exchanges between their countries.¹⁰

China's Response and the Risk of Strategic Miscalculation

The rearmament of Japan and South Korea has provoked a predictable but revealing response from Beijing. China has framed Japan's defence buildup as a return to militarism, leveraging historical memory as a strategic instrument. China has strategically reminded South Korea of historical grievances and the need for caution in its rapprochement with Japan, relying on rhetorical tactics such as emphasizing Japan's historical aggressions and drawing attention to persistent historical disputes between the two countries.¹¹ At the diplomatic level, China sent two letters to the United Nations criticizing Japan and leaned on Russia and North Korea to publicly denounce Tokyo.

This strategy of "soft wedging"; attempting to drive a wedge between Tokyo and Seoul by inflaming historical grievances rather than using overt coercion, reveals Beijing's fundamental concern. An unified Japan–South Korea–US security arrangement represents a significant counterweight to Chinese influence in Northeast Asia. If Seoul and Tokyo maintain their strategic alignment despite historical tensions and political changes, China's ability to leverage bilateral disputes to fragment the alliance is constrained. The trilateral relationship thus represents not merely a military challenge for Beijing but a political one: it limits China's natural sphere of influence.¹²

¹⁰ Lin, Bonny, and Kristi Govella. 2025. "Escalating Japan-China Tensions: Insights from the Past and Prospects for the Future." Csis.org. 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-japan-china-tensions-insights-past-and-prospects-future>.

¹¹ Wang, Shuqi, and Mingjiang Li. 2025. "Soft Wedging: China's Strategic Response to the Japan–South Korea Entente under US-Led Trilateral Security Cooperation." *European Journal of International Security*, November, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10032>.

¹² Sang-ho, Song. 2022. "S. Korea Aims for 5 Pct Share in Global Arms Market by 2027." Yonhap News Agency. Yonhap News Agency. November 24, 2022. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20221124007300325>.

Tensions have escalated particularly over Taiwan, with both Tokyo and Seoul publicly recognizing the importance of stability in the Taiwan Strait, even as they differ in their approaches shaped by distinct histories, geographies, and security priorities. Japan's acquisition of counterstrike capabilities creates ambiguity that could be misread during a crisis. A more assertive Japan, coupled with a better-armed South Korea and a US whose commitment is variable, creates a volatile environment in which the margin for error is shrinking.

The Risk of an East Asian Arms Race

Beyond bilateral disputes and historical grievance, the rearmament of Japan and South Korea feeds into a broader and more structural danger: a regional arms race. The pattern is security-dilemma logic; each state's defensive build-up is read by its neighbours as threatening, prompting countervailing responses that leave everyone less secure despite, or because of, greater military strength. As one assessment of the region's trajectory put it, Japan's pledge to double defence spending and South Korea's accelerated modernization, including new missile defence systems and the indigenous KF-21 fighter, signify an arms race that prioritizes military superiority over cooperative security. The competitive dynamic is not confined to Japan and South Korea alone: South Korea has said it aims to provide 5 percent of global weapons exports by 2027, which would make it the world's fourth-biggest arms seller, while Taiwan hiked its defence spending by an average of nearly 5 percent per year between 2019 and 2023. The cumulative effect is a region in which nearly every major actor is simultaneously expanding capability, each citing the others' build-up as justification.

On the nuclear dimension, China's and North Korea's nuclear weapon stockpiles are growing. States sheltering under the US nuclear umbrella are increasingly worried about the reliability of American extended nuclear deterrence. This anxiety has tangible consequences: South Korea has ramped up its advanced capabilities, including gaining US approval to build nuclear-powered submarines, as it leans closer to Washington while North Korea grows more open in its own push for nuclear weapons. Some analysts warn that if doubts about US extended deterrence deepen further, Seoul or Tokyo could eventually be tempted toward independent nuclear options. This

move would either weaken the international nuclear non-proliferation regime at best, or at worst it would shatter it and increase regional arms racing.

Conclusion

Japan and South Korea's rearmament marks the end of post-war restraint and the beginning of a new era in East Asian security. Both nations are transitioning from passive defense to active deterrence, acquiring offensive capabilities, and integrating into a networked security architecture that extends beyond the traditional hub-and-spoke model. This transformation is driven by North Korea's nuclear expansion, China's assertiveness around Taiwan, and the Russia-North Korea defense treaty etc. Their military modernization efforts are creating a more capable and interconnected regional defense network centered on cooperation with the United States. At the same time, these developments are contributing to a broader transformation of East Asia's strategic landscape, where deterrence, technological competition, and alliance politics increasingly define security dynamics. Whether this emerging security architecture ultimately promotes stability or intensifies strategic rivalry will depend on the choices made by regional actors. If managed carefully, stronger deterrence may preserve peace.