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Opinion – From Linkage to East Asia: From the 1970s to Today's US-Japan-ROK Strategy

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/10/02/opinion-from-linkage-to-east-asia-from-the-1970s-to-todays-us-japan-rok-strategy/>

JU HYUNG KIM, OCT 2 2025

In the early 1970s, US policymakers confronted the Soviet Union, which was engaging in arms control talks with the US, expanding its sway in Eastern Europe, and supplying weapons to its Middle Eastern allies simultaneously in order to bolster the Soviet Union's global position. When faced with the risks of compartmentalizing various issues, Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon developed and applied the "linkage policy." Although theoretically straightforward, such an approach was actually intricate. It assumed progress in a particular area in order to anticipate progress in other areas in the context of US-Soviet relations. Linkage was most prominent in the field of arms control and European security. The Nixon administration 'linked' advances in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) with Soviet restraint in Berlin and Eastern Europe. It was also extended to the Middle East. During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Washington made it clear that if the Soviets increased military shipments to the Arabs, détente would collapse. The most significant application of linkage was in triangular diplomacy with China and the Soviets. Through opening relations with China, Washington created leverage that could pressure Moscow, and it was a signal that a Soviet uncooperative posture would make the US move closer to a communist China that was a rival of the Soviets. Although some commentators argued that the Soviets exploited the linkage policy, such an approach left an important precedent: in global competition, no issue can be addressed in isolation.

Such historical insights are also evident in the contemporary Indo-Pacific. The US, Japan, and South Korea are confronting the China-Russia-North Korea bloc (loosely connected yet increasingly coordinated). As in the 1970s, the task is to manage the interplay between regions and issues. Russia's arms transfers to North Korea, China's coercive moves around the Taiwan Strait, and North Korea's missile launches are not separate episodes but interconnected elements of an authoritarian alignment. The danger lies in the fact that although Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul are reacting to individual provocations, they cannot establish a broad framework that could comprehensively deter opportunism.

There are parallels with the Cold War era. Then and now, the US and its allies are facing adversaries who are trying to exploit geographic and strategic vulnerabilities. Overall deterrence could be undermined by concerns about nuclear decoupling. As West Europeans in the 1970s questioned whether Washington would protect Hamburg by sacrificing New York, Japanese and South Korean officials are concerned whether the US could deter nuclear-armed adversaries in a dual contingency scenario. It is also worth pointing out that just as the Soviets tied their conduct in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, the current authoritarian bloc is coordinating their activities in Ukraine, the Taiwan Strait, and the Korean Peninsula.

Nevertheless, there are contrasts. Although the Cold War was fundamentally a bipolar order, today's rivalry is more multipolar. China, Russia, and North Korea are pursuing independent agendas that do not necessarily converge with one another. In addition, while 1970s NATO was relatively a mature and institutionalized alliance, US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation is relatively new, and Tokyo and Seoul are exposed to political instability. Furthermore, unlike the Soviets who were self-reliant, China's interconnectedness with world trade and technological networks makes economic interdependence both a limitation and a leverage.

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Recent events underline the risks of fragmented deterrence. In 2023, the US and South Korean intelligence agencies verified that North Korea provided millions of munitions to Russia. At the same time, proposals were raised at the United Nations to exempt humanitarian aid from sanctions on North Korea. In that same year, while China significantly increased the number of military sorties around Taiwan and intensified its coast guard operations near Japan's Senkaku Islands, Tokyo and Seoul debated how much they should reinforce semiconductor export restrictions. Meanwhile, when Japan redirected its emergency LNG cargo to Europe in order to offset Russia's energy cuts in 2022, there was no trilateral arrangement that could boost energy support to South Korea.

Such cases illustrate a recurring pattern. The opponents are fully exploiting gaps and further fragmenting democratic countries. For example, Moscow is acquiring North Korea's artillery shells while avoiding any penalties in Asia; Beijing is retaining its access to advanced technology while pressuring both Taiwan and Japan; Pyongyang is supplying weapons to Russia yet securing assistance. As the US once recognized the necessity of connecting issues regarding détente, arms control, and Middle East policy, Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul should design a system in which a provocation in one arena would trigger consequences in another. Without such a mechanism, deterrence would be reactive and could easily be manipulated by adversaries.

In order to apply linkage policy to the present situation, it requires a mechanism based upon institutions, triggers, and precedents. One measure that could be pursued is to establish a Trilateral Linkage Working Group under the aegis of the August 2023 Camp David Summit. Staffed by foreign and defense deputy ministers, such a group should publish a Linkage Report and document how provocations (ranging from missile firings to cyber intrusions) prompted coordinated responses in the defense, economic, and diplomatic arenas. Such transparency could signal to adversaries that miscalculations could not be compartmentalized.

Another step that can be taken is to forge a Euro-Indo-Pacific Sanctions Compact. If Russia continues to procure military hardware from North Korea, NATO members could reinforce sanctions in Europe, and the US-Japan-ROK could expand maritime inspections against North Korean vessels and tighten sanctions implementation. Such measures would replicate the logic during the Cold War that Soviet regional actions could not be divorced from global détente.

A third measure that could be advanced is the institutionalization of a Semiconductor Contingency Protocol. If Beijing increases its coercion in the Taiwan Strait or East China Sea, exports of advanced chips to Chinese firms would be automatically suspended. Such a protocol would be based on Japan's 2023 export restrictions on advanced chipmaking equipment and South Korea's participation in the Chip 4 Alliance, which is led by the US. By tying the flow of technology to maritime security, the three democratic countries would prevent Beijing's attempt to separate aggression and economic interests.

In addition, the US-Japan-ROK could institutionalize a Japan-ROK LNG swap through an Energy Security Linkage Mechanism. In 2022, Japan aligned with sanctioning Russia and provided LNG to Europe. In a crisis scenario, similar support should be guaranteed to Seoul. In return, South Korea should fully observe sanctions against Moscow and pledge to avoid any energy measures that could undermine the G7 oil price cap. Such measures could convert ad hoc responses into binding commitments.

Last but not least, the Russia-North Korea partnership should be the test case for linkage. Humanitarian aid to Pyongyang should be conditioned not only on nuclear restraint but also on halting arms transfers to Moscow in a verifiable manner. Such inspections could be carried out through the UN expert panel and US-Japan-ROK maritime patrols in the Yellow Sea. Such measures would make clear that North Korea's survival channels are dependent on comprehensive compliance with regional stability.

The Cold War experience revealed that linkage policy was far from flawless. Soviet interventions in Angola and Afghanistan were unavoidable, and adversaries exploited the linkage approach. However, the core principles remain valid. In a systemic rivalry, peace and stability require comprehensive bargaining and cross-domain repercussions. If the US, Japan, and South Korea could adapt the linkage policy to the realities of the 21st century through a sanctions compact, semiconductor protocol, LNG swap, and institutionalized trilateral cooperation, it could prevent adversaries

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from exploiting gaps, strengthen deterrence, and build a more stable Indo-Pacific framework. While crises in Ukraine, Taiwan, and South Korea are overlapping, linkage could be the best hope for preserving peace in East Asia.

About the author:

Dr. Ju Hyung Kim currently serves as a President at the Security Management Institute, a defense think tank affiliated with the South Korean National Assembly. He has been involved in numerous defense projects and has provided consultation to several key organizations, including the Republic of Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Defense Acquisition Program Administration, the Ministry of National Defense, the Korea Institute for Defense Analysis, the Agency for Defense Development, and the Korea Research Institute for Defense Technology Planning and Advancement. He holds a doctoral degree in international relations from the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) in Japan, a master's degree in conflict management from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and a degree in public policy from Seoul National University's Graduate School of Public Administration (GSPA).