

The Impact of the U.S.-Japan-Korea Leadership Changes on the U.S.-Japan, U.S.-South Korea Alliance and the Security Situation in Northeast Asia*

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Abstract

The geopolitical dynamics of Northeast Asia are undergoing profound shifts. Leadership changes in the United States, Japan, and South Korea have introduced a degree of uncertainty while simultaneously opening new avenues for regional engagement. The increasingly assertive posture of China and the unpredictable behavior of North Korea pose significant challenges to regional security and stability. The security framework of Northeast Asia, long underpinned by the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-South Korea alliances, is in the midst of a nuanced yet pivotal realignment. While the fundamental commitments of these alliances remain intact, evolving strategic priorities and policy orientations of the new administrations may necessitate recalibrations in their operational strategies. For instance, the United States' growing emphasis on equitable responsibilities among allies may incentivize Japan and South Korea to enhance their defense capabilities, thereby influencing the regional balance of power. This article examines trends in defense policy, economic collaboration, and public perception. Despite the challenges associated with leadership transitions, these developments also present opportunities to strengthen trilateral cooperation and enhance collective responses to regional threats.

Keywords: U.S.-Japan Alliance, U.S.-South Korea Alliance, Donald Trump, Shigeru Ishiba, Yoon Suk-yeol

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I. Strengthen Alliances

The recent leadership transitions in the United States, Japan, and South Korea represent a critical juncture for strengthening their alliances.¹ As prominent actors in the Asia-Pacific region, these states have historically aligned on fundamental values and strategic interests, making this leadership change a significant opportunity to deepen cooperation and strengthen their collective response to regional challenges.

If the new leadership prioritizes security cooperation, military collaboration is expected to intensify, potentially encompassing more frequent joint military exercises, enhanced interoperability among forces, and a reinforced intelligence-sharing framework. These initiatives will not only mitigate North Korea's persistent nuclear threats but also serve as a deterrent against China's growing military assertiveness. Given the complex global security landscape, such cooperation is essential for maintaining stability and peace in the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, trilateral collaboration is likely to extend beyond military affairs to encompass economic initiatives, security technology, and humanitarian assistance efforts.²

1. The Role of New Leadership

Leadership transitions often lead to shifts in foreign policy priorities and strategic implementation. New administrations may seek to redefine their nations' roles on the global stage and underscore the importance of alliances. For the United States, Japan, and South Korea, adopting a unified approach to regional security issues will not only strengthen their collective influence but also optimize the effectiveness of their cooperation.

It is imperative for these three countries to articulate a long-term vision for their partnership, establishing a framework that facilitates mutual support and strategic coordination. Such cooperation will enable them to address shared challenges more

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1. 〈米 国防次官候補 公聴会出席 “日本の防衛費 GDP の 3% にすべき”〉, March 5, 2025, *NHK*, <<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20250305/k10014740201000.html>>.
 2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 〈日米首脳会談〉, February 7, 2025, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/na/na1/us/pageit_000001_01583.html>.



Figure 1. Japan-U.S. Summit — Prime Minister Ishiba Reminds Trump of the Need for Continued Engagement in East Asia

Source: 田中一世, 〈日米首脳会談で同盟と南西防衛強化確認へ 石破首相、トランプ氏に東アジア関与継続念押し〉, February 7, 2025, 《産経新聞》, <<https://www.sankei.com/article/20250207-JYJMBBY2TZMDXKDRPKPYBKCDLA/>>.

effectively while reinforcing the principle of multilateralism, thereby solidifying regional peace and stability.

A key strategy for reinforcing the alliance is the enhancement of military cooperation. For example, from February 8 to 18, 2025, the United States, France, and Japan conducted joint military exercises in Philippine waters. Additionally, on March 2, the USS *Carl Vinson*, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, docked at the Pusan naval base in South Korea. These joint military drills not only facilitate mutual understanding among the armed forces of participating countries but also strengthen their collective operational capabilities, thereby bolstering the cohesion of

the alliance.³ On March 8, 2025, the U.S. Marine Corps replaced all FA-18 stationed at Iwakuni Base in Japan with F-35B. The deployment is intended to strengthen and enhance the Marine Corps Aviation's combat capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region and counter potential security challenges.⁴

Moreover, these joint exercises create expanded opportunities for collaboration in C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) systems. By establishing secure communication channels for real-time information sharing, joint threat assessments, and intelligence analyses, allied nations can more effectively address potential regional threats. These efforts include monitoring North Korea's missile tests and nuclear capabilities, as well as assessing China's evolving military posture. This cooperation fosters a more comprehensive understanding of the regional security landscape, enabling the formulation of proactive strategic responses to safeguard regional stability and peace.

2. Confronting Common Threats: The Necessity of U.S.-Japan-Korea Cooperation

As pivotal allies in the Asia-Pacific region, the United States, Japan, and South Korea must enhance their collaboration to address the escalating military threats posed by China and North Korea. These threats not only undermine regional security but also present broader risks to global stability. Accordingly, a unified and coordinated strategy is imperative.

First and foremost, the three nations should strengthen diplomatic engagement by leveraging multilateral dialogue to navigate these challenges. Diplomatic mechanisms

3. 〈米原子力空母が韓国に入港 報道陣に公開 強固な同盟関係強調〉, March 3, 2025, *NHK*, <<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20250303/k10014738601000.html>>; 〈仏米日が共同訓練「パシフィック・ステラー」に参加〉, February 21, 2025, *Ambassade de France au Japon*, <<https://jp.ambafrance.org/article21601>>.

4. 〈米軍岩国基地 海兵隊所属の戦闘機がすべて最新鋭のF 35 Bに FA18 が部隊交代〉, March 8, 2025, 《山口放送》, <<https://news.ntv.co.jp/n/kry/category/society/kr0dee8a196c764eb89b3fe4e5c964297a>>.

can effectively alleviate tensions while reaffirming a commitment to peaceful conflict resolutions. Additionally, in response to North Korea's nuclear ambitions and China's military expansion, the adoption of targeted economic sanctions should be considered to disrupt financial networks and incentivize behavioral adjustments.

Furthermore, military cooperation remains a critical pillar of regional security. The United States, Japan, and South Korea should conduct regular joint military exercises, particularly in the South China Sea and other contested maritime areas, to demonstrate their commitment to freedom of navigation. Simultaneously, the naval and coast guard forces of these nations should enhance coordination in patrol operations to ensure regional stability and security.



Figure 2. U.S. President Donald Trump Shakes Hands with Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba at the White House

Source: Sheila A. Smith. "The Ishiba-Trump Era," February 10, 2025, *Council on Foreign Relations*, <<https://www.cfr.org/blog/ishiba-trump-era>>.

Lastly, the three nations must collectively uphold the principle of international law, particularly in the realm of maritime governance. Through official statements and concrete actions, they should underscore their commitment to maintaining a rules-based order, thereby strengthening their legitimacy and leadership in the international arena. In the face of an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape, the solidarity and cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea will not only serve as an effective mechanism for countering threats but also establish a robust foundation for both regional and global peace.

II. Geopolitical Responses to China

China's emergence as a dominant power in the Asia-Pacific region has become a major geopolitical concern for countries such as Japan and South Korea. As China expands its influence across economic, military, and political spheres, the regional balance of power encounters new challenges. This situation necessitates a reassessment of the strategic responses employed by the U.S.-led alliance framework.⁵

In light of these developments, the United States and its Asian allies must adopt a more coordinated and systematic approach to mitigate risks and preserve their collective influence. Specifically, this may involve the formation of coherent and integrated foreign and security policies designed to enhance cooperation and stability in the region.⁶ Additionally, reinforcing economic interconnectivity and technological collaboration will foster the competitive standing of regional actors, equipping them with greater strategic leverage in the face of China's influence.

1. Understanding the Nature of China's Challenge

In recent years, China's rapid economic growth and military modernization have endowed it with unprecedented resources and capabilities, enabling it to assert

5. 〈中国軍の“変化”その先は〉, January 27, 2025, *NHK*, <<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20250127/k10014702781000.html>>.

6. 〈対中強硬派のルビオ氏「米国民第一の米中関係を追求」、王毅氏「正当な発展の権利は守る」…米中外相が電話会談〉, January 25, 2025, 《読売新聞オンライン》, <<https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/world/20250125-OYT1T50039/>>.

and safeguard its interests more vigorously. This ascent extends beyond economic dimensions, encompassing a substantial expansion of geopolitical influence. In the military realm, China has exhibited a strong ambition for regional dominance through its actions and territorial assertions in the South China Sea.⁷ Such maneuvers not only strengthen its strategic posture but also pose potential threats to neighboring states, exacerbating regional tensions.

At the National People's Congress (NPC) held on March 5, 2025, the Chinese government presented the draft central and local budgets for the year. The national defense budget was set at 1.78 trillion yuan, representing a 7.2% year-on-year increase, consistent with the trends of the preceding two years and constituting the most significant growth in recent years. Notably, this represents the fourth consecutive year in which China's military expenditure has exceeded a 7% increase.⁸ Despite an economic slowdown, China has maintained its robust investment in military capabilities, indicating its prioritization of enhancing national defense and consolidating strategic advantages. This sustained increase in defense spending has drawn considerable attention from the international community, prompting concerns regarding China's long-term strategic intentions.⁹

For Japan and South Korea, China's actions extend beyond economic cooperation, posing a significant challenge to regional stability and the established international order. The rules-based international order has long served as the foundation of East Asia's peace and prosperity; however, China's rise and strategic maneuvering are gradually destabilizing this balance and may even reshape the regional power dynamics.

7. 〈フィリピン 中国と南シナ海で高まる緊張 防空能力も強化へ〉, October 12, 2025, *NHK*, <<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20241012/k10014608241000.html>>.

8. 〈中共 2025 軍費破 8 兆 連 4 年増幅 7%〉, March 5, 2025, 《自由時報》, <<https://def.ltn.com.tw/article/breakingnews/4969920>>.

9. 〈中国 経済減速でも軍備増強 国防費 36 兆 5000 億円余の予算案公表〉, March 5, 2025, *NHK*, <<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20250305/k10014740191000.html>>.

In this context, Japan and South Korea face the dual challenge of safeguarding their national interests while balancing regional security with economic development. China's influence extends beyond economics, manifesting in geopolitical strategies, technological competition, and cultural exports, imposing multifaceted pressures on the policy choices of both nations. In response, Japan and South Korea should prioritize deepening bilateral cooperation and formulating joint response strategies within a multilateral framework to uphold regional stability.

Moreover, Japan and South Korea should adopt a more proactive stance on the international stage by advocating for rules-based multilateralism and collaborating with other like-minded states to address the strategic implications of China's rise, thereby ensuring long-term peace and prosperity in the region.



**Figure 3. U.S.-China Foreign Ministers Telephone Talk: Rubio Conveys
‘America First’**

Source: 〈米中外相電話会談 ルビオ氏「米国民第一」伝達〉, January 25, 2025, 《テレ東 BIZ》, <https://txbiz.tv-tokyo.co.jp/txn/news_txn/post_311314>.

2. The Importance of Trade Coordination in Promoting Regional Economic Stability

Trade coordination is essential for fostering regional economic stability and diversification. Japan and South Korea can collaborate with the United States to formulate forward-looking strategies aimed at mitigating excessive dependence on the Chinese market. For example, both nations could continue expanding investments in the United States while diversifying financial engagements with other emerging markets. Notably, during the Trump administration, Japan's SoftBank Corporation pledged a US\$100 billion investment in the United States over the following four years. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Japan has been the largest foreign investor in the United States for the past five years,¹⁰ while South Korea,



Figure 4. The Japanese and Chinese Foreign Ministers Confirm the Promotion of ‘Strategic Mutual Benefit’ During a Telephone Conversation

Source: 〈「戦略的互恵」推進を確認 日中外相 電話会談〉, October 9, 2024, 《テレ東 BIZ》, <https://txbiz.tv-tokyo.co.jp/txn/news_txn/post_304936>.

10. 〈ソフトバンク孫氏「米経済成長に自信」 15兆円投資表明〉, December 17, 2024, 《日本経済新聞》, <<https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOGN16CJ60W4A211C2000000/>>.

despite its relatively smaller investments, has also demonstrated a strong commitment to economic engagement, underscoring the potential for economic collaboration between the two countries.

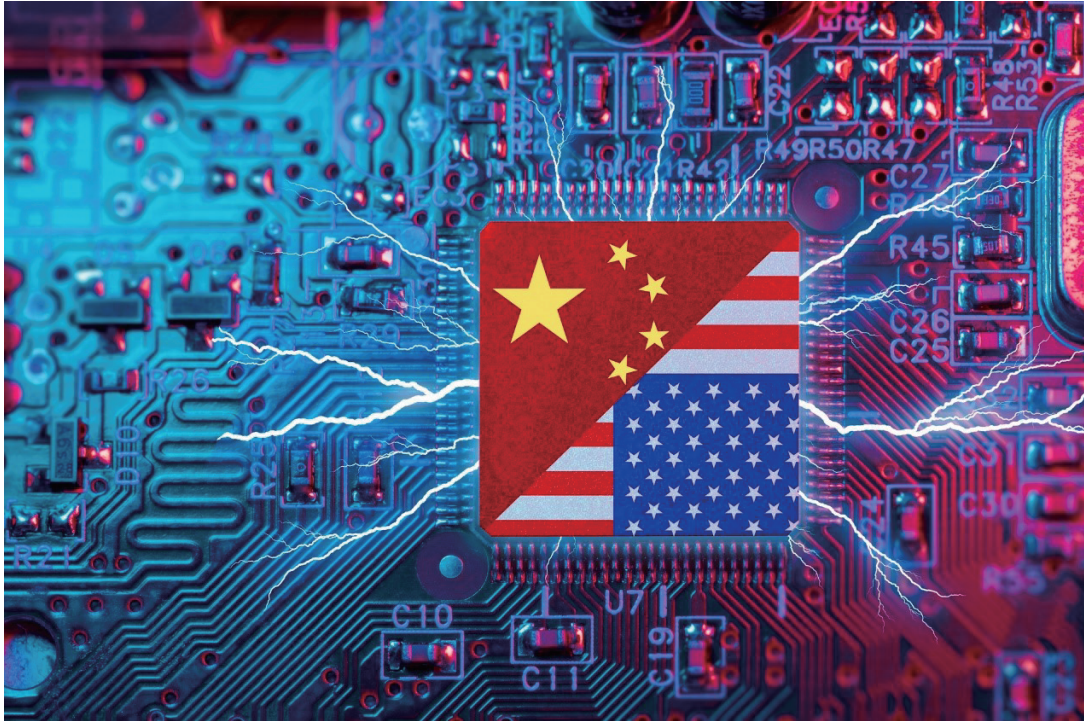
Additionally, strengthening economic partnership with ASEAN countries represents a crucial strategic initiative. By fostering closer trade relations, Japan and South Korea can effectively reduce their reliance on China for essential goods and services while concurrently diminishing China's influence in the region.

Furthermore, reinforcing supply chain cooperation is of paramount importance. The United States, Japan, and South Korea possess complementary strengths in the semiconductor industry. Japan's expertise in materials science, coupled with South Korea's leadership in wafer fabrication technology, can drive technological innovation and defense capabilities, which are vital for ensuring long-term economic and security sustainability.

3. The Importance of Strengthening Maritime Security Cooperation

The maritime corridors in the Asia-Pacific region possess irreplaceable strategic value, as their stability and security directly impact the global economy and geopolitical landscape. In this context, enhancing maritime security cooperation has become a critical measure to counter China's increasing ambitions. Notably, collaboration among the United States, Japan, and South Korea is especially vital beyond the First Island Chain.

Through joint naval exercises, coordinated patrols in contested waters, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms, these three nations can forge a more cohesive security alliance to enhance their collective security posture. Such cooperation will not only serve as a robust deterrent against potential Chinese provocations but also reaffirm their commitment to upholding the principle of freedom of navigation and international maritime law. By presenting a united front, these nations bolster confidence among regional partners, fostering a broader network of collaboration.



**Figure 5. New Sparks in the U.S.-China AI War:
‘DeepSeek’ from China Poses a Threat**

Source: Depositphotos.

For instance, the deployment of Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) warships through the Taiwan Strait on September 25, 2024, and February 5, 2025, not only underscores Japan’s concrete commitment to regional stability and adherence to international maritime norms.¹¹ These operations send an unequivocal signal to the international community that maintaining peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region is a shared responsibility.

III. Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy

The domestic political landscapes of the United States, Japan, and South Korea exert a profound influence on their foreign policy decisions and strategic orientations.

11. 〈海自護衛艦2回目の台湾海峡通過「航行の自由」主張のねらいか〉, March 1, 2025, NHK, <<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20250301/k10014736911000.html>>.

Various domestic factors, including economic challenges, public opinion, and political ideologies, serve as a critical backdrop for shaping these countries' engagement on the international stage. Furthermore, these considerations influence their cooperation with other nations, having a ripple effect on the broader geopolitical landscape.

1. Impact of Domestic Issues on Foreign Policy

During periods of economic downturn or political uncertainty, domestic concerns often take precedence over international obligations. For instance, when confronted with significant economic challenges, such as high unemployment or inflation, the United States tends to prioritize domestic recovery. Consequently, the government may reallocate resources and shift its policy focus inward, potentially undermining its support for international alliances and affecting global stability and cooperation. A similar pattern is evident in Japan and South Korea, where foreign policy decisions are frequently influenced by internal economic pressures, such as trade deficits or reliance on key imports. These constraints may compel governments to compromise their international commitments.

Public opinion plays a crucial role in shaping policy, particularly in international politics. In the United States, public sentiment significantly influences government decision-making across various domains, including international military engagement, trade policy, and immigration. These issues are inherently dynamic, reflecting divergent public expectations regarding the balance between national interests and moral obligations. In response to public sentiment, the U.S. government must delicately balance domestic priorities with international responsibilities — a tension that has emerged as a critical factor in the formulation of its policies.

Japan provides a distinct case of public opinion shaping policy. The Peace Constitution has historically cultivated a deep-seated sensitivity among the populace toward military involvement. However, shifting regional security dynamics have contributed to a gradual transformation in public attitude. A poll conducted on May 3, 2024, revealed that 36% of respondents supported constitutional amendments, while 19% opposed them, with the proportion of proponents increasing annually. Many advocates argue that constitutional revisions are essential to address national security

challenges and enhance Japan's self-defense capabilities. This trend signifies a notable evolution in the Japanese public's perception of national identity.¹²

Conversely, South Korea demonstrates a more immediate response to developments on the Korean Peninsula. The military threat posed by North Korea, combined with U.S. military deployments in the region, has significantly shaped public attitudes, particularly in reaction to security incidents and diplomatic engagement. This fluctuation in public opinion not only underscores the population's heightened security concerns but also exerts considerable pressure on government



Figure 6. North Korea's Hwasong-18 ICBM

Source: "Days before US election, North Korea stages record long missile test," October 30, 2024, *Radio Free Asia*, <<https://www.rfa.org/english/korea/2024/10/31/north-korea-missile-launch-japan/>>.

12. 〈NHK 世論調査 憲法改正「必要」は36%「必要ない」は19%〉, May 3, 2024, *NHK*, <<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20240503/k10014439651000.html>>.

policy. In this context, public opinion functions both as a challenge and as a tool for assessing governmental actions, thereby reinforcing the interplay between policy decisions and domestic attitudes.

2. Building Public Support for Trilateral Cooperation

To cultivate public support for trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea, it is imperative to effectively communicate the strategic significance of this collaboration. Public diplomacy and outreach initiatives that emphasize shared security interests, economic interdependence, and cultural connections can contribute to the establishment of a stable and cooperative international environment. Given the necessity for a collective response to common threats, such as North Korea's nuclear ambitions and China's expanding influence,



Figure 7. Japan-U.S.-ROK Foreign Ministers' Meeting

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-U.S.-ROK Foreign Ministers' Meeting," February 15, 2025, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na2/pageite_000001_00001.html>.

these efforts are likely to resonate with the public and enhance support for sustained international collaboration.

In conclusion, the domestic political contexts of the United States, Japan, and South Korea significantly influence their foreign policy decision-making.¹³ Domestic challenges, public opinion, and political discourse can either facilitate or hinder international cooperation. Leaders capable of navigating these complexities and mobilizing public support will play a pivotal role in establishing a stable and cooperative geopolitical framework.

IV. Conclusion

The leadership transitions in the United States, Japan, and South Korea are poised to profoundly impact the long-term strategic landscape of Northeast Asia. Each new leader's stance on critical regional issues — such as the evolving balance of power in Asia, the role of the United States in regional security, and the trajectory of multilateral alliances — will directly shape the region's policy orientation. These issues are not only integral to maintaining the stability of the international order but also to determining how the three nations will address increasingly complex geopolitical challenges, including developments on the Korean Peninsula, China's growing influence, and the advancement of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

If the three nations can align on a shared strategic vision and develop a coordinated long-term framework, it will contribute to fostering stability and prosperity in Northeast Asia. Conversely, divergences among leaders on key issues may impede policy coordination and increase regional uncertainty. In this context, effectively managing differences within a multilateral framework and identifying areas of convergence will be crucial components of their diplomatic strategies, ultimately determining the sustainability and enhancement of regional peace and collaboration.

13. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Joint Statement on the Trilateral United States – Japan – Republic of Korea Meeting in Munich,” February 15, 2025, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, <<https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100795507.pdf>>.

A long-term strategic vision should encompass a steadfast commitment to a collective security framework that recognizes the increasingly intricate and evolving dynamic power structure in Asia. As China's influence continues to expand, close collaboration among the United States, Japan, and South Korea will not only deter potential aggression but also establish a foundation for regional stability. This security framework should include regular trilateral defense consultations, joint military exercises, and enhanced force interoperability to ensure the adaptability and responsiveness of the alliance.¹⁴

In addition to strengthening U.S.-Japan-South Korea cooperation, expanding strategic partnerships with other regional actors, including Australia, India, and ASEAN countries, is of paramount importance. By cultivating a broad and resilient network of alliances, the three nations can promote a more balanced and multipolar regional order, effectively countering any unilateral actions that threaten regional stability, particularly in strategically sensitive areas such as the South China Sea. This multifaceted model of cooperation will not only enhance collective security but also contribute to the achievement of long-term peace and prosperity.

In the context of an evolving geopolitical landscape, the three nations must adopt a unified and well-coordinated approach to addressing a broad spectrum of security and economic challenges. By maintaining a common stance on critical issues such as the balance of power in Asia, the role of the United States in regional security, and the future of multilateral alliances, they can enhance cooperation through both existing and emerging multilateral frameworks.

This collaboration can effectively address not only traditional security threats, such as geopolitical tensions and economic disruptions, but also non-traditional security challenges, including climate change and cybercrime. Furthermore, economic integration through trilateral agreements and joint initiatives in technology and innovation can enhance the nations' competitiveness and resilience in an increasingly unpredictable global environment.

14. 〈日米韓 北朝鮮の極超音速ミサイル発射など受け共同訓練〉, January 15, 2025, *NHK*, <<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20250115/k10014694401000.html>>.



Figure 8. Defense Minister Gen Nakatani on an Inspection Tour in the Philippines to Further Strengthen Defense Cooperation

Source: 防衛省・自衛隊, 〈2月23日、フィリピン訪問中の中谷防衛大臣は、ワレス空軍基地を視察し、日本製の警戒管制レーダーがフィリピンの空の守りのため、そして南シナ海の平和と安定のために大きく貢献している様子を確認しました〉, February 23, 2025, X, <https://x.com/ModJapan_jp/status/1894922725086634063/photo/1>.

Ultimately, this shared vision, grounded in mutual respect and cooperation, will establish a robust foundation for enduring stability and prosperity for the United States, Japan, South Korea, and the broader Asia-Pacific region. Through sustained diplomatic efforts, these three nations will not only navigate the complexities of the 21st century but also reaffirm their unwavering commitment to democratic principles and a rules-based international order.

