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By Kyodo News Agency

WASHINGTON . The United States plans to launch "trilateral military cooperation" with Japan and South Korea to deal not only with North Korea but also with China and terrorist threats in Asia, Adm. William Fallon, head of the U.S. Pacific Command, said Tuesday.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Fallon said the United States has been working to transform its bilateral defense alliances with the two nations to deal with regional and global issues and develop them into a stronger trilateral initiative.

"We also hope to foster greater trilateral cooperation between the ROK (Republic of Korea), Japan and the United States," Fallon said in a written statement.

But referring to the ongoing realignment of bilateral military alliances with the two nations,

Fallon indicated the U.S. forces want the three countries to jointly deal with China's increasing military power, North Korea's possible collapse and reunification of the two Koreas, unconventional regional threats, including terrorism risks in Southeast Asia, and other regional matters.

The three nations have been promoting working-level defense consultations, but the talks have largely been limited to exchanging views on North Korea.

But uncertainties remain because the trilateral process as well as bilateral defense talks between Japan and South Korea have occasionally stalled due to lingering territorial and history-related disputes between Tokyo and Seoul stemming from Japan's 1910-45 colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula.

Defense experts said Washington wants to keep Japan and South Korea on its side against China, especially hoping to prevent Seoul from leaning toward Beijing due to their similar disputes with Japan and their common reconciliatory interests over North Korea.

Fallon's remarks came after the U.S. Defense Department issued its Quadrennial Defense Review last month, singling out China as having the "greatest" potential to militarily compete with the United States among emerging and major powers.

In the QDR, which set the defense strategy and military posture for the next 20 years, the Pentagon called for a "greater" military presence in the Pacific Ocean and vowed to boost military integration with allies to deter against emerging and major powers and "complicate any adversary's efforts to decouple them."

The integration includes intelligence sensors, communications networks, information systems, missile defenses, undersea warfare and countermine warfare capabilities.

Japan and the United States agreed last October to step up integration and joint operations between the Self-Defense Forces and U.S. forces as part of their broad accord on realigning the U.S. military presence in Japan.

The two nations are set to compile implementation plans by the end of March for the realignment accord.

"We are conducting a U.S.-Japan interoperability study, exploring ways to improve how our forces coordinate a wide range of operations," Fallon said, noting they are also jointly developing a missile defense system.

Fallon said Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro has demonstrated "exceptional leadership" in guiding the SDF through "significant change," such as sending ground troops to Iraq and refueling vessels to the Indian Ocean to help the U.S.-led antiterrorism operations in Afghanistan.

"These actions clearly show the willingness and capability of the government of Japan to deploy the SDF regionally and globally in support of security and humanitarian operations," Fallon said.

Meanwhile, Seoul and Washington agreed earlier this year on "strategic flexibility" of U.S. armed forces in South Korea, paving the way for U.S. forces there to engage in missions outside the Korean Peninsula.

But the accord led to controversy in South Korea as it may lead the nation to get involved in regional conflicts that the United States could be engaged in, including a possible emergency over Taiwan.

Fallon said, "We welcome (South) Korea's adoption of a more regional view of security and stability."

The two nations "must remain adaptable in light of the changing security environment, including unconventional threats, China's military modernization and the potential for reconciliation between the Koreas," he said.

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