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WEIGHING THE PERTINENCE OF DIALOGUE AND DIPLOMACY IN NORTHEAST ASIA: THE CHINA-JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA 2024 TRILATERAL SUMMIT

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Weighing the Pertinence of Dialogue and Diplomacy in Northeast Asia: The China-Japan-South Korea 2024 Trilateral Summit

More than four years after their last trilateral summit and against a backdrop of heightened geopolitical tensions and regional security threats, the long-awaited 9th summit between the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Japan finally took place in Seoul on 26-27 May 2024. The summit was attended by ROK President Yoon Suk-Yeol, Chinese Premier Li Qiang, and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio. Prior to the summit, leaders also held a series of bilateral talks. This was the first trilateral summit since 2019. Despite their diverging perspectives on global affairs and differing strategic interests, the three Northeast Asian countries decided to restore high-level dialogue, setting aside current geopolitical divisions to focus on cooperation. While the summit did not lead to major breakthroughs on sensitive issues, the fact that these historically contentious neighbours managed to meet, especially given the tense geopolitical background, can be seen as a positive sign.

The Geopolitical Dynamics of the Trilateral Summit

Initiated in December 2008, amid the global financial crisis, the first trilateral summit between the Republic of Korea, the People's Republic of China and Japan was held in Fukuoka, Japan. While the three Northeast Asian countries have been

collaborating through the ASEAN+3 Framework since 2007, South Korea proposed in 2004 to create a platform outside the ASEAN+3 grouping to strengthen political dialogue and consultations between the three neighbours, fostering a better understanding of one another. Planned to be held annually, the new platform was seen as a way to boost Northeast Asian economic, trade and cross-sectoral cooperation. The PRC, Japan and the ROK are the principal economic powers of East Asia, representing the world's second, fourth and 14th largest economies, respectively. Together, they account for roughly 25 percent of the world's total GDP and 20 percent of the global trade volume. Over the past three decades, economic and trade interdependence between the three nations has been growing from 130 billion USD in 1999 to 780 billion USD by 2022. China is Japan's and the ROK's largest trading partner, serving as their largest export market and source of imports. Conversely, Japan and South Korea rank as China's fourth and fifth largest trading partners, respectively. In 2023, China's trade volume with Japan reached 317.998 billion USD, and its trade with the ROK amounted to 310.737 billion USD. Besides trade matters, this trilateral cooperation also focused on concrete initiatives such as disaster relief, nuclear power safety, and environmental protection. In September 2011, the three countries launched the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) in Seoul, an international organisation aimed at promoting *Lasting Peace, Common Prosperity, and Shared Culture* between China, Japan and South Korea.

However, over the years, historical animosities, territorial

disputes and strategic divergences between the three countries, coupled with internal power politics and rising nationalist sentiments, have tarnished diplomatic relations and mutual engagements, disrupting the trilateral framework and its progress in non-traditional security areas. As a result, numerous summits were postponed. In 2013 and 2014, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the controversial Yasukuni shrine, which honours Japanese World War II leaders, fueled anti-Japan sentiments in both South Korea and China. In 2016 and 2017, the dispute between South Korea and China over the decision to deploy the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system on its territory, along with bilateral tensions between Japan and China over historical and territorial issues prevented the summit from taking place.

The last summit took place in 2019 under very different circumstances. At that time, Seoul and Beijing were pursuing rapprochement, while diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Seoul had deteriorated, culminating in a trade war. Since then, the regional dynamics among the neighbouring nations have undergone significant shifts, particularly after 2022 when Yoon ascended to power in South Korea. With the aim of positioning South Korea as a "global pivotal state", the Yoon government initiated reconciliation efforts with Japan, under the auspices of the United States, while also adopting a more balanced and critical approach towards Beijing. The current relationship between China and South Korea is considered to be at its lowest point since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1992. Tokyo's

relations with Beijing show no real signs of improvement, as Beijing condemns the release of treated Fukushima radioactive water, leading to the Chinese banning of all seafood imports from Japan in 2023. Meanwhile, diplomatic tensions with Seoul escalated once again, this time over a tech trade dispute.

The five-year gap was not solely a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, which disrupted traditional diplomacy by impeding meetings, conferences, and other significant events to be held in person due to travel restrictions. It was also influenced by the evolving global and regional geopolitical landscapes. Since 2019, a climate of distrust has taken roots, characterised by heightened geopolitical tensions and escalating regional concerns.

The Summit: Spotlight on Collaborative Opportunities

Prior to the 2024 Summit, bilateral meetings were held between the countries in order to establish an outline of what could possibly be achieved at the conference, amid concerns over relatively low expectations for successful diplomatic outcomes. These talks highlighted the similarities between Japan and South Korea in terms of their expectations for trilateral talks including their uneasiness over North Korea military build-up and intentions to further strategic cooperation with the US. In their respective talks with Chinese officials, both nations discussed key strategic issues such as Taiwan and security in the region as well as the outlook on increasing bilateral economic collaboration. While Japan and South Korea's top leaders

attended the summit, President Xi Jinping was notably absent from the proceedings, instead sending Premier Li Qiang to represent the Chinese delegation. This has been the norm of previous summits. However, since Xi has significantly consolidated power in the intervening years, some commentators have questioned the value China places on the trilateral talks. Despite this absence, a litany of topics was covered at the conference. The countries sought to revive negotiations towards a trilateral Free Trade Agreement which has been debated in the past but never came to fruition. Elsewhere other discussions showed more tangible outcomes with the countries releasing a joint declaration on future cooperation within a wide-range of policy areas. This declaration seeks to promote cultural exchange via increased regional tourism. Environmental issues were also addressed in the form of limiting greenhouse gas emissions within the Paris Agreement framework and working to curb marine pollution from plastic waste. Additionally, the countries released statements concerning the common challenges given their ageing societies and low-birth rates, agreeing to share government and expert solutions regarding these issues. Plans to prevent future pandemics were also framed. By strategically aligning on economic and societal issues, the attendees of the trilateral summit will be enabled to take a coordinated approach in the future so as to how they can collectively engage with other countries and organisations in the Indo-Pacific - such as ASEAN.

Controversial topics were not touched upon in the trilateral talks. These included Beijing's recent exercises around Taiwan during the inauguration of the Island's new

president Lai Ching-te. Despite requests from South Korea and Japan, the joint declaration avoided a commitment to seek the denuclearisation of North Korea. Japan's decision to release nuclear reactor wastewater into the ocean as well as China's concern about the other two countries joining the US-led efforts to restrict semiconductor technology transfers to China were not resolved nor referenced in the document. The conference sought to set up a baseline for future meetings rather than create solutions for longstanding sensitive issues. Taking an approach focused on less politically charged issues led to the three nations gaining several easy diplomatic wins through increased cooperation. Desire for economic integration superseded the nations' competing alliance partnerships and ideological differences. The trio agreed to continue to meet annually, with the next meeting taking place in Tokyo. Concurrent to the summit, business leaders met to discuss the facilitation of cross-border commercial cooperation. These talks aimed to create a permanent working coalition among the countries and was organised by the TCS. The TCS conference worked to strengthen supply chain stability and expand economic investments, thus reinforcing the aims of the governmental side of the summit. Overall, the conference succeeded in facilitating important discussions on pressing issues faced by all involved nations but failed short to properly address core underlying disputes. In a sense, the summit's outcomes reflected the complex relationship among the three countries, being mutual economic partners yet members of competing geopolitical blocs.

The significance of the 2024 Trilateral Summit: A potential path to reconciliation?

Until recently, the prospects of a trilateral summit between South Korea, China and Japan looked rather uncertain due to ongoing geopolitical tensions, especially between Beijing and Seoul. However, the time was ripe for the leaders to meet again. Each party had strong incentives to meet, viewing the high-level summit as a mutually beneficial opportunity. They acknowledged that a lack of dialogue and regional fragmentation would be more harmful to their economic and strategic interests, as well as undermine regional stability. After all, having a dialogue is preferable to no dialogue.

1. Implications for each actor

Firstly, China's long strained relations with Japan; South Korea's clear tilt to the US under Yoon's leadership; and the increasingly antagonistic US-China relationship have left the PRC in a strategically less advantageous position compared to Japan and the ROK in geopolitical terms. Following the Trilateral Summit at Camp David between the US, Japan, and South Korea in August 2023, Beijing ultimately consented to participate in the trilateral summit. For experts, China's participation can be seen as an attempt to counterbalance US influence in the region. On the one hand, Washington is intensifying its efforts to slow down China's technological advance, as shown by US protectionist measures to raise tariffs on Chinese imports, including electric vehicles. On the other hand, Washington is endeavouring to counter Beijing's

military ambitions by forming a coalition of allies and nations across the Indo-Pacific region. The emergence of several minilateral groupings led by the US, such as the QUAD or AUKUS, in China's proximity, is perceived as anti-China policy and is a significant concern for the PRC. This concern is particularly acute in the case of South Korea, whose closer ties with Japan and the US, as part of Yoon's Global Pivot State strategy, have displeased Beijing. The ROK, increasingly sceptical of China's assertiveness in the region, particularly concerning Taiwan, the South China Sea, and China's approach to North Korea, is now more aligned with the US. This shift contradicts China's vision of closely tying with South Korea and maintaining the ROK's neutrality in the strategic competition between the US and China. To that extent, China's participation in the Summit hosted by South Korea signifies a shift in the Chinese approach toward the ROK. Recognising the diplomatic and political significance of hosting the Trilateral Summit for South Korea, Beijing displayed greater tolerance and flexibility rather than coercion and punishment towards Seoul. This represents a success for South Korea, which effectively managed to leverage its alliance relations to influence strategic decisions in the region.

Regarding Tokyo and Seoul, both have strong incentives to resume talks with Beijing. They share an interest in stabilising ties with China, whether through a bilateral or trilateral framework. Japan's national security strategy advocates for a "constructive and stable" relationship with Beijing. Meanwhile, after years of "strategic ambiguity" under the previous Moon Jae-in government,

the Yoon government's Indo-Pacific Strategy views China as a "key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific." Despite geopolitical and ideological differences, China remains their largest trading partner and an important power to cooperate with on issues such as climate change, public health, and nuclear non-proliferation. Maintaining economic engagement is a priority, as deteriorating relations with China would adversely affect Japanese and South Korean markets. Moreover, keeping lines of communication open with China is essential for managing regional tensions, particularly around the Taiwan Strait and North Korea's threats. In addition to Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs, Tokyo and Seoul are increasingly concerned about the growing military cooperation between North Korea and Russia, as well as the Chinese-Russian alignment. China and Russia have consistently vetoed UN Security Council resolutions to strengthen sanctions on North Korea for its repeated ballistic missile tests in violation of UN prohibitions, while Pyongyang's arms supplies to Moscow are being used in Ukraine. Despite South Korea and Japan being US allies, the resumption of routine meetings between the three Asian nations serves as a reminder to Washington that its regional partners have their own interests to manage, especially in the context of uncertainties over the outcome of the US presidential election in November 2024, which could affect Washington's future commitments in Asia and around the globe.

As emphasised by the Korean strategic concept of "anmi kyŏng-jung" (security with the US, economy with China), Tokyo and Seoul are

striving to balance their economic interests with China, their largest trading partner, while strengthening their security alliances with the United States. Their objective is to create a scenario where their relations with both the US and China are not a zero-sum game. Nonetheless, this balancing act is trickier for Japan than for South Korea. Japan's strong long-standing alliance with the United States, coupled with historical complexities that have created volatile relations with China, adds an extra layer of complexity. In the context of the growing strategic rivalry between the US and China, Washington thus expects a firmer stance from Tokyo, urging it to call out Beijing for its behaviour and to follow the US "de-risking" approach from China. This expectation is shaped in the context of the US's growing willingness to penalise companies with significant engagement with China by threatening to restrict their access to the American market, making it more difficult for Japan to identify areas where it can engage with Beijing. For South Korea, both the Trilateral Summit and bilateral China-ROK talks seemed to be significant wins for President Yoon. He managed to successfully complete the challenging mission of bringing the three countries together, fulfilling its vision of making South Korea the strong "global pivotal state" he advocates for. The ROK's Foreign Minister, Cho Tae-yul, hailed the Summit as a great success, with multiple tangible outcomes, notably regarding the Korea-China Free Trade Agreement, signed in 2015. The success of the summit was also crucial for Yoon's government, as its party, the People Power Party (PPP), lost the National Assembly Election last April and hoped to regain some popularity. The summit has been positively received in South Korea, with some public

opinion recognising that the government is making efforts to balance its foreign policy.

2. Implications for East Asia

The summit and its outcomes underscore the significance of diplomacy and dialogue. Diplomacy remains a crucial tool for addressing security concerns, particularly in promoting regional stability in the Indo-Pacific region. The summit highlighted its potential to foster deeper integration and collaboration, contributing to a more stable and prosperous East Asian region. It served as a platform for renewed dialogue and the reopening of communication channels, especially after the pandemic. By focusing on shared concerns rather than tensions, the participants aimed to institutionalise and regularise their trilateral cooperation through regular summits and ministerial meetings. They also planned to resume negotiations around Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), aiming to establish more stable and consistent long-term relations. To achieve this, the Northeast Asian nations will leverage the already existing trade agreements. All three countries are members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a regional free trade agreement signed in 2020 and effective from 2022. RCEP includes the 10 ASEAN member states, along with Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, making it the world's largest free trade agreement by GDP. A proposed China-Japan-South Korea FTA, or "RCEP Plus," would surpass RCEP's level of liberalisation, as crafting a more ambitious agreement between

the three parties is deemed more feasible than doing so among 15 parties. Finding common ground among the three parties will be challenging, as their economies and export-oriented industries are more competitive than complementary. To make progress, China, Japan and South Korea could initially focus on a limited set of shared interests. Given that they are the biggest carbon emitters in the region, areas of immediate cooperation could include decarbonisation mechanisms and renewable energy technologies. Nonetheless, experts have expressed mixed views on the likelihood of an FTA happening in the foreseeable future, particularly due to the lack of clear timelines.

The three Northeast Asian powerhouses acknowledged their common interest and responsibility in "maintaining peace, stability, and prosperity" in the region. Attempting to restart diplomatic engagement amid an increasingly volatile strategic environment, marked by intensifying US-China competition, was a shared objective of Japan, China, and the Republic of Korea. This effort, in itself, represents a significant achievement. The trilateral summit's impact on East Asia's geopolitics is significant and should neither be exaggerated nor downplayed. It positively influenced bilateral diplomatic engagement, helping to stabilise Japan-China relations and improve ROK-China ties. For other regional players in Southeast Asia, the restoration of dialogue among the three Northeast Asian powerhouses, amid a growingly unpredictable and fast-changing strategic environment, sends a positive signal to the entire region. Even if the conference remains focused on non-traditional security domains and economic cooperation, it

should not be downplayed for its one-sided focus. The institutionalisation of trilateral diplomacy and partnership may not prevent conflicts over issues such as the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, or North Korea. However, the mere act of talking helps prevent minor frictions from escalating unnecessarily, thereby reducing the risk of the region becoming a powder keg with alliance dynamics. Open channels for dialogue, through regular summits and ministerial meetings between Beijing, Seoul, and Tokyo can serve as platforms to mitigate the scope of such conflicts. Additionally, increasing cooperation in economic and diplomatic fields aims to dissuade countries from crossing critical lines. The trilateral meeting's most significant accomplishment was securing a standard commitment among contenders to prioritise diplomacy, economic interdependence, and regional stability over conflict. The regularised three-way summits will help the three nations to better manage their differences and reduce confrontations. However, few elements will definitely continue to place limitations on Japan-China-ROK relations, notably power politics associated with the US-China rivalry, Washington's strengthened alliances in the Indo-Pacific, as well as the deepening Sino-Russian alignment. Another point of uncertainty is the forthcoming US presidential election. The potential return of former US President Donald Trump to the White House could strain the alliance with both Tokyo and Seoul, given his long-standing scepticism about US troops' commitment to allies.

Trilateral summits between South Korea, Japan, and the PRC have occurred before, though rarely

leading to any tangible outcomes. The 2024 summit comes at a time when relations between South Korea and Japan are gradually improving compared to earlier years. In addition, China has seen the moment fit to focus on cooperation in the face of growing US alliance expansionism in the region. The current political climate in East Asia made it possible for the 2024 summit to produce more concrete outcomes than its predecessors. However, countries must not only discuss increased cooperation, but also act on the promises made, if the 2024 summit is to differentiate itself from previous ones. Ultimately, matters of disagreement in regional affairs and differences in how to approach them will also need to be tackled.

Is the EU still a role model?

In seeking further economic integration, Japan, South Korea, and the PRC could look to the European model as possible inspiration, while recognising its limitations and contextual differences. Both regions were torn apart by deep-rooted ideological differences and historical animosities spanning across centuries, culminating in the conflicts of World War II. While many obstacles to reconciliation and stability remain in Northeast Asia, the European nations pursued economic cooperation as a path to reconciliation after the devastation of World War II. This effort began with the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, continued with the European Economic Community in 1957, and culminated in the creation of the European Union through the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s. These agreements established a

common market that allowed for the free movement of workers, goods, capital, and services, thereby creating stronger ties, increasing interdependencies, and fostering mutual understanding between nations and peoples. Besides the EU, there is also the intergovernmental cooperation model of the Benelux that could serve as a potential example

Creating economic integration or youth programs in Northeast Asia similar to that of the EU (like Erasmus+) would align with the aims of the trilateral summit not only in terms of economic goals but also the stated desire for increased movement of people through cultural exchanges. The European model required that nations, with shared history, bury their animosities to succeed as a unified economic bloc. The trilateral summit shows that there may be a burgeoning willingness for East Asian countries to form a likewise arrangement and advance the level of youth and educational exchanges.

Yet, it is important to note that for an economic integration similar to the European model, the countries in East Asia will first need to overcome, or at minimum acknowledge, their deeply rooted historical and ideological differences and find a common way to address them. This complex and long-term process requires a multifaceted approach involving first and foremost education reforms, official acknowledgments and prospective apologies, as well as cultural and people-to-people exchanges, diplomatic efforts, economic cooperation and civil society involvement. By addressing these areas, the three Northeast Asian countries could work towards a more peaceful and cooperative future. Moreover, while there is interest in a common market, negotiations have moved at a glacial

pace with previous trilateral summits showing progress but no concrete outcomes. Although cooperation among the three countries may seem simpler compared to groups like the EU with its 27 members, it is crucial to consider the significant power disparity among these actors, especially given China's considerable size and influence in contrast to South Korea and Japan. Leaders in Northeast Asia may also be sceptical of embracing the European economic and political model as a suitable framework for their regional context due to a changed perception of Europe weakened by the 2008 debt crisis, Brexit and the rise of the far right.

As an avenue for regional integration and increased stability, the EU should pay attention to the results of the trilateral summit and its efforts to promote cooperation and reconciliation in Northeast Asia. It could act as a neutral facilitator for dialogue between Northeast Asian countries, sharing best practices and lessons learned from the European integration process, including conflict resolution, economic cooperation, and political integration. Such collaborations could potentially be structured within an EU+3 Summit framework, encompassing the three regional players. However, considering the EU's shifting stance towards China, initiating an EU+2 Summit involving South Korea and Japan might be a more feasible initial step. This approach is particularly relevant following the Camp David meetings with the US, where the EU expressed similar intentions, given its strong relationships with both countries, exemplified by the 2015 EU-South Korea Free Trade Agreement and the 2019 EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, as well as a range of other agreements

in different domains that have followed suit.

Since 2020, unlike exports, European imports from the Indo-Pacific region have grown significantly. Subdued tensions in Asia would be beneficial for the EU in the long-term as it would allow for more streamlined discussions and negotiations with preexisting trade partners, as well as an increased ease of access for overseas imports and exports. Given that the EU has a vested interest in East Asian security, peace and stability, facilitating further dialogue and cooperation between South Korea, Japan and China could help advance the EU's maritime security, freedom of navigation and economic agenda in the region.

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