



CHINA-JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA TRILATERAL SUMMIT: REDEFINING PARTNERSHIPS

by

Simran Walia

The growing U.S.-China great power rivalry, and volatile security environment around East Asia make this region a complex one. China's expansionist behavior, the Taiwan Strait crisis and North Korea's nuclear ambitions have given rise to difficult situations in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific region. Amidst the adverse security environment and strained relationships, China, Japan and South Korea held their [trilateral summit on May 27](#) in Seoul.

Regional Complexities

Delayed in part to the COVID-19 pandemic but also because of once-sour relations, the summit in Seoul brought together South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, Chinese Premier Li Qiang, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida for the nations' first trilateral talks in nearly five years. The summit focused on attempting to seek deeper commercial ties between the three nations to further bolster their economies. Prior to the trilateral summit, the leaders of the countries held bilateral talks to look for opportunities to improve bilateral relations as well.

Chinese Premier Li Qiang met Japanese PM Fumio Kishida on the sidelines of the summit wherein, [Kishida](#) emphasized how crucial Taiwan Strait peace and stability are to Tokyo. Additionally, Kishida requested Li to provide an early release to a Japanese national detained in China. Both countries have a slightly tense relationship owing to their long-standing territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands. A new round of bilateral high-level economic dialogue between China and Japan is scheduled to take place at a suitable moment. Kishida also emphasized working towards a mutually beneficial relationship through common strategic interests and building stable ties.

The Chinese Premier met South Korea's President [Yoon Suk-Yeol](#) and both leaders emphasized the need for cooperation between the two nations to address

shared issues such as the Ukraine and Gaza war. Yoon also wants China to play a major role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council due to North Korea's increasing nuclear missiles. Both leaders focused on working towards maintaining stable supply chains and cooperating in new energy, high-end manufacturing, artificial intelligence among other areas.

The summit comes at a point when South Korea and Japan have been trying to mend their hostile ties and move towards rapprochement and also bolstering a trilateral partnership with the U.S. Yoon praised Kishida at a separate meeting, noting advancements in diplomatic, economic, and cultural contacts with Japan. The two leaders also tend to come up with new cooperation agreements in light of the [60th anniversary](#) of normalisation of diplomatic ties.

Partners for Development?

China, Japan, and South Korea are trying to forge a partnership by exploring avenues for cooperation and further work towards security and peace in the East Asian region and beyond. China's Premier is trying to persuade Japan and South Korea to reject protectionism and further uphold globalization which will also bring opportunities for the three countries to view each other as partners for development. The summit widely focused on greater economic cooperation and also the [announcement by North Korea](#) regarding a satellite launch.

On the fringes of the summit, over 200 business executives from the three nations also took the opportunity to network, and build collaboration in supply chains and commerce. Chinese officials and diplomats have been criticizing the United States and its allies for export restrictions that target the country's semiconductor industry and have called on them to avoid "overstretching the concept of national security" on multiple occasions in recent years.

Following the summit, China, Japan, and South Korea issued a joint declaration pledging to formalize more frequent communication at the highest levels and to work together on a variety of issues, including commerce, world peace, health, conservation, and

climate change. The proclamation also established a target of increasing people-to-people contacts through cultural, tourist, and educational exchanges to [40 million by 2030](#).

Regarding North Korea, Yoon and Kishida urged Pyongyang to halt its intended rocket launch that would have carried a space satellite, claiming that it employs ballistic missile technology that has been outlawed in resolutions passed by the UN Security Council. China, along with Russia, is the sole country that supports North Korea militarily. It is its biggest trading partner, and has advocated for the easing of U.N. sanctions against the country. The summit may perhaps advance practical collaboration in areas such as consular affairs and people-to-people interactions, even in the absence of significant progress on the most difficult subjects.

Beyond Trade Ties

For the progress to be more concrete regarding the trilateral partnership, China will have to address Japanese and South Korean concerns about the difficulty of doing business in China. The three nations have a genuine desire to resume the trilateral mechanism at this time because they want to work together to prevent potential instability by increasing senior-level government-to-government communication. These countries are currently facing different challenges as a result of the disruption of the global supply chain and other effects.

President Yoon will seize this year's crucial opportunity to mend relations with China, as he has previously strengthened ties with Japan over the last two years. Additionally, as South Korean and Japanese businesses relocate to Southeast Asia and join U.S.-led blocs to contain China in the fields of semiconductors and AI technologies, China needs to improve communication with these countries to minimize risks to the trilateral mechanism as a whole.

The three Asian countries are significant commercial partners, and fostering regional peace and prosperity requires their cooperation. When combined, they account for almost 25 percent of the world's GDP.

However, since Japan's wartime atrocities, the three nations have been entangled in intense disagreements over a variety of historical and diplomatic concerns.

The summit brings to light the challenging balancing act that Japan and South Korea, who both had China as their top trading partner last year, have had to perform. Additionally, both share a security partnership with the United States of America, which has increased military training and stationed tens of thousands of troops in both nations.

It is also vital for these three countries to mend their bilateral ties for the trilateral partnership to be successful in the near future. If China facilitates improved access for Korean and Japanese diplomats in Beijing and enhances the business climate for international enterprises, relations will advance even further. The discussions will give the trilateral cooperation new life and offer better avenues for the three countries to benefit mutually.

Simran Walia is an Associate Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi, and is pursuing a Ph.D. in Japanese Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi (JNU). She has also completed an M.Phil in Japanese Studies from JNU. Her research interests include Japanese politics and foreign policy, and Indo-Pacific and East Asian foreign policy.