



The 6th China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Summit

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The initiative of China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Meeting was started in 2008 in Fukoka, Japan. The proposal was put forward by former South Korean President, Lee Myung-bak to have a platform aside from the framework of ASEAN Plus Three forum to initiate a better understanding of one another in a strategically conflict ridden and economically volatile region. This led to the establishment of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat in Seoul in September 2011 later. From the year of its establishment till 2012, five Summits have been held. But due to disputes ranging from the apology by Japan to China for atrocities committed during World War II, the comfort women issue between ROK and Japan, to rising tensions that led to significant deterioration of relations between the Northeast Asian nations, no Summit took place after Japanese Prime Minister Abe took office in late 2012.

The joint declaration released at the Trilateral Summit took an optimistic view of the thorny relationship between China, Japan and South Korea. Saying that “steady progress has been made in trilateral cooperation in various areas despite fluid situations in the Northeast Asian region in recent years,” the statement declares that “trilateral cooperation has been completely restored on the occasion of this Summit.”¹ From now on, the Trilateral Summit “is to be held on a regular basis,” according to the declaration.²

It was also stated that the three countries “reached the common recognition that the situation in which economic interdependence and political/security tensions coexist must be overcome in order to build permanent peace, stability and co-prosperity in the region, and to continue to develop trilateral cooperation unwaveringly.”³ They also agreed to meet again next year in Tokyo in a continuation of discussions that were suspended for three years because of political tensions between Japan and the other two countries.⁴ The agreement also takes note of the positive role played by South Korean President Park Geun-hye in restoring the trilateral cooperation this year, which was stalled for the last three years due to the prevailing mistrust and suspicion.⁵

However, the present Summit played it safe by dealing with less controversial issues, such as disaster management, environmental issues, people-to-people exchanges, and deepening economic ties, rather than delving into the discussion of creating dispute settlement mechanisms or trying to understand the major points of dissonance in the East China Sea region and the means to resolve them. The declaration included 18 points on “expanding economic and social cooperation for co-prosperity,” 10 on “promoting sustainable development,” and 14 on “enhancing trust and understanding among the peoples.” There were only eight points dealing with security and political issues, and most of these are attempts to have a better understanding of trilateral coordination prior to upcoming multilateral meetings.⁶

The leaders of China, Japan and South Korea stressed the need to strengthen economic and social avenues between the three countries. Specific areas like Trilateral ICT Ministers’ Meeting, Trilateral Ministerial Conference on Transport and Logistics, Tripartite Customs Heads’ Meeting, and the Trilateral Ministerial Meeting on Science and Technology Cooperation were taken up to have better market integration and economic ties between the nations.

North Korea remained to be the most contentious security issue that was discussed, especially North Korea’s nuclear weaponisation and ballistic missile programmes. The

declaration made a clear commitment “to continue ... joint efforts to resume meaningful Six Party Talks at an early date,” which could be a major thrust towards achieving peaceful dialogue between the contentious parties.

Though, analysts had mentioned that such a Summit and the agreement that would follow would mostly symbolise an anodyne dialogue, which would make a spineless process of reconciliation between the northeast Asian neighbours without actually making an attempt to bring in any constructive and ground breaking change or placing an alternative formula in front of the nations but it has certainly led to the birth of an opportunity for the leaders of the three nations to sit together trilaterally as well as bilaterally on the sidelines of the trilateral summit, providing a platform to assess the challenges each other faces regionally.

The Chinese intentions were to strengthen trade links as it is making an all out attempt to inject fresh momentum into its slowing economy. However, the absence of President Xi Jinping was significantly noted, who has remained active in the promotion of China’s bilateral and multilateral dialogues and relations with other countries. Premier Li Keqiang represented China in the Summit, who remains one of the leading figures behind Chinese economic policy.

Premier Li, without mentioning Japan by name, said that the three countries needed to “heighten mutual political trust” and that “mutual trust is conditioned on a mutual understanding of historical and other important issues.” He said that Beijing did not want its trilateral and bilateral ties with the others to be disrupted again.⁷

Japan and South Korea relations have never been easy as well, ‘clouded by sensitive historical disputes related to Japan’s 1910-45 colonial rule over the Korean peninsula, especially the issue of Korean ‘comfort women’ forcibly recruited to work in Japanese wartime military brothels’, an issue that had kept President Park away from meeting her Japanese counterpart, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, formally.⁸

However, this Summit provided a proper forum for meeting each other, thereby ending a diplomatic freeze between the two nations. However, it should also be noted here that South Korea decided not to hold a state banquet for the Japanese leadership, an honour it gave to Premier Li, when he discussed trade and other ties with President Park and South Korean business leaders.⁹ It can be stated here that Japan had clarified before that in regard to South Korea, all issues were settled in a 1965 normalisation agreement, which saw Tokyo making a total payment of \$1.1 billion in grants or loans to its former colony.¹⁰

The Summit brought forth the commitment from South Korean President, who agreed with her Northeast Asian counterparts to work towards the conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and a separate free trade deal between the three economies.¹¹ Lim Tai Wei, a senior lecturer at Singapore's SIM University, while assessing the Summit for the media, referred to the manner in which South Korea used the platform of the Summit to project itself as a middle power in the region.¹²

It can be noted here that presently, Northeast Asia's strategic volatility increases with the rising tension between Japan and China, along with the North Korean crisis looming large over both Japan and South Korea. While the three disputing neighbours made fervent attempts to normalise the tense relations that prevail in the region, ending the diplomatic standoff between the three nations, the West too has prioritised to mitigate the crisis situation. While the Summit was taking place in Seoul, the US Defense Secretary, Ashton B. Carter visited the buffer zone separating North and South Korea, highlighting the American commitment to defend South Korea from what he called a "notoriously unpredictable" North Korea.¹³

The Japanese media stated the manner in which Japan plays an important role in the revival of the deteriorating economic situation of both China and South Korea, and how the Summit evolved as the most conducive platform to strengthen such an opportunity.¹⁴ South

Korean media pointed out how the Summit focussed on economic integration with the initiative taken by President Park Geun-hye – deciding to integrate the three countries into a single digital market by pulling down e-commerce barriers.¹⁵ The Chinese media kept the Summit a very low profile event, as for them, it was more to enhance and improve the atmosphere than to discuss anything about the technicalities.¹⁶

Though the Summit might not have brought forth ground breaking cooperative initiatives between the contentious Northeast Asian neighbours, but it surely championed the cause that existing tensions prevailing in the region can only be dissipated through bilateral, trilateral and multilateral dialogues between the nations. The joint initiative that has been taken by China, Japan and South Korea, remain noteworthy steps towards finding amicable pathways of resolution.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

Endnotes:

¹ Full Text of Joint Declaration of Trilateral Summit, *Yonhap News Agency*, November 01, 2015, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2015/11/01/0301000000AEN20151101003900315.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Choe Sang-Hun, “China, Japan and South Korea Pledge to Expand Trade at Joint Meeting,” *The New York Times*, November 01, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/02/world/asia/china-japan-and-south-korea-conduct-first-trilateral-meeting-in-3-years.html?_r=0.

⁵ Shannon Tiezzi, “With Trilateral Summit, China-Japan-Korea Cooperation ‘Completely Restored,’” *The Diplomat*, November 03, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/with-trilateral-summit-china-japan-korea-cooperation-completely-restored/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Op. cit., Choe Sang-Hun, “China, Japan and South Korea Pledge to Expand Trade at Joint Meeting.”

⁸ “Japan-South Korea-China Meet over Disputes,” *Voice of America*, November 06, 2015, <http://learningenglish.voanews.com/content/japan-south-korea-china-meet-over-disputes/3025415.html>.

⁹ Op. cit., Choe Sang-Hun, “China, Japan and South Korea Pledge to Expand Trade at Joint Meeting.”

¹⁰ “South Korea, China, Japan Vow to Strengthen Ties at Sixth Trilateral Summit in Seoul,” *ABC News*, November 01, 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-01/south-korea-china-japan-vow-to-strengthen-ties-at-summit/6903686>.

¹¹ See Kit Tang, “Seoul Summit: Big Breakthrough or Just Hot Air?” *CNBC*, November 02, 2015, <http://www.cnbc.com/2015/11/02/japan-china-south-korea-trilateral-summit-big-breakthrough-or-just-hot-air.html>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Choe Sang Hun, “China, Japan and South Korea Pledge to Expand Trade at Joint Meeting”, *The New York Times*, November 1, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/02/world/asia/china-japan-and-south-korea-conduct-first-trilateral-meeting-in-3-years.html?_r=0

¹⁴ Masahiko Takekoshi and Chikara Shima, “Japan, China, S. Korea Focused on Economy,” *The Japan News*, November 02, 2015, <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0002535734>.

¹⁵ “After the Summits: Japan’s Attitude Key to Ties with South Korea, China, *The Korea Herald*, November 03, 2015, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20151102001157>.

¹⁶ “A Hopeful Step Calls for Substantial Follow-ups,” *China Daily*, November 02, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-11/02/content_22341368.htm.