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REVITALIZING DIPLOMATIC SYNERGY:

The Resurgence of the China–Japan–South Korea Trilateral
Summit

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The resurgence of the China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Summit marks a pivotal milestone after nearly four years of diplomatic hiatus¹. Convening amidst complex geopolitical dynamics and historical frictions, the meeting of the top diplomats from these nations aimed at rekindling cooperation and reinstating the trilateral summit, albeit without a specified timeline.² Acknowledging the intricate interdependencies binding these economies, the foreign ministers of these nations expressed a commitment to accelerate preparations for the summit, emphasizing the urgency to revitalize multifaceted collaboration in trade, technology, public health, sustainable development, and security domains³. However, the absence of a set timing for the summit signals a potential delay, possibly impacting the South Korean chairmanship's aspirations for a prompt gathering⁴. Despite this, the diplomatic dialogue signifies a significant step toward reinstating a platform for broader discussions among the three influential nations. The intricate historical tensions, stemming from Japan's past aggression and the strategic complexities posed by the US-China rivalry, have historically challenged collaborative endeavours⁵. Yet, recent shifts in regional dynamics, particularly highlighted by conciliatory gestures between the US and China, offer a nuanced backdrop for recalibrating diplomatic synergies among China, Japan, and South Korea⁶. Amidst shared concerns over North Korea's nuclear advancements and regional stability, these nations navigate a complex landscape, balancing historical grievances with the imperative for strategic cooperation⁷. The meeting's outcomes reflect evolving regional dynamics, emphasizing the delicate balance between historical disputes, security imperatives, and the collective pursuit of stability and prosperity in East Asia.

¹ Press, Associated. "South Korea, Japan and China Agree to Resume Trilateral Leaders' Summit, but without Specific Date." Voice of America. Voice of America (VOA News), November 26, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-korea-japan-and-china-agree-to-resume-trilateral-leaders-summit-but-without-specific-date-/7370772.html>.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

Historical Context

The genesis of the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral summit dates back to 2004 when South Korea proposed a separate community forum outside the framework of ASEAN Plus Three, advocating for a distinct platform for the three major economies in East Asia⁸. The formalized momentum commenced during the ASEAN Plus Three meeting in November 2007, where leaders from China, Japan, and South Korea convened for their eighth meeting⁹. This pivotal gathering laid the groundwork for reinforced political dialogue and consultations among the three nations, culminating in the decision to hold an ad hoc meeting in 2008¹⁰.

The inaugural trilateral summit took place on December 13, 2008, in Fukuoka, Japan, yielding the signing and issuance of the "Joint Statement between the three partners."¹¹ This milestone document delineated the cooperative direction and principles guiding China, Japan, and South Korea¹². Discussions centred on ameliorating future relations from strategic and long-term perspectives, despite historical and territorial disputes posing impediments.¹³

The subsequent summits underscored the imperative for deeper cooperation amidst global challenges. The 2009 summit held in Beijing, within the context of the global financial crisis, witnessed a significant shift in the trio's collaboration¹⁴. Acknowledging the need for coordinated

⁸ Kim, Jae Cheol. "POLITICS of REGIONALISM in EAST ASIA: THE CASE of the EAST ASIA SUMMIT on JSTOR." Jstor.org, 2023. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42704723>.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "MOFA: Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit: A Joint Statement for Tripartite Partnership (December 13, 2008)." Mofa.go.jp, 2023. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/jck/summit0812/partner.html>.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Joint Statement on the Tenth Anniversary of Trilateral Cooperation ." *Joint Statement on the Tenth Anniversary of Trilateral Cooperation* , 2009. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/jck/meet0910/joint-1.pdf>.

efforts, the leaders identified the necessity to cooperate on global financial risks and institutions, significantly influencing East Asian management strategies¹⁵.

The 2010 summit in Jeju, Korea, emphasized history acknowledgement and future-oriented cooperation, outlining specific goals for the next decade¹⁶. Plans were articulated to enhance communication, and strategic trust, establish a secretariat, and prioritize sustainable development and economic cooperation¹⁷.

As the summits progressed, agreements were reached, including the Trilateral Agreement for the Promotion, Facilitation, and Protection of Investment signed in 2012¹⁸ and the resumed summit in 2015, wherein leaders committed to annual meetings and the pursuit of a trilateral free trade agreement¹⁹. The 2018 summit in Tokyo marked the seventh meeting after a hiatus since 2015, reinforcing the commitment to ongoing dialogue and collaboration among China, Japan, and South Korea on North Korea's Nuclear program.²⁰ These summits, amidst historical disputes and geopolitical complexities, signify an evolving effort to navigate shared challenges and foster regional stability and economic prosperity.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "MOFA: Joint Press Release of the Third Trilateral Summit Meeting among the Republic of Korea, Japan and the People's Republic of China (May 30, 2010)." Mofa.go.jp, 2020. https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/jck/summit1005/joint_pr.html.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Gu, Xiaolei. "China-Japan-South Korea Sign Trilateral Agreement and Launch FTA Talks - China Briefing News." China Briefing News, May 14, 2012. <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-japan-south-korea-sign-trilateral-agreement-and-launch-fta-talks>.

¹⁹ Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "The Sixth Japan-China- ROK Trilateral Summit." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_000409.html.

²⁰ Osaki, Tomohiro. "Japan, China and South Korea Are 'in Sync' on North Korea, Japanese Official Says." The Japan Times. The Japan Times, 1970. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/05/09/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-hosts-leaders-china-south-korea-summit-north-korea/>.

Current Relations

In recent years, the relations between Japan, South Korea, and China have been marked by a mix of diplomatic tensions, fluctuations, and efforts towards cooperation, influenced by intricate economic, political, and security dynamics.

Diplomatically, historical grievances, particularly stemming from Japan's colonial past, continue to strain relations between South Korea and Japan. Contentious issues like wartime labour and 'comfort women' have periodically resurfaced, leading to escalations in tensions and diplomatic standoffs²¹. This historical backdrop has significantly impacted political dialogue and cooperation, impeding the forging of cohesive trilateral relationships.

Economically, despite being closely linked and collectively contributing around 25% to the global GDP²², economic ties among the three nations have faced disruptions due to geopolitical rivalries and trade disputes. China's growing economic influence in the region, coupled with strategic competition with the United States, has led to fluctuations in economic cooperation between Japan, South Korea, and China²³. This has been compounded by intermittent trade frictions and regional economic uncertainties.²⁴

Security dynamics further complicate trilateral relations. South Korea and Japan, both key U.S. military allies, have been navigating security alliances amid regional tensions, particularly North

²¹ Harris, Bryan, and Robin Harding. "Financial Times." @FinancialTimes, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/b2c1a11c-f372-11e8-ae55-df4bf40f9d0d>.

²² Press, Associated. "South Korea, Japan and China Agree to Resume Trilateral Leaders' Summit, but without Specific Date." Voice of America. Voice of America (VOA News), November 26, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-korea-japan-and-china-agree-to-resume-trilateral-leaders-summit-but-without-specific-date-/7370772.html>.

²³ Ichiro, Fujisaki, Han Sung Joo, James Steinberg, and Karl Friedhoff. "Cooperating, Competing, Confronting: US-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation as China Rises US-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation as China Rises on JSTOR." Jstor.org, July 7, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep33467>.

²⁴ Ibid

Korea's nuclear threats.²⁵ The deployment of U.S. troops in both nations has been a significant point of contention for China, viewing it as part of a containment strategy²⁶. This, along with broader geopolitical competition and territorial disputes in the East China Sea, has strained security cooperation and led to fluctuations in regional stability.

Recent years have seen attempts to navigate these challenges. Efforts to revive trilateral summits and cooperation projects across various sectors such as trade, technology, public health, and sustainable development have been evident.²⁷ However, these attempts have often been hindered by unresolved historical disputes, geopolitical complexities, and shifting global power dynamics.

In 2023, attempts to revive the trilateral summit signified a renewed willingness to engage in dialogue despite persisting challenges.²⁸ The conciliatory tone struck between Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Joe Biden²⁹ provided a diplomatic opening, potentially allowing for manoeuvring room to reignite trilateral cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and China. Nonetheless, the intricate interplay of historical, economic, and security factors continues to shape the delicate balance of relations among these East Asian nations.

²⁵ Lee, Christy. "South Korea's Dilemma: Is North Korea the Only Threat?" Voice of America. Voice of America (VOA News), September 28, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-korea-s-dilemma-is-north-korea-the-only-threat-/7288178.html>.

²⁶ Stevenson, Charles H. "U.S. Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia: Implications for Current Regional Issues on JSTOR." Jstor.org, 2023. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25798145>.

²⁷ Press, Associated. "South Korea, Japan and China Agree to Resume Trilateral Leaders' Summit, but without Specific Date." Voice of America. Voice of America (VOA News), November 26, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-korea-japan-and-china-agree-to-resume-trilateral-leaders-summit-but-without-specific-date-/7370772.html>.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ C. Raja Mohan. "The US-China Truce: Where India Needs to Assess the Changes in Great Power Relations." The Indian Express. The Indian Express, November 16, 2023. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/india-us-china-truce-joe-biden-meeting-xi-jinping-analysis-9028739/#:~:text=Biden%20and%20Xi%20met%20for,a%20broadly%20conciliatory%20tone%20afterward>.

Implications and Benefits

The revival of the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral summit, as sought in November 2023³⁰, holds significant implications across political, economic, and security domains, potentially reshaping regional dynamics in East Asia. A renewed commitment to this summit could foster greater diplomatic dialogue, potentially mitigating historical tensions and promoting cooperation among the three influential nations.

Politically, the resumption of high-level trilateral dialogue could signify a willingness to navigate historical grievances and geopolitical complexities. Increased diplomatic engagements among China, Japan, and South Korea may pave the way for constructive discussions on contentious issues, potentially easing historical animosities and fostering a conducive environment for broader regional stability.

Economically, the trilateral summit's revival holds promise for enhanced cooperation in trade, technology, and investment. Strengthening economic ties among these major economies could yield substantial benefits. The collective GDP contribution of these nations stands at approximately 25% of the global GDP³¹, indicating the immense potential for collaborative economic endeavours. Moreover, a renewed focus on trade cooperation may alleviate trade frictions and uncertainties, benefiting regional and global markets.

Security implications are also noteworthy. Addressing shared security concerns, such as North Korea's nuclear advancements, could be a focal point in trilateral discussions. Collaborative security measures and strategic dialogues among Japan, South Korea, and China may contribute to fostering stability in the region, despite underlying complexities and historical animosities.

³⁰ Press, Associated. "South Korea, Japan and China Agree to Resume Trilateral Leaders' Summit, but without Specific Date." Voice of America. Voice of America (VOA News), November 26, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-korea-japan-and-china-agree-to-resume-trilateral-leaders-summit-but-without-specific-date-/7370772.html>.

³¹ Ibid

Evidence from past trilateral summits showcases the potential for substantial outcomes. Agreements such as the “Trilateral Agreement for the Promotion, Facilitation, and Protection of Investment” in 2012 highlighted the potential for economic collaboration.³² Additionally, the 2015 summit's commitment to deepening trade relations and pursuing a trilateral free trade agreement indicates the far-reaching implications of sustained trilateral cooperation³³.

However, challenges persist, and the successful revival of the trilateral summit will require concerted efforts to navigate historical disputes, geopolitical tensions, and broader strategic dynamics. Nonetheless, a reinvigorated commitment to trilateral dialogue holds the potential to positively influence regional geopolitics and foster greater cooperation across various spheres among China, Japan, and South Korea.

Conclusion

The resurgence of the China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Summit marks a significant step toward reconciling historical tensions and fostering cohesive regional cooperation. Amidst a hiatus spanning nearly four years, the recent attempt to rekindle dialogue among these nations signifies a critical juncture in East Asian geopolitics. This revival, although lacking a specified timeline, underscores the urgent need for renewed collaboration in diplomatic, economic, and security domains. Historical complexities, compounded by unresolved grievances, have historically strained relations, hindering sustained cooperation. However, the recent diplomatic efforts reflect a collective acknowledgement of the imperative to navigate challenges and revitalize comprehensive discussions.

Economically, these nations collectively wield substantial global economic influence, presenting vast prospects for enhanced trade, investment, and technological collaboration. Strengthening

³² Gu, Xiaolei. “China-Japan-South Korea Sign Trilateral Agreement and Launch FTA Talks - China Briefing News.” China Briefing News, May 14, 2012. <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-japan-south-korea-sign-trilateral-agreement-and-launch-fta-talks>.

³³ Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “The Sixth Japan-China- ROK Trilateral Summit.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_000409.html.

economic ties through trilateral cooperation could mitigate uncertainties and invigorate regional and global markets. Security implications, particularly concerning North Korea's nuclear advancements and broader geopolitical tensions, further highlight the significance of concerted efforts among China, Japan, and South Korea. Addressing shared security concerns and fostering strategic dialogues could contribute significantly to stability in the region. The historical trajectory of trilateral summits offers glimpses of potential outcomes, emphasizing the far-reaching implications of sustained cooperation across political, economic, and security spheres. In essence, the revival of the China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Summit signals a pivotal opportunity to recalibrate regional dynamics, foster stability, and advance collective prosperity in East Asia.

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