Fraught but Promising: The China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Summit

By Zhang Muhui

Three-way summits among the leaders of China, Japan and South Korea go back almost two decades, but despite the sometimes shared ambitions, such as a trilateral free-trade agreement among these giant economies, the summity has been marred by seemingly intractable bilateral issues involving history and territorial disputes.

If the leaders could come together in new ways to address regional and even global problems, their summits could help peace and prosperity in Asia, writes Zhang Muhui.

China, Japan and South Korea convened a trilateral summit in Tokyo in May this year after a three-year hiatus due to bilateral frictions. Whether by design or serendipity, the timing was auspicious. North Korea’s peace and reconciliation overtures to the international community helped warm otherwise frosty relations between the Northeast Asian powers. Where does the trilateral summit process stand now? What agendas might it address? In the long run, can it contribute to peace and prosperity in East Asia?

Beyond Economics
The trilateral summit took root in 1999 under the auspices of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) process. In order to strengthen co-ordination on financial policies, leaders of the three countries convened a breakfast meeting. In 2008, the Trilateral Summit was developed into an independent and regularized mechanism apart from the APT. In 2011, institution-building took another step forward through the establishment of an intergovernmental Trilateral Co-operation Secretariat (TCS), located in Seoul, to provide administrative services and think tank-style advice to the three governments. Since its inception, 22 ministerial meetings and more than 100 specific intergovernmental projects have been initiated under the umbrella of the trilateral summits.

Many observers have compared the China-Japan-South Korea (CJK) summit process with the US-Japan-South Korea relationship, and argued that the former has rarely addressed security matters and has instead prioritized deepening economic ties between its often-quarrelsome...
In Focus: Zhang

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have been proceeding, but with difficulty. As of October 2018, the three governments had held 13 rounds of negotiations but failed to make any major breakthroughs. During two recent trilateral summits in November 2015 and May 2018, the three countries' leaders expressed strong political will to support the conclusion of negotiations.

Nonetheless, these political commitments appear to be more symbolic than substantial. The three countries have not achieved full agreement on the basic modality of a free-trade deal. They have not narrowed the gaps regarding the scope of goods, investments and services that would be covered by the agreement, and they have not adopted any specific future-oriented roadmaps. According to relevant ministries of the three countries, what can be called “progress” stopped at merely the establishment of a number of working groups in the services, finance and telecommunications sectors during the 13th round of negotiations in March 2018. Even to optimists, the future of the deal remains unclear.

Security Challenges

The trilateral summits in recent years have been confronted with two major challenges. First, they have been based on co-operative relations; that is to say, resolutions or even dialogue on disputed issues, such as territorial and historical issues, or the North Korean nuclear issue, are not strictly on the agenda of the trilateral summits. Thus, the key focus remains limited to certain functional areas and has not generated significant outcomes on regional security.

Second, the trilateral summits remain unstable as an institution and have been overly susceptible to fluctuations in bilateral relations. In 2005, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited the Yasukuni Shrine, despite diplomatic protests from China and South Korea. China was infuriated and publicly declared that it would postpone the trilateral summit and reject any high-level meetings with Japanese officials. South Korea backed China in its refusal to meet with Koizumi as well.

In 2012, a new round of disputes over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands began when Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro, known for his nationalist statements, announced his intention to purchase the islands by establishing a Senkaku fund. In response, the Japanese central government purchased the islands to place them under national control. This was seen by the...
Chinese government as an aggressive attempt to unilaterally change the status quo.

The resulting tensions between China and Japan created a vacuum of high-level diplomacy. When Shinzo Abe returned as prime minister in 2012, China and South Korea appeared to reach a tacit understanding to avoid both bilateral and trilateral summit diplomacy with Japanese leaders in 2013 and 2014. Further, in 2016, the dispute between China and South Korea over Seoul's deployment of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system also cast a long shadow on the convening of a trilateral summit.

The most recent trilateral summit in 2018 was no different. The movement towards a rapprochement among the three is clear, but less clear is what tangible solutions the trilateral partnership can deliver. Some have surmised that the summit could be a mechanism to facilitate negotiations toward denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Such a view is overly optimistic: China was reluctant to list the North Korean issue as a key agenda item and the summit adopted an ambiguous statement that did not include anything on the concept of complete, irreversible, verifiable denuclearization (CVID). As a result, the wording of the Joint Statement was an exercise in cautious compromise and not ultimately what Japan was hoping for.

**Bilateral Conflicts Get in the Way**

Although the trilateral summit and ministerial dialogues were postponed in 2005 and 2012, the mechanism did begin to provide opportunities to co-ordinate relations among the three countries in recent years. One of the summit's true values lies in its provision of a crisis-management or "buffering" mechanism to ease bilateral conflicts in a region plagued by historical anxieties and territorial disputes.

This mechanism is of increasing importance because bilateral tensions have been high in recent years. Japan's containment policy towards China and China's hardline policy toward Japan have led to diplomatic dilemmas for both sides. Pressured by domestic politics and public sentiment, leaders in both countries have been unwilling to offer gestures of diplomatic compromise, despite bilateral trade and investment reaching all-time highs.

Even if Beijing and Tokyo share a willingness to normalize bilateral relations, frequent direct visits and bilateral meetings between political leaders appears a distant proposition.

In the meantime, to the frustration of Washington, diplomatic relations between seemingly natural allies Japan and South Korea remain strained. Heated disagreements over the legacy of Japan's imperial past, fueled by nationalistic sentiment in both countries, plague the bilateral relationship. The trilateral summit offers a platform to transcend the roiling bilateral hostilities by moving diplomatic relations into a collective framework for negotiation and the defining of common interests. This pragmatic approach is desperately needed. What may be untenable bilaterally becomes possible multilaterally on issues of mutual interest to all three parties.

**Offering a Way Forward**

In this regard, the trilateral summits offer a diplomatic option that avoids diplomatic sensitivities and circumvents many of the nationalistic domestic pressures thwarting more robust political relations.

The trilateral summit has two platforms: a trilateral meeting first and bilateral meetings following. The former is largely used to produce joint statements (like the Joint Statement on the 2018 Inter-Korean Summit) and to build consensus on umbrella initiatives, such as regional free-trade negotiations. The latter are used to address the many and varied bilateral challenges undermining harmonious relations.

For example, in the lead-up to the May 2018 summit, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Japan for the first time in seven years in what was designated as an official state visit. Ultimately, a stepwise arrangement to co-ordinate restoration of normal diplomatic relations between the countries was reached, as was an agreement to restart the maritime and aerial communication mechanism for avoiding conflict along their national borders. The two countries have since been co-ordinating on a three-step process—first, Li's visit to Japan in May, then Abe's visit to China in October 2018 and finally Xi's planned visit to Japan sometime in 2019. All of this was made possible by the trilateral summit.
Likewise, the summit has provided a platform for rapprochement between South Korea and China as they slowly emerge from the diplomatic fiasco over THAAD. Likewise, Japan and South Korea have agreed to resume “shuttle diplomacy,” with South Korean President Moon Jae-in inviting Abe to South Korea next year. Amid this progress, the three countries vowed to accelerate trilateral negotiations on both their free trade agreement and on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade accord. And in an unprecedented move, Beijing has proposed another summit meeting to be held in late 2018 — the first time for it to be convened twice in the same year.

New Potential for Extra-Regional Co-ordination

The trilateral summit embodies two different categories of co-operative behavior: intra-regional co-operation among the three powers and extra-regional co-ordination.

Although the former appears not to have yielded robust results in recent years, if one refocuses the optics of the CJK process toward “the third market” of extra-regional affairs, we find far more cause for optimism. China, Japan and South Korea have traditionally viewed each other more as rivals than allies — a legacy that has stymied the development of ties for decades. Yet the possibility of a win-win situation, or at least a minimum level of policy co-ordination, toward third parties or outside issues should not be ruled out. Trilateral diplomacy in the extra-regional realm appears to trigger much less political sensitivity and domestic backlash. This partially explains why all three countries have been investing more resources in RCEP negotiations than in CJKFTA negotiations.

The current leaders of the three countries have each proposed ambitious blueprints — China’s Belt and Road Initiative, Japan’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, and South Korea’s New Southern Policy, prioritizing ASEAN countries as strategic targets. Notably, China and Japan have recently kicked off several pilot projects on infrastructure in third countries, including a recent agreement to join forces to build railway systems in Bangkok, with the first meeting of a joint public-private committee on economic co-operation being held this October. Major Japanese logistics firm Nissin Corp. and Sinotrans, China’s largest integrated logistics-services provider, also joined hands this summer to undertake a sea-and-rail shipment trial project from the Far East to Western Europe via China and Central Asia. These new co-operative efforts seem to have created a potential new agenda for the trilateral summit in the near future. Particularly given that China will chair the next summit, it is likely that it may indeed produce new, high-level mechanisms on extra-regional co-operation.

Visions for the Future

So, what should we expect from future trilateral summits? Expectations must remain realistic and pronouncements of breakthroughs must be weighed against the evidence. The summits will be less likely to co-ordinate closely on denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, nor will they engage intimately in high-security affairs more broadly. Yet the trilateral summits retain their strategic value. By serving as a buffering mechanism against thorny bilateral relations, they constitute the region’s best chance for building the diplomatic bridges necessary for peace and stability in Asia. In the meantime, there is huge space for the three economic giants to join in common efforts to invest and explore external issues beyond Northeast Asia. It may be time to shift the focus of trilateral summit diplomacy to a broader East Asian or even global focus.

Flanked by Li and Moon at the Royal Palace State Guest House in Tokyo at the summit in May this year, Abe noted at the close of proceedings how the summit provided a “very strong foundation” for jointly responding to regional and global issues of mutual concern. While these sanguine words might not truly reflect the challenges facing the three countries, the summit can serve as a mechanism for peace and prosperity in East Asia. And that is a win for all parties involved.

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