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The China-South Korea-Japan Triangle: The Shape of Things to Come?

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See-Won Byun, Research Associate at the Asia Foundation, explains how “The fourth summit between Chinese, South Korean (ROK), and Japanese leaders in Tokyo on May 21-22 reaffirmed the promise of the China-South Korea-Japan triangle as a sustainable model for Northeast Asian cooperation.”

The fourth summit between Chinese, South Korean (ROK), and Japanese leaders in Tokyo on May 21-22 reaffirmed the promise of the China-South Korea-Japan triangle as a sustainable model for Northeast Asian cooperation. Much has happened since the last meeting of the three leaders in May 2010, including the China-ROK fallout over North Korea’s belligerent actions throughout 2010, the clash between a Chinese fishing boat and two Japanese Coast Guard vessels in September 2010, and the Japan-ROK dispute last March over Japanese textbooks that claimed the contested Dokdo/Takeshima Islands as Japanese territory. This year’s summit was an important opportunity for the three Northeast Asian neighbors to demonstrate solidarity and renew their pledge to advance their “future-oriented comprehensive cooperative partnership.”

The sustainability of this trilateral meeting of leaders at the core of Northeast Asia is notable considering the escalation of bilateral and regional tensions, and loss of confidence in the Six-Party Talks. Since January this year, these three countries have held joint ministerial talks on culture, foreign affairs, trade, and the environment as part of regularized annual exchanges. The decision to establish a permanent Secretariat in Korea later this year will mark concrete progress toward institutionalization of trilateral cooperation. This is the first objective in “Vision 2020,” the ten-year plan for trilateral cooperation disclosed at last year’s summit in Jeju.

China is the largest trade partner and major investment destination for both Japan and South Korea. China-Japan and China-ROK bilateral trade peaked last year at around US\$300 billion and US\$200 billion respectively, and combined Japanese and South Korean investment in China currently amounts to US\$120 billion. Although economic opportunity was the primary catalyst for bringing the three countries together within the ASEAN+3 framework in the 1990s, this exchange has led to an expansion of trilateral cooperation to address new security challenges. Such cooperation has been sustained despite periodic flare-ups over bilateral political issues. Since 2008, the leaders’ summit has provided a platform for coordinating responses to immediate regional concerns. The first summit in 2008 focused efforts on handling the global financial crisis. This year’s summit began with a goodwill visit to Japan’s earthquake-stricken northeast, the first visit by foreign leaders to the area since the March tragedy, and placed disaster preparedness and nuclear safety on the top of the summit agenda. Having pledged to deepen strategic cooperation through enhanced mutual political trust at the second leaders’ summit, the three partners are now committed to implementing long-term joint projects on economic, security, environmental, cultural, and regional and global issues under “Vision 2020.”

A potential Trilateral Free Trade Agreement (TFTA) is an active initiative that continues to be pushed forward given increasing levels of cross-border trade and investment among the three nations. The TFTA has been prioritized at the trilateral



business summit held in conjunction with the leaders' summit, which recognizes the potential role of China-ROK-Japan free trade in broader East Asian economic integration.

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While still a nascent development, the emerging China-South Korea-Japan triangle carries with it several implications for Northeast Asia's limited regionalism. First, sustained trilateral cooperation may contribute to alleviating South Korean and Japanese anxieties about the regional impact of China's rise while also easing Chinese suspicions about what is often perceived as efforts by two staunch US allies to contain China's rising regional influence. Second, trilateral cooperation between the three Northeast Asian neighbors would enable South Korea and Japan to simultaneously manage their respective alliance relationships with the United States and economic partnerships with China. Third, trilateral diplomacy may provide more opportunities for bilateral coordination on political and security issues that remain the most sensitive issues in the respective bilateral relationships. Fourth, as an institutional mechanism the China-ROK-Japan process could provide a starting point for multiple frameworks of regional cooperation, given that the Korea-based Secretariat is designed to serve as the central coordinating body for the various existing trilateral initiatives. The China-ROK-Japan trilateral may bridge Northeast Asia with broader ASEAN-led efforts such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit, which the three partners envision as the drivers of regional community building.

Finally, since China-South Korea-Japan cooperation is primarily functional and does not place North Korea at the center of its agenda, this form of cooperation may continue despite the stalemate surrounding North Korea. It remains to be seen whether the trilateral dialogue will confront or avoid sensitive political and regional security concerns. Last year's summit in May did not address tensions over the *Cheonan* incident, and the meeting this year did not elaborate on Kim Jong-il's visit to China that was disclosed only days before the summit. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's seven-point proposal for trilateral cooperation—post-quake reconstruction, nuclear safety, disaster management, trade and investment, sustainable development, and cultural exchanges—did not include any North Korea-related or historical and territorial issues. Vision 2020 delegates the North Korea problem to the stalled Six-Party Talks rather than directly addressing the differences that have stalled the talks.

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On the other hand, the China-ROK-Japan trilateral has arguably progressed relatively rapidly and with sustained political will when compared to US-ROK-Japan allied cooperation that prioritizes, but need not be limited to, the North Korean security challenge. The three Northeast Asian neighbors have regularized high-level dialogues in many newly-emerging, nontraditional security fields in which both South Korea and Japan have also sought “comprehensive” alliance cooperation with the United States but with little tangible progress. While the resurfacing of the textbook debate between South Korea and Japan in March appeared to suggest that traditional disputes and nationalistic tendencies continue to constrain pragmatic cooperation, such issues have been more effectively managed in the China-ROK-Japan context where all three parties share historical and territorial differences.

China-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation over the next decade will require building sufficient political trust if it is to emerge as a serious effort on managing regional security issues. Although regional differences over North Korea's nuclear development have prevented the three Northeast Asian partners from advancing the Six-Party Talks as an enduring mechanism for security cooperation, the China-ROK-Japan process suggests that economic interdependence may increasingly direct attention to common security challenges. From this perspective, Northeast Asia-centered trilateralism could become a potential challenge to longstanding US policy toward the region if the three countries are indeed able to promote security cooperation for the first time in decades without the United States having a seat at the table.