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China, Japan, South Korea: Time for Trilateralism?

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Recent rapprochements in China-Japan and Japan-South Korea relations have raised hopes for a trilateral mechanism in dispute-torn Northeast Asia. If this reconciliation process is successful, it would serve as the first steps toward regional integration of the three biggest economies in East Asia, with major implications for ASEAN.

NORTHEAST ASIA's three key players -- Japan, China and South Korea -- have agreed to launch a trilateral annual summit in a bid to jointly take the lead over regional disputes. This development followed warm-up visits to Japan by South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak in April and Chinese President Hu Jintao in May as well as a resumed foreign ministerial meeting between the three Northeast Asian nations in June 2008. They will also make the three-way foreign ministers meeting a regular event. The venue for the summits and ministerial meetings will be rotated among the three neighbours each year. The Japanese newspaper Yomiuri Shimbun reported that the first summit will be held in Japan this September while China will host the next year's foreign ministerial meeting.

The giants in unfitted clothes

Despite lingering disputes, China, Japan and South Korea have pushed up trilateral cooperation in the past decade. Summit meetings of the three nations' leaders, first initiated by former Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi in 1999, have so far been held annually on the sidelines of ASEAN's conferences in the formats of the ASEAN+3 and the East Asia Summit (EAS). The three nations' summit, however, was stalled in 2005 due to then Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's repeated visits to the war-related Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo thus souring its bilateral relations with China and South Korea. After a year of interruption, they were resumed without much warmth at the ASEAN summit in Cebu, the Philippines in 2006. At the Cebu summit, China and South Korea proposed the idea of an independent trilateral summit among the three nations but it was then dismissed by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Normally, China, Japan and South Korea can continue to meet annually at an unofficial level on the sidelines of the ASEAN+3. But undoubtedly such meetings in ASEAN-driven mechanisms will reduce the importance of the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral encounters. Despite being the three

biggest economies in East Asia, they have to accept cooperation models dominated by ASEAN which includes much smaller economies. Even the new model like the EAS can hardly meet their desire as its agenda is still largely set by ASEAN. This renders the three nations to find a new playground to meet their interests. At last year's ASEAN+3 Summit in Singapore, the leaders of the three countries agreed in principle to hold the China-Japan-South Korea annual summit independently of the ASEAN+3 framework to expand their scope of cooperation.

A 'strategic triangle' taking shape?

As revealed by the three foreign ministers, high on the agenda of the first summit are North Korea's nuclear row, protection of intellectual property rights and the establishment of an investment accord. Furthermore, they agreed to study concrete ways to push forward cooperation in disaster prevention and establishing a new international framework to cut global greenhouse gas emissions to succeed the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012. As a step to help the development of Africa, they also agreed to hold the first three-way policy consultation in Japan this autumn.

The envisioned trilateral summit in September will be the first to be held independently of regional and international conferences, reflecting significantly improved ties among the neighbours who account for 70 percent of East Asia's economic output, measured by gross domestic product. Sanguine regional watchers even think of a 'China-Japan-South Korea strategic triangle' -- opening an era of trilateralism and multilateralism in Northeast Asia.

From an intra-regional perspective, the establishment of this new framework can be explained in terms of adaptation to new developments in Northeast Asia in recent times. Noticeable progress has been made in security dialogues on the nuclear issues in the Korean peninsula, giving momentum to other issues involving China, Japan and South Korea. However, the three countries have yet to overcome barriers posed by history-related issues which require them to set up a sustainable framework to manage unpredictable fallout from radical nationalism in each country.

Economically, such a stable coordination channel will also serve the interests of all three countries as they are each other's largest economic partners. Moreover, with the growing importance of East Asia, the fact that the three biggest regional economies are able to now conduct annual summit meetings will surely give them a greater voice and stature in regional and global affairs. With China rising, this new framework may serve as the best mechanism for South Korea and Japan to hold dialogues with and explore possible steps for further cooperation with China. If the three nations can deepen their relationships and mutual trust, it will certainly have a favourable effect on their respective bilateral relationships.

Implications for the region

In fact, relations among the three biggest economies in East Asia have always been a concern for the whole Asia Pacific region as it will influence and drive the dynamics of the regional economy as well as cooperative patterns in East Asia. However, though they are strongly linked by investment and trade, it is too soon to envision a 'strategic triangle' among the three-bigwigs of East Asia. Historical legacies, a lack of common identity and great power politics still impede political cooperation and economic integration. China and South Korea are yet to "leave the past behind" with Japan as long as Japan's view of its role as a colonial power and its actions during the Second World War remains an issue with them. China itself is also concerned of strategic relations among South Korea, Japan and the United States.

Meanwhile, there remain maritime disputes among the three countries (South Korea-Japan's Dokdo/Takeshima dispute and China-Japan's Diaoyutai/Senkaku dispute). The weightiest point of common concern is the nuclear issue in the Korean peninsula. Each nation has its own preferences

and all of them also have to take into account the involvement of outsiders, namely Russia, but particularly the US. Hence, in the immediate future, trilateralism in North East Asia will begin first by dealing with the ‘easy tasks’ like environmental and economic issues rather than tough controversies like territorial disputes, nuclear proliferation or security cooperation.

Declining role of ASEAN?

Looking from the ASEAN perspective, this new development, while positive for Northeast Asia, may be a sign of ASEAN’s decreasing role as “the centre” for East Asian cooperation initiatives. ASEAN, within the ASEAN+3 framework, seems to no longer have ample clout to bind the three powers in the region. The EAS may also become an “unfitted shirt” for the three giants. The new annual summit mechanism is a forecast of a possibly new East Asian cooperation model going around the China-Japan-South Korea axis. ASEAN+3 may turn into 3+ASEAN and this is a signal that ASEAN is losing its driver’s seat in East Asian cooperation mechanisms.

Likewise, it would also be a warning for the US in terms of its regional influence. The newly established mechanism, together with China’s increasing charm offensive, willy-nilly, may erode US-led regional alliances which have recently been worsened due to an upsurge of anti-US public sentiment in South Korea (over beef imports) and Japan.

Therefore, while it might be premature to predict that a ‘strategic triangle’ is going to be formed among China, Japan and South Korea, this is definitely a strong move toward deeper regional integration and greater independence from outside influence, with serious implications for ASEAN’s role in East Asian affairs.

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