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Teo, Sarah

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China-Japan-Korea Trilateral Summit: What does it mean for East Asia?

By Sarah Teo

Synopsis

The leaders of China, Japan and South Korea have resumed the Trilateral Summit. While largely symbolic, the meeting nevertheless is an important development in East Asia. Given that all three countries are significant powers in East Asia, the resumption of the summit also has implications for the broader region beyond Northeast Asia.

Commentary

THE LEADERS of China, Japan and South Korea met over the 1 November 2015 weekend, after a three-year hiatus of what was supposed to be an annual summit, caused by political and historical disputes among the three Northeast Asian countries. Prime Minister Li Keqiang, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Park Geun-hye convened in Seoul, South Korea for the Sixth Trilateral Summit, where they issued a joint declaration noting that trilateral cooperation had been “completely restored” and pledged to resolutely sustain such cooperation.

The meeting of the three leaders is arguably an achievement in itself, given that none of the issues that had initially disrupted the annual summit have been resolved. Maritime territorial disputes—involving China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, and Japan and South Korea over the Takeshima/Dokdo islands—remain in the background of this recent upturn in relations. Likewise, little progress has been made towards resolving the argument among the three countries arising from their differing interpretations of history.

China, Japan and South Korea in East Asia

To be fair, despite the presence of these long-standing disagreements and the lack of a trilateral leaders' meeting in the recent past, it has been reportedly business-as-usual for the working-level forums as well as ministerial meetings in areas such as environment, disaster management and finance. As further signs of a potential improvement in relations, Park in December 2014 proposed a trilateral summit with China and Japan; foreign ministers of the three countries also met in March this year—the first time since 2012 that such a meeting was held. In this sense, the resumption of the summit comes as little surprise.

Nevertheless, the resumption of the Trilateral Summit is a relatively important development in East Asian international relations for several reasons. Firstly, China and Japan are considered major powers, and South Korea a relatively established middle power, in the region. They are the top three economies in East Asia (encompassing Northeast and Southeast Asia), and are each within the top five trading partners of one another.

Beyond Northeast Asia, China and Japan have since the early 2010s been the largest and second largest trading partners of ASEAN collectively, with South Korea not far behind. China is additionally the top trading partner of several Southeast Asian countries, while Japan and South Korea occupy leading positions in terms of their foreign direct investments in the region.

All three countries are also firmly embedded in the regional economic architecture through bilateral and multilateral arrangements. Their huge economic presence throughout the region suggests that any developments in Northeast Asia are likely to have an impact that would resonate beyond their backyard.

Secondly, the fact that the three countries have managed to engineer a meeting among their leaders despite the continuing existence of political and territorial disputes reflect the importance of political will in East Asian interstate relations. As many observers have highlighted, most of East Asia's security hotspots are located in Northeast Asia. These include not only the maritime territorial disputes, but also North Korea and cross-Straits relations. While China, Japan and South Korea broadly want to preserve regional peace and stability, their interests in the above issues are fundamentally different and in some cases conflicting.

In this regard, without political will from all three leaders and policymakers, it is unlikely that the Trilateral Summit would have resumed. This is also characteristic of other multilateral initiatives in the broader East Asia. Political will, motivated by a sense of pragmatism, is perhaps the most important factor driving dialogue and cooperation in a region trying to promote community-building and integration amid the challenge posed by potentially divisive Sino-US dynamics and its associated issues.

Implications for East Asia

Keeping the extant features of the regional architecture in mind, what implications does the Trilateral Summit have for the broader East Asian region? For the United States, the meeting of its two most important allies in East Asia – Japan and South

Korea - is a positive sign given its efforts in trying to bring the two Northeast Asian countries together over the past few years.

The meeting between Park and Abe—the first formal bilateral talks since both took office—following the Trilateral Summit could thus be considered an initial step in further strengthening the US web of regional alliances, and consequently sustaining its dominant presence in the region.

At the same time, the resumption of three-way talks also highlights the willingness on the part of Japan and South Korea to engage and cooperate with China, even if both are US allies. This effort to reduce the ‘Asian paradox’, reflected in the disparity between worsening political-security ties and increasing economic interdependence, is additionally reflective of the hedging behaviour pursued by other regional countries in response to China’s rise. With the jury still out on whether China is seeking to change the status quo and establish a new regional order, the best strategy at the disposal of regional countries remains to simultaneously balance against and engage with the rising power.

Finally, for ASEAN which has been striving to preserve its centrality in the region, should it be concerned that improved relations in Northeast Asia could eventually render the ASEAN-led platforms irrelevant to China, Japan and South Korea? In the short- to medium-term, ASEAN is unlikely to lose its relevance to the three Northeast Asian powers. After all, the recent Trilateral Summit remains more a symbolic achievement and serious challenges continue to cloud Northeast Asian relations, with the possibility of another suspension of the summit if relations deteriorate again.

In other words, China, Japan and South Korea would likely continue to find the ASEAN-led forums useful, even if only as venues where their leaders and ministers could meet within the broader regional context.

Nevertheless, with the upcoming series of ASEAN leaders and ministerial meetings this month, it would be prudent for policymakers in ASEAN to consider ways to sustain—or even enhance—the Association’s relevance to the three Northeast Asian countries in the long-term. This would also help ASEAN guard against any negative consequences arising from the fluctuations in the trilateral relations.

Sarah Teo is Associate Research Fellow with the Regional Security Architecture Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
