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THE PENINSULA

2024 Korea-Japan-China Trilateral Summit: Disunity on North

Korea and Regional Security

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At the end of May, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol hosted a high-level summit with representatives from Japan and China. It was the first time Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio traveled to South Korea this year and was also the first visit to South Korea by Chinese Premier Li Qiang since his appointment in 2023. The Ninth Korea-Japan-China trilateral summit was held in Seoul after a five-year hiatus and included a variety of trilateral meetings, including one with the Korean Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and other bilateral meetings. The joint statement issued after the summit covered a wide range of issues, including support for reenergizing a trilateral Korea-Japan-China free trade agreement. But the lack of details on critical security issues, particularly North Korea, underlines the continued gaps between Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing.

The section of the trilateral joint statement focusing on North Korea underlines the distance between Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing. The wording suggests the leaders were unable to come to a consensus on how to manage tensions with Pyongyang, with the left-leaning *Hankyoreh* calling it “an undeniable step back” from its previous iteration. “We reiterated positions on regional peace and stability, denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the abductions issue, respectively,” the leaders said in Seoul this year. “We agree to continue to make positive efforts for the political settlement of the Korean Peninsula issue.” In comparison, the attendees of the 2019 trilateral summit in Chengdu said they were

“committed to the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” While emphasizing the need for diplomacy, the leaders had also underlined the importance of North Korean compliance with UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

The lack of reference to UNSC resolutions in this year’s statement is notable, given the dissolution of the UN panel of experts responsible for monitoring North Korea. China’s abstention from the vote would not have saved the panel, given Russia’s veto. But combined with the lack of consensus in the trilateral summit, it appears there is significant distance on North Korea between China on the one side, and Korea and Japan on the other. An unnamed former government official observed to the *Hankyoreh* that “common ground is so shaky they didn’t even field reporters’ questions at their joint press conference.” China remains lenient toward handling North Korea, while skepticism has grown among South Korea and Japan. Changes in the regional security environment are reflected in the differing results of the successive Korea-Japan-China trilateral summits.

Despite the lack of a strong statement on North Korea, the North sharply showed its disapproval of the summit. The Korea-Japan-China summit was “a blatant challenge to the sovereignty of the DPRK and wanton interference in its internal affairs,” said the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “If anyone tries to deny or violate the constitutional position of our country as a nuclear weapons state...it will be regarded as the most serious infringement upon sovereignty,” the statement also said. On the day of the summit, Pyongyang went ahead with the launch of a “reconnaissance satellite Malligyong-1-1 aboard the new-type satellite carrier rocket.” The launch was in contravention of international sanctions and was ultimately unsuccessful, according to a report by North Korean state media.

Pyongyang’s actions were notable amid the major diplomatic activity by China, one of the few states friendly with North Korea. “The strong backlash from North Korea shows that the joint declaration of the summit was significant,” said South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Lim Soo-suk. Separately, the Ministry of Unification underlined the fact that a similar action by the North last happened after a 2015 meeting between South Korea and China. “Though the North’s rebukes were focused on the South, it was rare for North Korea to publicly denounce a (diplomatic) meeting attended by China,” the official said. They added that North Korea’s warning against “anyone” trying to uphold denuclearization may have included Beijing.

Despite these shortcomings, it is still good that South Korea, Japan, and China met. Relations between the three have rarely been completely positive, given the significant differences between them. In particular, the strengthening of US-Japan-Korea cooperation amid the US-China competition has put South Korea in a delicate position. Speaking after the trilateral summit, Chinese Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming warned South Korea not to work against China “based on values.” Ambassador Xing also said, “We hope that South Korea is wary of small anti-China groups and continues the partnership to facilitate the mutual development as we respect each other’s common interests.” Beijing remains apprehensive of Seoul’s strengthening cooperation with Washington and Tokyo, so threading the needle on maintaining stable South Korea-China relations will continue to be a major issue for the Yoon administration.

The trilateral summit has received a variety of responses in South Korea. Members of the Yoon administration seemed pleased with the results. “The summit marks a turning point in fully restoring and normalizing the trilateral cooperation framework in the post-COVID-19

era,” [said](#) Prime Minister Han Duck-soo during a cabinet meeting. The media also gave the Yoon government a passing grade for the summit. “The trilateral summit has its limitations due to its tight schedule and format,” wrote [The Korea Herald](#) in an editorial. “But it should continue since it offers an important venue for the leaders to seek much-needed cooperation in the region.” However, public opinion polls offer a less-than-sunny picture of the president’s standing with the public. A [Realmeter survey](#) in early June found that President Yoon’s approval rating at the end of May was 30.6 percent, improving by 0.3 percent from the previous survey. The overall negative sentiment of the poll tracks with a [poll conducted by Media Research](#) immediately after the summit, which found 35.1 percent of respondents evaluating the Yoon administration positively. That was a rise of 2.4 percentage points, which the firm speculated may have been caused by the successful hosting of the summit. Despite this, the Yoon administration has far to go in winning the public’s approval.

However, the Yoon administration should be congratulated for realizing the first South Korea-Japan-China trilateral summit in five years. It has furthered its vision of South Korea as a “global pivotal state” by underlining Seoul’s leadership potential in the international community. But it remains to be seen how the summit will affect the trajectory of regional security, given the gaps on important issues like North Korea. [The Wall Street Journal](#) [observed](#) that the decision to send Premier Li suggested that Beijing was more focused on economic issues rather than diplomacy or security. South Korean media says the Yoon administration should now work to repair the bilateral relationship with China. “To this end, diplomatic authorities from [South Korea and China] should double down on efforts to facilitate a visit by the Chinese president to Seoul, which would further solidify the progress made at the summit,” said [The Korea Times](#) in an editorial. Talking for the sake of talking may not be a worthwhile objective, but the recent trilateral summit has demonstrated that more diplomacy may be needed to close severe gaps that remain on critical issues facing the region.

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Photo by Yang Seung Hak on the [Republic of Korea’s official Flickr account](#).

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