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The Sixth Trilateral Summit: Style Over Substance?

By Tan Ming Hui and Henrick Z. Tsjeng

Synopsis

After more than a three-year hiatus, the Trilateral Summit between China, Japan and South Korea has finally been revived. Although it was largely symbolic, lacking major breakthroughs, the seeming thaw in relations between the three neighbours is a welcome, albeit temporary, respite from the tensions in the region.

Commentary

ON 1 NOVEMBER 2015, China, Japan, and South Korea held their sixth Trilateral Summit in Seoul, attended by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and South Korean President Park Geun-hye. This was the first, and much anticipated, meeting between the three Northeast Asian neighbours since 2012, following which relations deteriorated over territorial and historical disputes.

Although it did not result in major breakthroughs, the revival of an annual summit signals at least a degree of political will of the leaders to discuss issues and mitigate conflicts in a peaceful manner. It also continues the trend of warming relations among the three countries. Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping have met twice on the sidelines of international summits in April and last November. Furthermore, Beijing and Seoul showed considerable restraint in their responses to Abe's statement marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, even though it did not meet their demands.

Return to *seikei bunri*

Although the politics of Northeast Asia have been riddled with nationalism, mutual distrust and animosities since World War II, the key players in the region remain

close economic and trade partners. Regional relations can be encapsulated by *seikei bunri*, or the separation of politics and economics, a guiding principle for Japan's post-war foreign policy.

The principle of *seikei bunri* began to unravel in September 2010, when a clash occurred between a Chinese trawler and the Japanese Coast Guard's patrol boats near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Tensions between the two Asian giants were further exacerbated when the then-Japanese government under Yoshihiko Noda purchased and nationalised the islands in 2012, despite Chinese backlash.

In addition, diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan deteriorated over conflicting claims to the Liancourt Rocks. Since her inauguration as president in February 2013, Park has refused to hold bilateral meetings with Abe, laying the blame on his supposed historical revisionism, especially over the comfort women issue. Thereafter in December 2013, Abe's visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine saw a further cooling of relations.

The recent Trilateral Summit's emphasis on the tightening of economic ties suggests that the leaders are ready to put aside politics for the moment, and focus on economics. In particular, the Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia circulated after the meeting highlighted the leaders' pledge to work towards economic integration and the conclusion of a trilateral free-trade deal. Due to fraught relations and the existence of anti-Japanese sentiments in the country, Japanese investors had begun to withdraw from China and look elsewhere in Asia for business opportunities.

Beijing may be acknowledging the negative repercussions on its economy, and this is on top of the slowdown that the Chinese economy is currently facing. Moreover, China and South Korea are not parties to the recently concluded Trans-Pacific Partnership, and may be concerned over possible trade diversion from their economies. From the Japanese perspective, popular support for Abe has plummeted since his introduction and later passage of the controversial security bills. To regain public confidence, it is likely that he wants to shift the focus back to economic revitalisation.

Security and historical issues remain

Nonetheless, putting aside political and security matters is only a short-term solution given the highly-charged regional atmosphere. One of the more notable features of the Trilateral Summit's Joint Declaration is the relegation of security issues to a mere few paragraphs. On the top of the security agenda, expectedly, was North Korea, particularly the call to resume the Six Party Talks and the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. The Joint Declaration also called for cooperation on terrorism and cyber security. Notably, however, there was no mention of the territorial disputes between the three countries.

Despite the best of intentions among the three countries, getting North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons will remain a pipe dream for a long time. North Korea appears determined to keep its nuclear stockpile as a deterrent against external invasion, as well as a bargaining tool in its negotiations with the United States and

South Korea. However, the three countries—especially China—may be attempting to isolate and pressure North Korea to scale back its belligerent behaviour, especially its nuclear tests.

Secondly, there was no mention of the territorial disputes between the three countries. There was no discussion over the Senkaku/Diaoyu and Liancourt disputes though Japan and South Korea did discuss the South China Sea issue but without China.

What is clearly needed is at least some form of dialogue to manage disputes and develop confidence building and crisis mitigation measures. However no mention was made on the communication link between Japan and China that would likely be a major crisis mitigation measure once fully established.

Finally, the historical issues that continue to dog mutual relations were only given a cursory reference that the three countries should have “the spirit of facing history squarely and advancing towards the future.” While ostensibly a jointly-crafted statement, it nonetheless reveals the rift between South Korea and China on one hand, and Japan on the other: The former two often call for Japan to face up to history, but Japan professes a preference for looking to the future.

A welcome respite

It is clear that the security and historical issues have been largely sidestepped, and an incident over the disputed islands or disagreements over interpretation of history could again cause the annual trilateral meeting to be suspended. Nonetheless, the Trilateral Summit is a first step to breaking the ice. While security and historical matters are not easily resolved overnight, at the very least, the recent show of restraint and the resumption of the Trilateral Summit reflect political willingness to engage in dialogue, even if they only reach for the low-hanging fruit of economic cooperation initially.

Even though the summit may appear to be more “style” over substance and by no means a watershed, it may pave the way for more positive interactions in the future as well as greater mutual understanding over thorny issues, thereby contributing to regional peace and stability.

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