

China, Japan, South Korea Trilateral Cooperation: Implications for Northeast Asian Politics and Order

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How significant are trilateral relations in Northeast Asia? Does increasing trilateral cooperation between China, Japan, and South Korea undermine existing U.S. bilateral relationships? Can Japan and South Korea use trilateral relations to hedge between the United States and China? Or do these middle powers help create a buffer between great power rivals by establishing trilateral relations with both the United States and China? This essay explores trilateral cooperation in East Asia paying particular attention to developments in trilateral relations between China, Japan, and South Korea. Although trilateral cooperation among Northeast Asian states will likely continue to grow, proponents of U.S. bilateral alliances need not be alarmed about such trends. Taking a positive-sum view of trilateral relations, policymakers should encourage trilateral developments, whether they include the United States or China, to the extent that such institutional arrangements facilitate cooperation and trust-building at the bilateral and multilateral level.

This essay is organized into four sections. In the first section I provide a brief overview of trilateral cooperation between China, Japan, and South Korea. I also present data available from the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) website indicating trends and patterns in trilateral relations since 1999. Section two discusses the relative political significance of trilateral cooperation within Northeast Asia and its limitations. The focus here is on the micro-foundations of trilateral cooperation. Section three places the TCS and the Trilateral

Summit in a broader strategic context. I address trilateral cooperation in the context of geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China and East Asia's developing institutional architecture. Section four concludes by arguing that trilateral initiatives are not zero-sum. Although some policymakers fear that traditional U.S. allies may drift closer to China as trilateral cooperation expands, the TCS and Trilateral Summit are but one set of institutional mechanisms situated in conjunction with or on top of bilateral alliances.

A Brief Overview of Trilateral Cooperation

Trilateral cooperation between China, Japan, and South Korea took root in 1999 under the auspices of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) meeting. Initiated by then Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, the leaders of the three countries held an informal breakfast meeting on the sidelines of the APT¹. Discussions revolved around various ways to promote collaboration across various sectors including trade, commerce, env-

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ironment, and agriculture through joint research. Sensitive political and security issues remained off the table, although security cooperation did appear on the agenda on occasion. The breakfast meeting in 2001 included counterterrorism as a discussion point. North Korean nuclear diplomacy was also discussed during the 2003 meeting.

For the first few years, trilateral meetings between the three heads of states remained informal and relatively low key. However, the 2003 trilateral meeting in Bali, Indonesia moved a half-step towards greater formality. For the first time, the three leaders issued a joint declaration following their meeting. At this point, trilateral cooperation had proliferated into multiple meetings with separate meetings held for foreign, economic, finance, health, and science ministers.²

Trilateral cooperation hit a glitch following Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to Yaskuni Shrine in October 2005. The visit resulted in the cancellation of the 2005 trilateral meeting. Although the economic ministers met on the sideline of the 2006 ATP, the leaders of the three countries did not meet again until early 2007. It was at the 2007 ATP, however, when

Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda proposed hosting the annual leaders meeting outside of the ASEAN Plus Three format. The three heads of state held their first independent Trilateral Summit in Fukuoka, Japan in December 2008. Trilateral cooperation took another step toward institutionalization at the 2010 meeting when South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak proposed establishing a secretariat for trilateral cooperation. In addition to providing administrative support and secretarial services for various trilateral consultative mechanisms, the secretariat would explore new agendas for cooperation and actively engage in public diplomacy. The new Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) opened in Seoul on September 2011.

In addition to the Trilateral Summit and TCS, the three countries have created over sixty trilateral consultative mechanisms. This includes eighteen ministerial meetings and over one hundred cooperative projects.³ Table 1 below presents data available from the TCS website indicating trends and patterns regarding trilateral cooperation. Table 1 below indicates greater frequency of Track I and Track II trilateral meetings since the initiation of ASEAN +3 in 1999.

Table 1: Trilateral Meetings⁴

Year	Politics & Security	Economics	Environment	Science, Social, Culture	TOTAL
2011	11	29	5	8	53
2010	8	28	4	11	51
2009	6	18	5	10	39
2008	5	16	5	10	36
2007	8	17	6	11	42
2006	2	14	2	9	27
2005	2	12	2	4	20
2004	4	8	2	4	18
2003	1	5	2	2	10
2002	1	5	2	3	11
2001	1	2	2	0	5
2000	1	1	2	0	4
1999	1	0	1	0	2
TOTAL	51	155	40	72	318



Table 1 also suggests that economic issues (which include trade, finance, investment, agriculture, standardization, regulations etc...) account for the greatest number of meetings. The frequency of trilateral meetings categorized as politics and security are relatively small, suggesting that the priority of the TCS falls under economic, technical, scientific, or cultural issues. Although the available data does not include interaction among the three countries outside the trilateral format (i.e. interaction at the Six Party Talks or in larger multilateral settings), I assume that the general trend towards greater interaction still holds true. Greater interaction is also corroborated by statistics for annual trade, investment, professional networks, and student exchanges.

The Politics and Political Significance of Trilateral Cooperation

Understanding the significance of trilateral cooperation between China, Japan, and South Korea is a matter of perspective. The development of trilateral relations is a remarkable feat in its own right. Looking at the *longue durée*, the establishment of the TCS presents a milestone. This is especially true if we consider the colonization of the Korean Peninsula and parts of China by Japan or direct military confrontation between China and South Korea during the Korean War. Trilateral cooperation has certainly come a long way given the nature of Northeast Asian relations the past century. The establishment of the TCS is therefore significant. It represents an “expression of political will” on the part of the three parties to improve relations among the three Northeast Asian countries.⁵

At the same time, trilateral cooperation is still politically weak at this stage. For the most part, trilateral cooperation revolves around “soft” issues in which all three countries can find some common basis for mutual cooperation. This is true of the ministerial meetings and Track II meetings as well as the annual Trilat-

eral Summit involving the heads of states. For the Trilateral Summit, hosting countries have typically chosen non-controversial themes. For instance, the 2012 meeting in Beijing highlighted sustainable development and wildlife conservation. In 2011, the typhoon and nuclear meltdown in Fukushima prompted the three leaders to focus on nuclear safety and disaster management.

Although the cooperative spirit of the trilateral framework enables diplomats and government officials to feel relatively “safe,” bilateral undercurrents still flow deep beneath the surface of trilateral discussions. Trilateral relations are still underpinned by bilateral ties. And in Northeast Asia, these bilateral ties still suffer from underlying structural and historical problems. The recent reemergence of territorial disputes among all three countries is just one manifestation of troubled bilateral relations. TCS staff members readily admit that the Trilateral Summit and the TCS are not the appropriate venue for addressing politically sensitive issues. Nor is it the place to address bilateral issues and problems.⁶ The nature of bilateral relations places limitations on what trilateral cooperation can actually achieve in Northeast Asia.

This leads to an important question for trilateral cooperation. Do bilateral relations have to improve before trilateral cooperation advances to the next stage? Or does trilateral cooperation, by expanding trust-building mechanisms, help pave the way for improved bilateral relations. TCS officials and those who believe in international institutions argue the latter. Realists might claim the former. Obviously this is not a one-directional relationship. At the very least, trilateral cooperation would not likely worsen bilateral relations between the three countries. The creation of the TCS ensures an institutional foundation for trilateral cooperation. Even if bilateral relations deteriorate, discussions at the trilateral level on the “safe” issues such as transportation and logistics, customs, science and technology, or water resource management may prevent an all-out diplomatic freeze from occurring.



Hence, the trilateral framework can provide space for countries to keep talking on issues where they might find areas of mutual cooperation even if higher level bilateral meetings are temporarily suspended. Given the relatively low costs and potential benefit of trilateral initiatives, its creation has thus far been a worthwhile venture.

Trilateralism in the Context of East Asian Geopolitics

Trilateral cooperation does not exist in a strategic vacuum. Although the trilateral framework addresses primarily economic, social, and cultural issues, as an institution, the Trilateral Summit and TCS exists within a broader network of multilateralism and minilateralism. The question is, why create another institution rather than taking advantage of existing institutional arrangements in East Asia?

China, Japan, and South Korea pushed the trilateral agenda forward in part to create a mechanism addressing issues specific to the three major Northeast Asian countries. Prior to 2008, no such institutional arrangement existed. Moreover, the three Northeast Asian countries were keen on developing a more permanent mechanism for dialogue and trilateral cooperation outside of ASEAN.

More importantly, each of the three member countries have their own incentives and agenda for participating in trilateral cooperation. South Korea has been an enthusiastic supporter of trilateral cooperation. By hosting the TCS and actively participating in trilateral cooperation, South Korea continues to raise its regional and international profile. Moreover, the trilateral framework enables South Korea to interact with its more powerful neighbors, China and Japan, on an equal footing. Having often been the victim rather than aggressor in Northeast Asian affairs in the past, South Korea is also in a unique position to mediate and moderate the trilateral agenda. It is not by coincidence that the TCS is headquartered in Seoul rather than Beijing or Tokyo.

Despite China's initial reluctance to participate in trilateral meetings, since the early 2000s, China has welcomed trilateral relations. The Trilateral framework enables China to participate in a regional forum without U.S. involvement and strengthen relationships with Japan and South Korea on its own terms. China seeks to dilute U.S. power and influence in the region. The trilateral framework, while still lacking political bite, does provide an institutional framework to advance such longer term strategic goals.

Although Japan initiated the trilateral meeting at the ASEAN + 3 stage, Japan in some respects has less incentives than China and South Korea in promoting trilateral cooperation. Japan has often approached regional multilateralism from a position of inclusiveness, one which encompasses the broader Asia-Pacific and draws in U.S. participation. Investing deeply in China, Japan, South Korea trilateralism may pull Japan away from its broader regional vision of layered multilateralism while also sending the United States mixed signals about its alliance commitments.

Despite being limited to largely economic, social, and cultural issues, some see the Trilateral Summit and TCS situated within a broader geostrategic rivalry between the United States and China. Others observe trilateral cooperation in the context of multilateralism in East Asia and the development of the regional institutional architecture. There is, of course, the "other" trilateral between the United States, Japan, and South Korea. U.S. officials do not necessarily carry any strong opinions about growing trilateralism between its two Asian alliance partners and China. From Washington's perspective, however, two basic schools of thought exist. The first see trilateral relations as benign. At best, trilateral cooperation may help facilitate regional stability. At worst, it's a mechanism designed to go nowhere.

However, others in Washington are closely monitoring developments in China, Japan, South Korea cooperation. Contrary to the positive-sum view of trilateral cooperation, those who accept the reality of



U.S.-Sino rivalry adopt a zero-sum view of trilateral relations and remain wary of any institutional framework which involves China but excludes the U.S. Washington becomes uneasy when Japan and South Korea begin to exhibit strategic ambiguity; the Trilateral Summit and TCS provide an institutional framework for such a strategy. More pragmatic policymakers in this camp may not necessarily oppose China-Japan-South Korea trilateralism. But they would also want to see greater institutional development in trilateral relations between the U.S., Japan, and South Korea. Under this scenario, strengthened trilateralism would represent a classic example of institutional balancing.⁷

Looking Forward

An analysis of trends and discussions with TCS representatives from China, Japan, and South Korea suggest that those in the benign camp have a more accurate reading of trilateral relations in Northeast Asia. To begin with, the Trilateral Summit and TCS are not designed as a counterweight against U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral relations. U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral relations are fundamentally strategic in nature built on longstanding bilateral alliance partnerships. On the other hand, the Trilateral Summit and TCS are based on cooperative relations. The rationale is foremost functional and geographic rather than strategic. Although trilateral cooperation is gradually institutionalizing, the Trilateral Summit and the TCS exist largely as a measure for confidence-building through a combination of Track I and Track II meetings. Thus, barring some immediate security or political crisis, trilateral cooperation will continue to remain largely within the realm of economic, social, and cultural cooperation.

Second, even if China intends to use the trilateral framework as a venue to exercise Chinese political leadership in the region or challenge U.S. alliances, Beijing would face stiff resistance from Seoul and Tokyo. The Trilateral Summit and TCS do not provide the means or mechanisms to fulfill the strategic ambi-

tions of one member country.

Third, Japanese and South Korean officials have made clear that they intend to maintain if not strengthen bilateral and trilateral relations. Bilateral alliances remain robust, propped by regional security threats and common values among democratic partners. Since 2010, the three countries have increased military cooperation and opened more opportunities for joint training exercises. At this year's ASEAN Regional Forum, the U.S., Japan, and South Korea launched a consultative body, known as the Steering Group, which would enhance trilateral relations between the three countries.

Finally, although some U.S. policymakers fear its traditional allies may drift closer to China's orbit as trilateral cooperation in East Asia expands, they should be reminded that the TCS is but one organization situated in conjunction with other trilateral, bilateral, and multilateral arrangements. Underneath this multilayered framework are U.S. bilateral alliances which continue to play a significant role in East Asia's regional architecture.

Some policymakers, particularly in Washington, may continue to see the Trilateral Summit as a way for Seoul and Tokyo to hedge between the U.S. and China. Rather than interpreting China-Japan-Korea trilateralism as a tool for hedging, however, policymakers should understand the TCS and Trilateral Summit as a mechanism for South Korea and Japan to signal its willingness to cooperate with China on regional and economic issues even as it seeks to strengthen the US-Japan-ROK security ties. The TCS, along with other institutional arrangements in Northeast Asia, are not merely pawns for great power politics. They should be viewed as a means to a larger end of stability and regional order rather than and geopolitical rivalry. ■



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Korea's commitment to improved trilateral relations.

⁶ As one staff member remarked, members may have less incentive to participate if discussion over sensitive issues results in a two against one scenario. For instance, if China and South Korea continued to raise Japan's wartime past, Japan might be less willing to attend future meetings.

⁷ Kai He, *Institutional Balancing in the Asia Pacific: Economic Interdependence and China's Rise* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹ The leaders of each country carried their own expectations in agreeing to the first trilateral summit in 1999. Prime Minister Obuchi wanted the summit to address the North Korean issue, thereby increasing Japan's role on Northeast Asian security issues. China, initially skeptical about trilateral cooperation, and South Korea were keen on improving economic cooperation.

² The trilateral meeting among the three ministers of science did not take place until January 2007.

³ See the TCS website at <http://tcs-asia.org/about/overview.php> [last accessed November 6, 2012]

⁴ Data as of June 2012.

⁵ Interview with TCS Secretary-General Shin Bong-kil, Seoul, South Korea, July 6, 2012. Ambassador Shin explains that an independent secretariat was not necessarily needed for an organization with only three participating countries. More than functional need, the acceptance of the TCS by all parties indicated China, Japan, and South

