

2024 KOREA POLICY

Volume 2 / Issue 1

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The trilateral relationship between South Korea, Japan, and China has reached a critical juncture, with historical grievances, territorial disputes, and the US-China strategic rivalry shaping their interactions. The fabric of bilateral relations, foundational to the trilateral partnership, is fraying. South Korea-China relations have deteriorated to their lowest point since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1992, especially in the aftermath of the THAAD dispute in 2017, and have yet to find the momentum to recover.¹ Japan-China relations have also plummeted following the arrest of a Japanese business executive in China on espionage charges and Japan's labeling of China as "the greatest strategic challenge."²

Conversely, ties between South Korea and Japan are experiencing a resurgence under South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol.³ The dynamics among these nations resemble a seesaw; as South Korea and Japan's ties with China worsen, their relationships with the United States strengthen. The United States, as a key ally of both South Korea and Japan and a strategic competitor to China, plays a critical role in shaping this relationship.⁴ The official website of South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs expresses a commitment to "harmoniously develop" both South Korea-US-Japan and South Korea-Japan-China trilateral cooperation.⁵ However, achieving this goal is more complex than it might initially appear.

Historical Context

The establishment of diplomatic relations among the three East Asian countries – starting with South Korea and Japan in 1965, Japan and China in 1972, and South Korea and China in 1992 – marked significant milestones. Despite historical grievances, economic reforms in China and the end of the Cold War spurred regional economic growth and increased diplomatic exchanges. The first trilateral summit between South Korea, Japan, and China began with a breakfast meeting between South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo, and Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji

Dr. Seong-Hyon Lee is a Senior Fellow at the George H. W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations and a Visiting Scholar at the Harvard University Asia Center. This paper was finalized in mid-May 2024

during the ASEAN+3 summit held in Manila in 1999. This eventually led to the inception of annual summit meetings starting in 2008 and the establishment of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) in 2011, aimed at promoting “peace, prosperity, and cultural exchange.”⁶

Cooperation among the three nations has progressed intermittently over the past 16 years. While the leaders’ summit was planned to be held annually, it has, in practice, been held irregularly, often disrupted by territorial disputes and historical issues.⁷ For instance, the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012 led to a three-year hiatus in summit meetings.⁸ At that time, the Japanese government announced its nationalization of the islands, stating that the move was to prevent Tokyo’s then hawkish Governor Ishihara Shintaro from purchasing the islands, which could have escalated tensions with China.⁹ However, China suspected a “conspiracy” between Ishihara and the Japanese government. The incident followed a 2010 collision between a Chinese fishing boat and a Japanese official vessel, seen by Japan as a sign of China’s growing aggression and by China as Japan’s hardening policy.¹⁰ The territorial dispute occurred amid increased maritime activities by the Chinese Coast Guard and frequent incursions near the islands, highlighting the ongoing conflict between the two nations in the East China Sea.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 significantly disrupted trilateral engagements. Additionally, tensions arising from the deployment of the US THAAD missile system in South Korea, coupled with strengthened cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, have made China less enthusiastic about resuming full-scale meetings.¹¹ Furthermore, the Ukraine War has significantly influenced the consolidation of alliance structures in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly among the United States, South Korea, and Japan.¹² Considering all these factors, China increasingly perceives the trilateral relationship, which includes two of the US allies in Asia, as another Washington-led mechanism in the region to isolate Beijing.¹³

By 2023, the geopolitical context had evolved, with the Joe Biden administration emphasizing the expansion of US-South Korea-Japan collaboration as a pivotal aspect of its Indo-Pacific Strategy. Highlighted by the Camp David Summit in August 2023, this move faced criticism from China, which perceived it as an attempt by the United States to use its allies to “incite bloc confrontation in Asia” to contain China’s regional influence.¹⁴ Despite these geopolitical tensions, efforts to stabilize US-China relations with a face-to-face meeting between Presidents Biden and Xi Jinping for the first time in a year on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in November 2023 have provided Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing with a window to rejuvenate trilateral ties.¹⁵

This article, written from a South Korean perspective, explores the challenges and diminishing opportunities for trilateral South Korea-Japan-China cooperation within the broader context of the US-China rivalry. It aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on why these nations struggle to cooperate more closely despite perceived economic benefits, setting the stage for further discussion on this complex issue. For the remainder of the article, I examine lingering animosities among the three countries by illustrating specific incidents, followed by an analysis of the deep economic interdependence that brought South Korea, Japan, and China together in the past but has now become a liability amid diverging strategic priorities in the broader US-China rivalry. Then, this article shows that the vision for regional cooperation and unity between the three Asian states is not a recent development by illustrating prominent figures from history who strived for such a vision, albeit with different contexts and diverging goals. It then moves on to dig deeper into why there are greater challenges and diminishing opportunities ahead despite these underlying currents of efforts for trilateral cooperation. Finally, it concludes with some thoughts on the future prospects of the trilateral relationship, which will ultimately depend on the strategic choices made by the political leaders of Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing.

Lingering Animosities

The complex historical legacies and territorial disputes among South Korea, Japan, and China continue to influence regional dynamics in East Asia. For instance, in April 2024, the South Korean Foreign Ministry summoned the Japanese Ambassador, Aiboshi Koichi, in response to Japan's approval of a new middle school textbook that downplayed Japan's historical atrocities on the Korean Peninsula. The South Korean government criticized this approval, stating that it "runs counter to the trend of improving bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan" and urging Japan to "squarely face history and take a more responsible attitude in educating the young generation."¹⁶

That same month, the Chinese and Japanese coast guards confronted each other in the East China Sea near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. This confrontation occurred when a group of Japanese lawmakers, led by former Defense Minister Inada Tomomi, visited the area.¹⁷ Inada's group spent three hours near the islands, using drones to observe the area, while the Japanese coast guard vessel attempted to fend off the Chinese coast guard. This was the first inspection trip to the area by members of Japan's parliament since 2013.

Adding to regional strains, both South Korea and China criticized Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's offering at the Yasukuni Shrine, a site that both

countries view as a symbol of Japan's wartime militarism due to its honoring of "Class A" war criminals from WWII.¹⁸ In a reciprocal critique, Prime Minister Kishida labeled China "the greatest strategic challenge."¹⁹

Such exchanges reflect the ongoing adversarial political environment in which East Asians, including this author, are raised. The animosity, which is deeply embedded in historical memory and easily provoked in present reality when triggered, illustrates how difficult it is for the three nations to form any kind of common trilateral unity. The Asia bureau chief of *The Economist* once recounted his visit to the TCS office in Seoul and stated that the sight of the three countries' flags hanging side by side somehow looked "unnatural."²⁰

This environment also often sees two of the nations aligning against the third. For example, during his 2014 visit to South Korea, President Xi highlighted past Japanese aggressions to evoke a sense of unity against Japan. He remarked, "In the first half of the last century, Japanese militarism launched a barbaric war of aggression against China and Korea, annexing the Korean Peninsula and occupying half of China, causing immense suffering and devastation to the people and lands of both nations."²¹ He added that the people of the two nations were "interdependent in life and death, and gave their utmost support... during the fiery years of the war against Japan." In contrast, Japanese diplomats and journalists have suggested to the South Korean side that Japan and South Korea, who share democratic values and market economy systems, should unite against China's influence. For instance, Hatoyama Yukio, former prime minister of Japan and currently serving as chairman of the East Asian Community Institute, is well known for advocating for the realization of an "East Asian community" among the three Asian nations. In doing so, he suggested that Japan and South Korea should become "the central axis" of the mechanism.²²

Economic Interdependence and Geopolitical Realities

Amid the US-China rivalry, the geopolitical landscape in East Asia is becoming increasingly complex. China's assertive foreign policies are prompting the United States to strengthen ties with South Korea and Japan to counterbalance China's influence. However, each country's threat perception toward China is influenced by its own historical, economic, and strategic contexts.

China seeks to assert its regional leadership and counter US influence by fostering cooperation with South Korea and Japan. This approach aims not only to create a conducive regional environment for China's rise but also to mitigate the formation of a united front against it. Economically, South Korea and Japan are vital trading partners, and their collaboration helps manage

potential conflicts and maintain regional stability. Despite occasional tensions from disputes in the East and South China Seas, China continues to engage in high-level dialogues and has recently emphasized the importance of economic cooperation among Asian nations. This shift comes as the United States has been urging its allies to reduce supply chain dependencies on China for sensitive technological components. Facing economic challenges and concerns over social stability and regime legitimacy, Beijing appears more eager than it was a year ago to enhance relations with economically significant countries, including its two neighbors.²³

In Japan, tensions between the United States and China have underscored the significance of its alliance with the United States as a counterbalance against China. Despite this, Japan maintains a dual strategy of “engagement” and “vigilance” toward China, emphasizing economic cooperation alongside military caution.²⁴ To this aim, Japan has reinstated the phrase “mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests” for the first time in five years in its “Diplomatic Bluebook for 2024” issued by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, marking a cautious but hopeful approach for positive economic engagements with China despite underlying tensions.²⁵

Japan’s motivation for enhancing cooperation with China and South Korea stems from several factors. Economically, China is Japan’s largest trading partner, and South Korea is Japan’s third-largest trading partner.²⁶ Strengthening economic ties with these nations is crucial for Japan’s continued growth and prosperity. In particular, China comprises 19.4 percent of Japan’s total exports and 21 percent of its total imports, accounting for 20.3 percent of Japan’s total trade in 2022.²⁷

Additionally, Japan sees engagement and cooperation within the trilateral grouping as a means to counter China’s growing influence in the region and to maintain a stable regional order in what it officially refers to as maintaining “the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).”²⁸ While Japan’s security strategy has increased its efforts in balancing China in several new areas, “Japan has not abandoned the engagement part of its strategy towards China,” notes Japanese scholar Ueki Chikako.²⁹

Indeed, Japan’s “Diplomatic Bluebook for 2024” highlights the “importance of dialogue between Japan and China” to pursue “mutual benefits” while increasing vigilance against Beijing’s intensifying military buildup, indicating that Japan’s “two-track” policy framework toward China largely remains.³⁰ “Economic relations between Japan and China, including trade and investment, are very close,” Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs states.³¹ There is a view that Japan’s two-track approach is driven by “a desire to create an illusion of positivity” to enhance economic ties, even though China substantively adheres to hardline positions that matter.³²

Publicly available official government texts show that South Korea's approach toward China, even under the conservative and pro-US President Yoon Suk-yeol, aligns similarly with Japan's stance on China. They state that South Korea aims to cultivate a healthier and more mature relationship with China built on "mutual respect and reciprocity."³³ For South Korea, economic interdependence is a significant factor, with China remaining as South Korea's largest trading partner.³⁴ South Korea's economic reliance on China surpasses that of Japan and the United States. According to the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI), which includes major companies like Samsung, Hyundai, SK Hynix, and LG among its 600 members, the dependency on imports of material parts from China was 29.3 percent for South Korea, 28.9 percent for Japan, and 12.9 percent for the United States, indicating that South Korea had the highest dependency.³⁵

Data from the Korea International Trade Association (KITA) further underscores South Korea's dependency on key raw materials, noting that South Korea sources all its magnesium – a crucial component in mobile device products – from China, along with 94.7 percent of tungsten oxide used in medical devices and semiconductor manufacturing and 86.2 percent of neodymium magnets that are essential for lightweight electronic products.³⁶ This significant dependence on China for critical raw materials and the intricacy of bilateral economic ties present a potential vulnerability for South Korea's manufacturing sector and overall industry, which will be examined in more detail below.

Navigating Economic Vulnerabilities

Amid rising tensions between the United States and China, South Korea is increasingly aware of its economic ties with China, which complicates its alignment with US strategy in the Indo-Pacific region and on economic security. A leaked confidential report from December 2022 by the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP) reveals that South Korea relies on China for over 70 percent of imports of 958 key industrial materials.³⁷ Restrictions by China on these exports could have a severe impact on South Korean industries, causing disruptions across multiple supply chains.

This vulnerability is exemplified by LG Energy Solution, which supplies batteries to Tesla, a US-based electric vehicle manufacturer, and depends on China for 86.2 percent of crucial minerals like lithium carbonate and lithium hydroxide.³⁸ Restrictions or bans by China on exporting these vital resources could have extensive and far-reaching effects on South Korean industry.

A major challenge highlighted in the KIEP report is the limited alternatives available for South Korea to source materials outside of China. Out of nearly 1,000 items, fewer than 50 could be imported from Southeast Asian nations, with little prospect for significant change in the near future, according to the report.³⁹ This limitation means South Korean industries have restricted options for diversifying their supply chains away from China.

Ironically, while the Biden administration has been advocating for a reduction in supply chain dependence on China, the KIEP report suggests growing supply chain cooperation between South Korea and China. This fact underscores China's critical role as a supply chain hub and a primary source of raw materials, emphasizing the economic reality for South Korea to maintain close ties with China despite geopolitical complexities related to aligning with the United States. Similarly, FKI sternly warned that South Korean industries could face more severe impacts than their competitors if disruptions occur in supply chains linked to China.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the semiconductor industry has been receiving significant attention as one of the critical areas of US-China rivalry.⁴¹ South Korea is one of the major powerhouses in terms of chip manufacturing, and China is a major revenue source for South Korean chip companies. In fact, China is the largest market (41 percent) for South Korean semiconductor chips. If Hong Kong (21 percent) is included, then the "Greater China" market accounts for 62 percent of South Korean chips.⁴² South Korean Minister of Trade, Industry, and Energy Ahn Duk-geun candidly admitted that there were disagreements between Seoul and Washington over the latter's continued export restrictions on semiconductor tools to China. "Our semiconductor industry has a lot of concerns about what the U.S. government is doing these days," he bluntly said.⁴³ It is rare for a South Korean senior official to publicly complain about US decisions. Washington's semiconductor export restrictions seem to have set hard parameters for Seoul regarding its economic relations with Beijing. While the push to de-risk from China is being led by the United States, Ahn's remarks reflect South Korea's sense of agency in terms of how much it wishes to cooperate with the United States. South Korea faces a dilemma in which it continues to import key industrial raw materials from China, but its alignment with US efforts and refusal to sell semiconductors to China could lead the Chinese government to retaliate by leveraging export bans against South Korea.

In 2021 and again in 2023, South Korea faced a significant urea shortage when China, the world's largest urea supplier, unexpectedly halted exports.⁴⁴ Urea is essential for reducing emissions in diesel vehicles and is also used in fertilizers. The shortage led to widespread disruptions in South Korea, including long

lines at gas stations, hoarding by consumers, and significant risks to transportation and supply chains. South Korea imported more than 90 percent of its urea from China, so it was particularly vulnerable to this crisis.⁴⁵

The political landscape in East Asia complicates and sometimes conflicts with economic interests due to China's economic influence and its use of coercive measures. The controversy over THAAD, which China strongly opposed, resulted in economic retaliation against South Korea.⁴⁶ The impact of this fallout is ongoing, as China has still not lifted "unofficial" sanctions on South Korean businesses, tourism, and K-pop performances in China. The term "unofficial" is used because the Chinese government has denied imposing economic retaliatory measures against South Korea.⁴⁷

Under President Yoon Suk-yeol, there has been a significant shift in South Korean foreign policy to align more closely with the United States. This approach contrasts with his predecessor, Moon Jae-in, whom Yoon described as "pro-China," adding "Most South Koreans do not like China."⁴⁸ Yoon has emphasized a clearer stance in the US-China competition and played a pivotal role in facilitating the 2023 US-South Korea-Japan trilateral summit at Camp David by unilaterally improving relations with Japan, despite 60 percent of South Koreans opposing the move.⁴⁹ "South Korea will further strengthen trilateral ties with the United States and Japan for supply chains of advanced industries," stated Yoon's first Minister of Trade, Industry, and Energy Bang Moon-kyu. However, he also acknowledged the importance of cooperation with China by adding, "South Korea will cooperate with China as a key trade partner to navigate the intensifying Sino-U.S. technology competition."⁵⁰ This underscores the complex balance South Korea must achieve amid these geopolitical tensions.

Aspiration for Regional Harmony

As illustrated, the role of economic factors is significant in the trilateral relationship and is often emphasized when discussing the drivers of East Asian cooperation among South Korea, Japan, and China. However, the vision for regional cooperation and unity among these three Asian states is not a recent development.

Over a century ago, Ahn Jung-geun, a prominent Korean independence activist during the Japanese colonial era, advocated for an "East Asian Peace Theory."⁵¹ Ahn is viewed both as a patriot and a terrorist, depending on one's perspective. On the eve of Korea's colonization by Japan in 1909, he gunned down Ito Hirobumi, Japan's first Resident-General of Korea, at Harbin Railway Station in

Manchuria. For Koreans, he was a national hero who fought against Japan's militarism that subsequently led to Korea's colonization. However, for the Japanese, he was a terrorist who killed an important government official. While in prison awaiting his execution, Ahn transformed into a peace advocate.

His "Theory of East Asian Peace" highlighted the importance of peaceful coexistence and cooperation among these countries. Ahn envisioned these nations standing on equal footing, striving for common prosperity through economic and cultural exchanges rooted in their shared Confucian heritage.

In contemporary discussions, the concept of an "East Asian Community," akin to the European Union, has resurfaced. Former Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama has been a vocal advocate for this idea, promoting regional cooperation to alleviate tensions. In an interview with the South Korean newspaper *Hankyoreh*, Hatoyama emphasized the importance of collaboration across economic, cultural, educational, and environmental domains to lay the foundation for an "EU-style East Asian bloc."⁵² He argued that Japan and South Korea should lead this effort toward "coexistence and co-prosperity," and he urged the Japanese government to more sincerely address existing disputes, such as the issue of wartime sex slaves.⁵³ Hatoyama envisions the community as a "community of non-war," representing the best path forward.

However, Hatoyama's tenure as prime minister was short-lived and marked by significant opposition, especially concerning his attempts to relocate the US Marines' Futenma airbase from Okinawa and strengthen ties with China. This drew criticism from conservative forces within Japan, ultimately leading to his resignation.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, he continued to promote East Asian integration through the East Asian Community Institute, which he founded in 2013.

Adding another dimension to regional aspirations, Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the "New Asian Security Concept" in 2014. Xi said, "In the final analysis, it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia."⁵⁵ This vision articulated a security framework centered on "Asian solutions to Asian problems," excluding external powers and emphasizing regional autonomy in security matters. This stance was a clear signal of China's growing confidence and its desire to redefine regional security dynamics without external interference, particularly from the United States. However, Xi's approach to Asianism has been interpreted more as a demonstration of growing Chinese dominance and desire for a Sinocentric sphere of influence in Asia rather than a true vision for Asian unity based on shared cultural and historical heritage.

More Challenges and Diminishing Opportunities Ahead

In the 2000s, it was common to characterize the nations of South Korea, Japan, and China as having a three-way “division of labor” in East Asia.⁵⁶ Japan exported materials and parts to South Korea, which then developed them into components and semi-finished goods for China to assemble into finished products. Japan specialized in high-value-added products, while China focused on low-value-added products, positioning South Korea in the middle of this trilateral industrial supply chain to facilitate a seamless process.

Fears that the “division of labor” system might be breaking down have been voiced for several years. Now, they appear to be coming true, as the three countries are increasingly competing for the same industrial and market sectors, particularly in technology-driven sectors like automobiles and electronics. In the display market, for instance, South Korea overtook Japan in 2004 to occupy the number one spot in the global market share, but it handed over the throne to China in 2021.⁵⁷ China has made significant strides in several technology sectors where it has either caught up with or surpassed South Korea and Japan, including e-commerce and digital payments, high-speed rail, artificial intelligence, solar energy, telecommunications, and consumer electronics. Evidently, the division of labor they once enjoyed seems to have dissipated, gradually eroding a major impetus for the three nations to cooperate and reduce tensions.

Against this backdrop, resuming trilateral summitry between South Korea, Japan, and China is even more critical for the three countries to explore new opportunities and resuscitate momentum for cooperation in Northeast Asia while managing regional tensions. Despite increasing industrial competition, the three East Asian nations collectively account for about 20 percent of the global population, 25 percent of global GDP, and 20 percent of global trade volume, and are essential for establishing stability in the Indo-Pacific region and achieving prosperity and peace.⁵⁸ In theory, these factors should promote collaboration among the three nations.

In practice, however, multiple significant obstacles impede the full realization of trilateral cooperation. Historical grievances, particularly between Japan and its neighbors, continue to affect diplomatic relations. Furthermore, territorial disputes and diverging strategic priorities add layers of complexity. Security concerns linked to the intensifying US-China technological rivalry and US efforts to secure supply chains with allies also impact economic ties and cultural exchanges. Additionally, China’s intermittent engagement in the trilateral

framework – largely driven by its desire to counterbalance US influence – reflects its skepticism about the value of these summits, especially considering its view of South Korea and Japan as being within the US sphere of influence.

For instance, ahead of the long-anticipated trilateral summit to be hosted by South Korea in late May 2024, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning, whose diplomatic career includes a stint at the TCS office in Seoul, emphasized the importance China places on trilateral cooperation and expressed a desire to collaborate with South Korea and Japan.⁵⁹ She also noted that the three countries should jointly “create conditions” for the trilateral leaders’ meeting, though she did not specify these conditions. The state-controlled *Global Times* highlighted “external obstacles coming from Washington” as a key impediment, citing a poll where 53 percent of respondents viewed the United States as the main barrier to friendly relations between China and South Korea.⁶⁰

To navigate these complexities, the three countries must take proactive steps to foster mutual trust and understanding. Japan can match its expressions of remorse over its wartime actions with tangible measures to support the victims. Expanding cultural and educational exchanges can dismantle stereotypes and strengthen people-to-people connections. Furthermore, establishing crisis communication mechanisms and conducting joint goodwill exercises focused on disaster relief can contribute to a more stable security environment.

The role of the United States remains pivotal in managing trilateral relations. As US-China strategic competition intensifies, there is a risk that South Korea and Japan could be drawn into a new Cold War dynamic, potentially exacerbating their fragile ties with China.⁶¹ If managed skillfully, however, US involvement could stabilize the situation, reassuring its Northeast Asian allies and fostering better coordination on shared interests.

In contrast to the complex dynamics between South Korea, Japan, and China, the United States has historically served as a stabilizing force in the region and a counterweight to China’s growing influence and North Korea’s military adventurism by maintaining a strong military presence through its security alliances with South Korea and Japan. The US-Japan Security Treaty (1951 and revised in 1960) and the US-South Korea Mutual Defense Treaty (1953) form the bedrock of these alliances, committing the United States to the defense of its allies in the event of an armed attack.⁶² These security arrangements have not only provided a sense of stability and deterrence in the region but have also allowed South Korea and Japan to focus on economic development.

Similarly, China needs to foster a perception among its neighbors that having China as a partner is as advantageous and secure as the United States. However, changes in the regional power dynamics have led to a sense of uncertainty and distrust among nations. The rapid ascent of China, particularly its expanding military presence in the South China Sea, has heightened tensions. Neighboring countries continue to express skepticism toward China's assurances of peaceful development and rise.

Looking Ahead

The trilateral relationship between South Korea, Japan, and China is at a critical juncture, facing significant challenges that hinder meaningful cooperation. Historical legacies, territorial disputes, and the evolving geopolitical landscape marked by intensifying US-China rivalry have created an environment of mistrust and competition that undermines the potential for collaboration.

Public perceptions within each country also play a significant role in shaping trilateral dynamics. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2022 found that 80 percent of South Koreans and 87 percent of Japanese held unfavorable views of China.⁶³ These public sentiments are fueled by historical grievances, territorial disputes, anger over China's appropriation of Korean culture, and concerns over China's growing assertiveness, creating domestic pressures that can constrain the room for diplomatic maneuvers.

Despite the theoretical benefits of cooperation, such as economic interdependence and shared transnational issues, the reality is that domestic politics, public sentiment, strategic calculations, and external influences continue to impede progress. Historical grievances and deep-seated mistrust among the three countries remain significant barriers to building a foundation for meaningful collaboration.

Yet, from another perspective, the commitment to trilateral summitry and the establishment of the TCS represent remarkable achievements, considering the long and checkered history of tension in Northeast Asia. Since its inception in 2008, separate from the ASEAN summit, eight trilateral summits have been held in rotation among the leaders of the three countries. As of today, trilateral cooperation encompasses 71 major consultative platforms, including 21 at the ministerial level, in areas such as foreign affairs, finance, trade, environment, culture, and agriculture.⁶⁴ Most notably, the region where these three countries are located has not experienced war for over seven decades, a historical rarity.

There is potential for incremental progress through initiatives aimed at fostering mutual trust, expanding cultural exchanges, and strengthening regional institutions. However, the path ahead remains uncertain and is fraught with challenges. The role of the United States adds another layer of complexity as it seeks to reassure its allies while avoiding a new Cold War dynamic.

Moving forward, the future of the trilateral relationship will depend on the strategic choices made by leaders in Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing. However, given the current geopolitical climate and the deep-rooted challenges, it is unlikely that we will see a significant breakthrough in trilateral cooperation in the near future. Instead, progress, if any, is likely to be slow, incremental, and subject to setbacks.

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