

**REPORT**

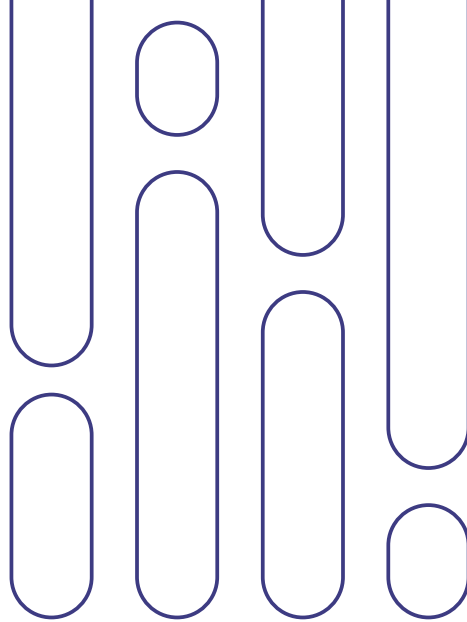
# **The Tripartite Asian Summit and Its Implications for Security and Cooperation Between Disputing Parties in East Asia**

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**RASANAHA**  
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية  
International Institute for Iranian Studies



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Seoul hosted a tripartite summit with South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol, Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, aiming to ease escalating tensions in East Asia, now a hub of international economic activity. This summit occurred amid the fierce global contest between the United States and China over international leadership and the shifting dynamics of the global system. Meanwhile, middle powers worldwide are reevaluating their influence and strategies in response to these heightened regional and international issues.

The timing of the summit raises several questions about the real motives behind this tripartite meeting among countries that are essentially in conflict over significant issues. Why was this summit held when the United States is tightening its alliances in Asia as part of a strategy to contain China and balance power in East Asia, rather than allow for Chinese regional hegemony? Additionally, what are the strategic approaches of Washington's Asian allies amid the transformations in the international system, and how do Japan and South Korea balance their shared interests with China, a neighboring country with rising military and economic capabilities?

## **The Circumstances Surrounding the Tripartite Summit**

The summit, the first in nearly five years, focused on enhancing cooperation in six areas: economy and trade, sustainable development, health, science and technology, disaster management and safety, and people-to-people exchanges. It concluded with a joint statement outlining the results and recommendations

agreed upon by the three countries. The three main features of the timing of the tripartite summit are discussed below:

### **Mounting Beijing-Taipei Tensions**

The tripartite summit took place amid escalating tensions between China and Taiwan, supported by the United States. Tensions further intensified following the secessionist calls by Taiwan's new President Lai Ching-te in his inaugural speech, in which he clearly and directly expressed his intent to separate from China. This invoked China's ire with Beijing conducting military drills around Taipei, including scenarios for joint land, sea, and air strikes. These developments heightened tensions and raised concerns among neighboring countries such as South Korea and Japan.

### **The Ukraine War Tipping in Russia's Favor**

The tripartite summit between China, Japan and South Korea was held at a very sensitive and delicate time, marked by significant global events and developments. Chief among these is the Russia-Ukraine war, in which Moscow has made unprecedented strides, capturing 278 square kilometers in eastern Ukraine, particularly in the Kharkiv region, within a week. This advance came as Western nations were preoccupied with the war in Gaza. South Korea and Japan, partly motivated by fears of growing Russian power and its strong support for North Korea, which threatens Tokyo and Seoul, seek to strengthen cooperation with China. However, this is not their sole motivation. The substantial economic interests that South Korea and Japan have with China are a major driver of their foreign policy orientations toward Beijing.

The summit also took place shortly after Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to China, where discussions encompassed

various regional and international issues, notably the situation in North Korea. Pyongyang's ongoing nuclear and ballistic missile tests have strained its relations with Japan and South Korea. The strengthening ties between China and Russia undoubtedly raise genuine concerns in Japan and South Korea, particularly regarding their regional security dynamics and the implications for the North Korean situation.

## **The Failure of the US Approach of Cooperative Competition Toward China**

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Beijing in April 2024 included discussions with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. Despite reaching a five-point consensus to strengthen China-US relations, including maintaining stability, high-level exchanges, advancing consultations in various sectors, promoting people-to-people interactions and engaging in discussions on major international and regional issues, significant challenges remain. These issues revolve around power dynamics, the nature of the international system, and global leadership. The presence of Japan and South Korea, as close allies of the United States in East Asia, indicate that the tripartite summit may have received tacit approval from Washington, despite its differences with Beijing.

## **Challenges Imposing Pressures on Asian Nations**

In spite of longstanding historical differences, the timing of the summit underscores the shared imperative for the three countries to maintain dialogue in order to safeguard their strategic interests. China, Japan and South Korea are influential global economic centers crucial to the international economic system.

They convened to discuss avenues for joint cooperation on economic matters amidst pressing regional issues, including the Taiwan-China crisis, tensions on the Korean Peninsula, escalating military cooperation between North Korea and Russia, and the mounting pressures exerted on China by the United States.

## **Importance and Significations**

The significance of convening the tripartite summit in South Korea against the backdrop of the aforementioned regional and international developments is underscored in the following:

### **Prioritizing the Easing of Tensions Between the Three Parties**

The agenda of the summit discussions and the contents of its final [statement](#) revealed a curious paradox. The summit was anticipated to address challenging and sensitive topics, particularly the geopolitical and security landscape in East Asia. The urgency is heightened by escalating tensions against the backdrop of North Korea's persistent nuclear and ballistic missile tests. Moreover, the conflict between Beijing and Taipei has intensified under the new Taiwanese president, who has expressed strong separatist tendencies. Concerns from Japan and South Korea regarding the burgeoning advanced military cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang have also been on the rise.

Realistically, the agenda of the discussions and the final statement placed a stronger emphasis on economic and cooperative matters. Both the Korean and Japanese sides underscored the importance of collaboration among the three economies, which collectively constitute significant global economic centers and

represent around 20% of the world's population and trade. It appears that there was a mutual recognition of the necessity to alleviate tensions rather than delve into more contentious issues. The mere resumption of trilateral talks signifies a positive step, indicating the determination of the three Asian neighbors to enhance relations and reduce tensions. This move aims to safeguard the region, which holds substantial geopolitical and geostrategic significance in global strategies, from the potential risks of entering into a catastrophic scenario.

Hence, the final statement refrained from addressing issues that could potentially stir up contention. Notably absent were references to the North Korean nuclear file, a matter of concern for Seoul and Tokyo, despite the South Korean president's remarks during the talks about a trilateral agreement not to accept any new North Korean nuclear tests and the imperative of dismantling the program. According to a South Korean official, there was consensus among the three parties regarding the necessity of including a text in the statement aimed at preventing further escalations from North Korea in the East Asian region. However, they encountered disagreement regarding the appropriate formulation, taking into account Pyongyang's sensitivity, especially given Beijing's cautious approach as a key ally of North Korea.

### **Japanese-South Korean Awareness of the Importance of Deescalating Tensions With China**

It is possible that South Korea and Japan are reevaluating their strategic visions regarding China, deviating from traditional perspectives regarding its clout and influence in both the regional and international systems. This shift may stem from recognition of Chinese warnings regarding the increasing mil-

itary cooperation between the United States, Seoul and Tokyo, reaching a level that raises concerns about potential ruptures and the onset of disastrous regional confrontations. In light of this stark realization, both parties may perceive a threat to their strategic interests due to:

- Heightened Chinese concerns regarding US efforts to undermine Beijing's dominant position in East Asia are evident given the United States' continued military support for allied Asian powers that oppose China's role in the region. Additionally, the establishment of military alliances aiming to encircle and contain China in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), comprising the United States, Japan, Australia and India, and the trilateral alliance between the United States, India and Australia (AUKUS), further exacerbates tensions.

- China's deep discontent with the outcomes of the US-Japan-Philippine trilateral summit in April 2024 was notable. This summit occurred following the first-ever quadrilateral exercises in the South China Sea, against the backdrop of several incidents and tensions between Chinese and Philippine military vessels in the sensitive maritime region. During this period, President Joe Biden issued a clear warning to Beijing, [stating](#) that any attack on Filipino aircraft, ships or armed forces in the South China Sea would trigger the implementation of the Mutual Defense Treaty between Washington and Manila. In response, China asserted that its activities in the sea were lawful and beyond reproach.

- China expressed displeasure with the outcomes of the tripartite summit between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, held at Camp David in August 2023. The summit marked the launch



of a new phase of security and defense cooperation among the three countries, while also criticizing what it deemed as “China’s [dangerous and aggressive](#) behavior in the South China Sea.” The South Korean president’s bold statements further fueled tensions, particularly amidst escalating diplomatic disputes between the two Asian neighbors. He attributed simmering tensions over Taiwan to “attempts to [change](#) the status quo by force,” referencing China’s military activities in the Taiwan Strait. In response, China cautioned Seoul to handle issues related to Taiwan with wisdom.

- Chinese criticism primarily centered on the participation of Japanese and South Korean delegations in the inauguration ceremony of the new Taiwanese president.

### **China as a Conduit for Deescalating Tensions With North Korea**

Despite their alignment with the Western camp, Tokyo and Seoul seem to recognize the considerable tools of influence wielded by China in regional and international affairs, owing to its significant economic and military capabilities. Economically, China ranks second globally, trailing only behind the United States. China is also second only to the United States in terms of global military expenditure. Furthermore, China’s influential leverage over Pyongyang, as North Korea’s largest trading partner and principal ally, grants it substantial sway over North Korean actions.

China’s special relationship with North Korea enables it to exert influence over Pyongyang, which can contribute to defusing tensions between North and South Korea, particularly amidst Pyongyang’s persistent nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests. This is in addition to North Korea’s announcement

to dismantle government agencies assigned with enhancing cooperation with its southern neighbor. Additionally, North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un's escalatory rhetoric in January 2024, warning of war in case even 1 [millimeter](#) of North Korean territory was encroached upon by Seoul, underscores the delicate nature of inter-Korean relations and the potential for escalation.

### **The Summit Laid Out a Cooperative Approach Bringing Together Tokyo and Seoul in the Face of Pyongyang**

Despite historical differences and lingering disputes, Japan and South Korea may have recognized the imperative of bilateral cooperation to address the mounting North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile threat, which risks their security and stability in East Asia. This realization is particularly salient given the South Korean president's pursuit of a policy of rapprochement with Tokyo since assuming power in May 2022. Additionally, both countries maintain strategic relations with the Western camp and are members of various US-led military and economic alliances. These shared interests and affiliations underscore the necessity for joint action in confronting regional challenges.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing underscores a palpable awareness on the part of South Korea and Japan regarding China's substantial sway in the East Asian region. China is perceived as a regional hegemon with considerable capabilities and tools of influence, enabling it to shape the trajectory of regional affairs and mitigate escalating tensions in East Asia. Furthermore, it could be concluded that both South Korea and Japan are cognizant of China's ability

to potentially temper North Korea's advancing nuclear and ballistic missile development in the region.

South Korea and Japan's recognition of China's pivotal role in reducing tensions in East Asia suggests a potential shift in their approaches toward China. This indicates a broader trend toward moving beyond the era of unipolarity to a more multilateral or bipolar world order. It reflects an acknowledgment by key actors in East Asia of the emergence of new poles of power on the international stage, notably China alongside the United States. China's growing influence in regional and global affairs, coupled with its possession of multiple tools of influence, signals a shift toward establishing a balance between regional hegemony and international equilibrium. In this context, South Korea and Japan's engagement with China signifies their strategic adaptation to this evolving global landscape. This shift highlights a broader recalibration of geopolitical dynamics in East Asia, reflecting a recognition of the changing power dynamics and the need for nuanced diplomatic approaches in a multipolar world. China, in turn, may recognize that fostering cooperation with neighboring countries undermines US attempts to forge an Asian alignment against it. Such cooperation also obstructs US endeavors to entrench its global leadership position. Consequently, China's efforts to reshape the international system to one less dominated by the United States, and more aligned with its own interests, are validated.

