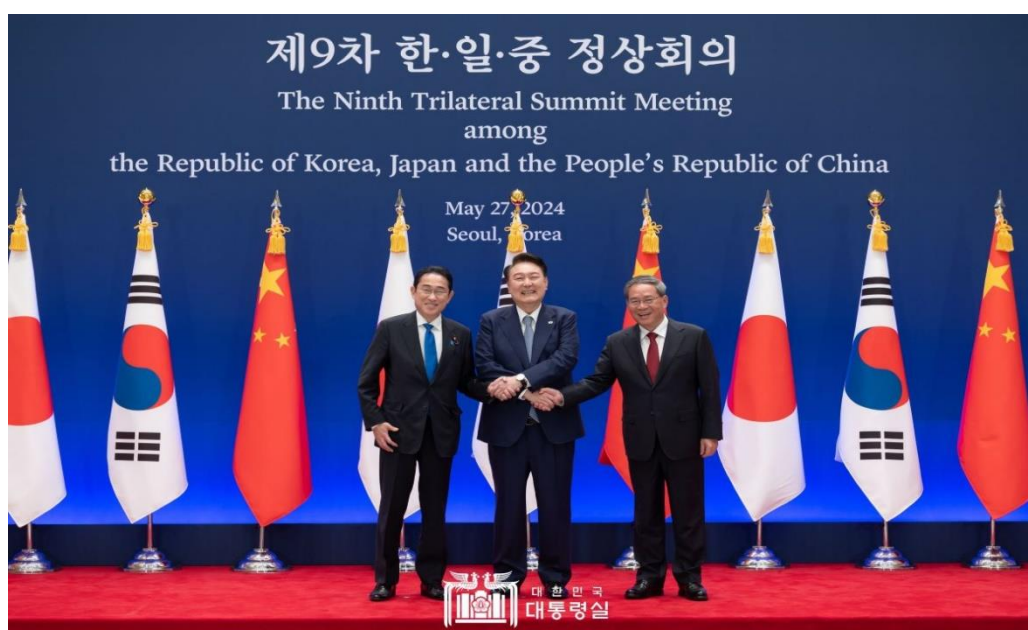


## Renewed Dialogue: The Significance of the China-Japan-South Korea Summit 2024

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Source: Stimson Center

### Introduction

In a world where tensions often overshadow collaboration, the recent meeting between China, Japan, and South Korea is a welcome move toward communication and harmony. On May 27, 2024, leaders from these three key Northeast Asian countries convened in Seoul following a four-and-a-half-year break, indicating a positive new chapter in their trilateral relationship.<sup>2</sup> The summit had been delayed by historical disagreements and strategic differences since it started in 2008 and

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<sup>2</sup>Duncan Bartlett, “With Trilateral Summit, China, Japan, South Korea Look for a Reset”, *The Diplomat*, May 28, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/with-trilateral-summit-china-japan-south-korea-look-for-a-reset/>

was supposed to be a yearly event. However, 2024 was the ideal year for a fresh discussion. Though it may not have addressed enduring problems, this summit—the seventh of its kind—was successful in reviving dialogue and highlighting common concerns and objectives. This renewed conversation offers a ray of light for the Indo-Pacific region, showing that even the deepest rivalries may lead to cooperation and advancement in an era of unpredictability and shifting power relations.

### **Contributing Factors to the 2019-2024 Summit Gap**

The last trilateral summit between China, Japan, and South Korea was held in December 2019 in Chengdu, China.<sup>3</sup> South Korean President Moon Jae-in, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe were present there. But both the global environment and the leaders themselves have undergone substantial transformation since that encounter.



Source: Asia News Network

South Korea and the United States saw an unexpected softening of North Korea's hostile posture in 2018, which prompted Seoul to lessen its criticism of Pyongyang.<sup>4</sup> But Japan persisted in applying pressure to North Korea, causing a divide with South Korea regarding how to deal with

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<sup>3</sup>"The Eighth Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit", [https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/rp/page3e\\_001141.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_001141.html)

<sup>4</sup>Ankit Panda, "South Korea's "Decapitation" Strategy Against North Korea Has More Risks Than Benefits", August 15, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/08/south-koreas-decapitation-strategy-against-north-korea-has-more-risks-than-benefits?lang=en>

the North. As a result, Japan found itself in an increasingly isolated position, having to contend with the opinions of China, Russia, South Korea, and North Korea in addition to North Korea. The U.S., under President Donald Trump, attempted to mediate between Japan and South Korea.

The move by Japan to impose export controls to South Korea in reaction to a ruling by a South Korean court ordering Japanese corporations to compensate Korean forced laborers from World War II was another significant issue that caused tension in relations between the two countries.<sup>5</sup> Japan's action was seen as retaliatory, which led to a major response in South Korea and a significant "No Japan" boycott movement.<sup>6</sup> The three leaders at the Chengdu summit were only able to agree in principle to work together toward North Korea's denuclearization. There were no major breakthroughs, and the public's attention was mostly drawn to a parallel summit between South Korea and Japan, which was taking place for the first time in fifteen months.

So, no trilateral summit occurred after Chengdu, partly because of resistance from Beijing. Despite South Korea's efforts to organize another meeting, China was reluctant, largely due to its dissatisfaction with the security policies of Japan, the U.S., and South Korea, which were perceived as targeting China.

## **Driving Forces Behind the Japan-China-South Korea Trilateral Summit 2024**

It was not until November 2023 that China agreed to a meeting of foreign ministers from the three countries in Busan, South Korea. Beijing's change in stance came after realizing that South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol was firmly committed to prioritizing the U.S.-South Korea alliance and trilateral security cooperation with Japan, a significant shift from the approach of his predecessor, Moon Jae-in, who had been careful not to upset China and North Korea.

The other factors leading to the 2024 summit is discussed below.

**Impact of the 2023 Camp David Summit:** The Japan-U.S.-South Korea summit held at Camp David in August 2023 highlighted the growing security and economic cooperation among these

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<sup>5</sup>Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "South Korea to compensate victims of Japan's wartime forced labor", The Washington Post, March 6, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/06/south-korea-japan-forced-labor-compensation/>

<sup>6</sup>No Kyung-min, "'No Japan?' Korea swings from extreme rejection to selective embrace", October 3, 2023, <https://asianews.network/no-japan-korea-swings-from-extreme-rejection-to-selective-embrace/>

countries, which raised concerns in China.<sup>7</sup> This development prompted China to reconsider its approach and propose another trilateral meeting with Japan and South Korea.

**China's Motivations:** China's global influence appeared to be weakening, especially as North Korea strengthened its ties with Russia amid ongoing military and nuclear developments. Additionally, China's economy was facing challenges. These factors drove Beijing to use the trilateral summit as a platform to reinforce its security position and support its economic interests.

**South Korea's Shifting Policy:** Following a poor performance in the general election, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol was likely to seek better relations with China while maintaining close ties with the U.S. and Japan. South Korea's foreign minister, Cho Tae-yul, emphasized the importance of relations with China, reflecting a nuanced shift in South Korea's diplomatic stance.<sup>8</sup>

**China's Strategic Timing:** China cleverly maneuvered the timing of the summit to its advantage. Beijing preferred a late-May summit, strategically scheduled after Taiwan's presidential inauguration, to remind Japan and South Korea of its stance on Taiwan.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, China delayed the meeting until after South Korea's general election, anticipating that the opposition's victory would align more closely with China's interests.

**Need for Dialogue with China:** Despite tensions, Japan and South Korea recognized the necessity of engaging China in dialogue to address the military threats from China, North Korea, and Russia. Japan, in particular, needed China's cooperation in resolving issues with North Korea, such as the abduction of Japanese citizens.

**Challenges in Japan-South Korea Relations:** A commercial dispute involving the South Korean tech group Naver and Japan posed another challenge to the cooperation between Japan and South Korea. Such issues could hinder the united front needed to influence China and counter its efforts to exploit divisions between the two countries.

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<sup>7</sup>Hiroshi Minegishi, "What made Japan, China, South Korea hold a summit now?", May 22, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/What-made-Japan-China-South-Korea-hold-a-summit-now>

<sup>8</sup>Hiroshi Minegishi, "What made Japan, China, South Korea hold a summit now?"

<sup>9</sup>ibid

## Highlights from the 2024 Trilateral Summit

This meeting was highly anticipated as it came at a time of rising tensions in Northeast Asia. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan, Chinese Premier Li Qiang, and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol came together to discuss ways to improve relations and address shared challenges. The leaders decided to work together on a number of issues, such as trade, sustainable development, and economy.<sup>10</sup> They agreed to hold frequent meetings and picked up the stalled talks on a free trade agreement. In controlling regional tensions and fostering better diplomatic relations, this meeting was viewed as a step in the right direction. The summit was commended for starting a conversation again even though it did not produce any significant progress on divisive topics. The leaders decided to collaborate on problems like supply chain connection, crisis management, and aging populations.<sup>11</sup> They also uphold the significance of mutual trust and understanding.

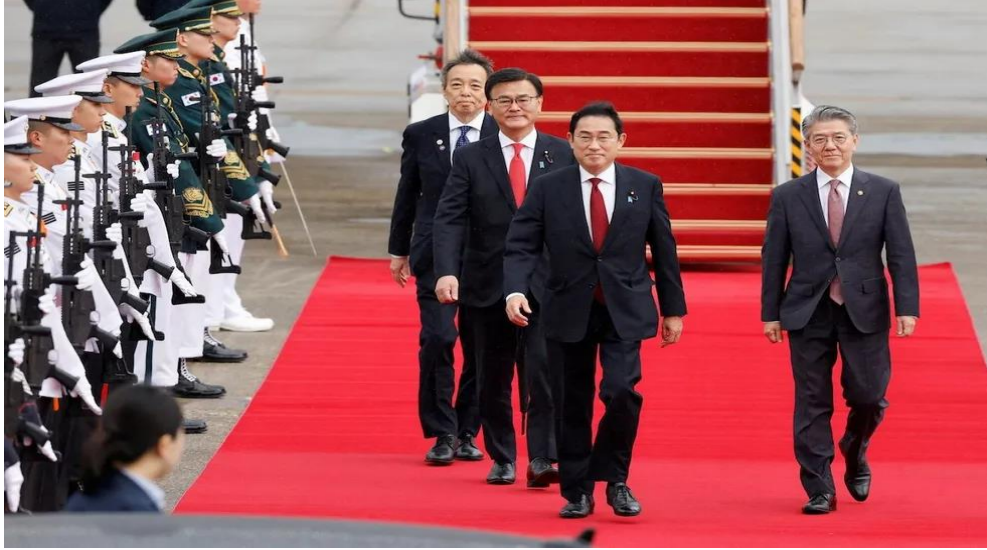
China expressed concerns about the growing security cooperation between the US, Japan, and South Korea. China views this trilateral security partnership—which entails cooperative military drills and strategic alliances—as an effort to subvert its strategic objectives and balance its regional influence.<sup>12</sup> China has responded by urging attention to be diverted from these political and security concerns and instead placed on preserving trade and economic ties. The focus was on keeping trade and economic relations stable and positive by keeping economic disputes from becoming mixed up with geopolitical problems.

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<sup>10</sup>Thisanka Siripala, “Japan, China, South Korea Trilateral Summit Was a Missed Opportunity”, The Diplomat, May 31, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/japan-china-south-korea-trilateral-summit-was-a-missed-opportunity-for-bold-negotiations-on-divisive-issues/>

<sup>11</sup>Dr. Tunchinmang Langel, “Restarting South Korea-Japan-China Trilateral Leaders’ Summit 2024”, June 4, 2024, [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=10948&lid=6958](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10948&lid=6958)

<sup>12</sup>Wooseon Choi, “New Horizons in Korea-U.S.-Japan Trilateral Cooperation”, June 27, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-horizons-korea-us-japan-trilateral-cooperation>



Source: GZERO Media

The continuous military exercises by North Korea, which have been a major cause of insecurity in the region, were also discussed at the summit. Aware of the possible threat posed by North Korea's developing nuclear and missile programs, the leaders of South Korea, China, and Japan agreed that stability on the Korean Peninsula was vital. China, on the other hand, chose to be more circumspect and refrained from outright denouncing North Korea's military operations. Rather, in line with its position of striking a balance between regional stability and its larger strategic objectives, China argued for a measured approach that promotes moderation and aims to avert further escalation of tensions.

Looking ahead, the leaders agreed to continue their regular trilateral meetings in the future, with the next one taking place in Japan in 2025. They also decided to cooperate on boosting commercial relations and collaborating more to address global issues. Overall, even as these major regional actors navigate ongoing geopolitical challenges, the meeting represented a significant step toward increased discussion and partnership.

## **A Critical Evaluation of Renewed Dialogue: Gains and Shortcomings**

### **Positive Aspects**

**Revival of Dialogue:** The 2024 summit represents a critical revitalization of dialogue among China, Japan, and South Korea. This revival is not merely a return to form but a strategic pivot

towards constructive engagement in a region fraught with historical animosities and emerging rivalries. The resumption of trilateral meetings offers a platform for addressing shared challenges—such as North Korea's provocations and regional economic instability—through cooperative discourse rather than isolation or confrontation.

**Strategic Realignment and Stability:** By convening in Seoul, the summit signals a significant shift in regional diplomacy, suggesting a potential stabilization of Northeast Asian relations. The summit's focus on economic cooperation, sustainable development, and crisis management illustrates a collective commitment to navigating global uncertainties. This collaborative spirit could mitigate the risk of miscalculations and accidental escalations, fostering a more stable regional environment.

**Future Prospects and Continued Engagement:** A commitment to ongoing participation is shown by the decision to schedule frequent meetings and by organizing the 2025 summit in Japan. The leaders' readiness to gradually address both cooperative and contentious issues is highlighted by this forward-looking strategy. The foundation for sustained cooperation and dispute resolution is laid by the emphasis on trade, supply chain links, and mutual trust.

### **Negative Aspects**

**Limited Impact on Core Disputes:** Despite being a major diplomatic move, the meeting did not address enduring problems including historical grievances and North Korea's military provocations. The absence of significant progress on these fundamental issues raises the possibility that the summit's conclusions are only cosmetic and may not address underlying issues. This can cause people to get discouraged and doubtful about the value of trilateral talks.

**Strategic Manipulations and Timing Concerns:** The summit's deliberate scheduling, which takes place after South Korea's general election and Taiwan's presidential inauguration, begs the question of its underlying intentions. One could argue that China's intention to have discussions was motivated more by a desire to undermine the alliance between the United States, Japan, and South Korea than by a sincere desire to find a solution to the region's problems. This impression of deliberate manipulation has the potential to erode confidence in the goals and outcomes of the summit.

**Potential for Shifting Alliances and Internal Dissent:** President Yoon Suk-yeol's focus on the U.S.-South Korea alliance and the changing dynamics within South Korea's leadership could lead to tensions both inside and outside the country. Striking a balance between interacting with China and preserving close connections with the United States could lead to discontent or instability in South Korea's political environment. The ongoing internal strife may make it more difficult to take a united stand in trilateral talks.

## **Way Forward**

The 2024 China-Japan-South Korea summit serves as a crucial reminder that even in a world filled with tensions and complexities, dialogue remains an essential tool for building bridges. The revival of this trilateral meeting offers a glimmer of hope, showing that nations with deep-rooted differences can still come together to address common challenges. While the summit may not have resolved all the significant disputes, it has opened the door to future cooperation and understanding. The journey ahead is far from straightforward. The strategic maneuvers and lingering disagreements highlighted the fragility of this newfound dialogue. The leaders must now navigate these challenges with care, ensuring that their renewed conversations lead to meaningful actions rather than just diplomatic gestures. In a region where history often weighs heavily on the present, the true success of this summit will be measured not just by the agreements made, but by the trust built and the continued willingness to engage in open and honest dialogue. The path to lasting peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia may be long, but this summit is a step in the right direction.