



OPINION / VIEWPOINT

Seoul summit offers valuable momentum for China-Japan-S.Korea cooperation

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The 8th China-Japan-South Korea Business Summit is held in Seoul, South Korea on May 27, 2024. Photo: VCG

Editor's Note:

The ninth Trilateral Summit Meeting among China, Japan and South Korea was held in Seoul on Monday. In an interview with Global Times (GT) reporters, Moon Chung-in (**Moon**), James Laney distinguished professor of Yonsei University and former special advisor to president Moon Jae-in for national security and foreign policy, analyzed the outcomes of the summit and the current regional situation. He believes the Seoul summit offered valuable momentum for leaders of China, Japan and South Korea to meet and discuss common concerns.

GT: Chinese Premier Li Qiang put forward a five-point proposal on deepening

China-Japan-South Korea cooperation at the summit. What do you think of the five-point proposal?

Moon: Premier Li emphasized long-term common interests and the importance of strategic communication and mutual trust as well as cooperation and common prosperity through a trilateral free trade agreement, science and technology, and human exchanges. He also underscored the enhancement of peace and stability through multilateralism and mutual respect of core interests as well as the political settlement of the Korean Peninsula issue through dialogue and diplomacy. Finally, he drew attention to the need for strengthened trilateral cooperation among China, Japan and South Korea. Trust-building through communication, strategic empathy, mutual respect of core interests and preventive diplomacy are desperately needed for peace, stability and common prosperity in the region. I hope leaders and people in Japan and South Korea can appreciate his proposals.

GT: The three sides released several joint statements. How do you evaluate the outcome of this summit? Could it become an "important milestone" for restoring mutual trust and strengthening cooperation among the three countries?

Moon: Convening this year's trilateral summit was a daunting task. It was held after a four-and-a-half-year lapse since the last summit in Chengdu in 2019. Given such a process, I commend leaders from China, Japan and South Korea for their restraint, resilience and commitment. The joint declaration of the summit reveals some important achievements: the institutionalization of trilateral cooperation through the regularization of summit and foreign ministers' talks, the promotion of human exchanges, especially focusing on future generations, seeking common strategies in coping with challenges of climate change, free trade, public health and an aging society, science and technology as well as digital transformation, and natural disasters, and appealing to peace and stability in Northeast Asia. These achievements are quite significant.

But I wouldn't say it was an "important milestone." It can be seen as a modest, but

valuable restart for cooperation among the three countries. Moreover, the leaders were short of addressing critical geopolitical and geoeconomic issues facing the region. Trust-building and fuller cooperation will take more time. We need patience. Nevertheless, the Seoul summit offered valuable momentum for the leaders of China, Japan and South Korea to meet and discuss common concerns.

GT: What do you think is the root cause of the uncertainty in the current regional situation? What demonstrative effect does this meeting have on promoting broader regional cooperation and easing regional confrontations in the Asia-Pacific region?

Moon: The root cause of the uncertainty emanates from China-US strategic rivalry. American fear of China's rise gave birth to its Indo-Pacific Strategy that aims at encircling and even containing China. Japan and South Korea have adopted a pro-American balancing strategy that has undermined their strategic cooperative partnership with China. US-led geopolitical containment, geoeconomic decoupling and de-risking, and value alliance of like-minded countries have precipitated the advent of exclusive bloc diplomacy, heightening structural uncertainty in the region. We need an inclusive, non-discriminative, and win-win approach. I believe strengthening regional cooperation through the trilateral summit can surely shape a new regional ambiance that can mitigate tensions between China and the US and help find a win-win solution to the current dilemma.

GT: There is a viewpoint that this trilateral meeting can play a vital role in easing tensions between China and the US. What's your take?

Moon: Yes, a full consolidation of trilateral cooperation among China, Japan and South Korea can surely mitigate tensions between the two giants. Japan and South Korea are the closest allies of the US, and they can play a role in mediating and even preventing conflicts between China and the US. The issue at stake is to what extent they can cultivate trust and strategic empathy with China. Beijing needs to make more efforts to win the minds of people in Japan and South Korea.

GT: Since President Yoon Suk-yeol took office, he has made a concerted effort to deepen the alliance with the US. Hence, observers tend to think the outlook toward the China-South Korea relationship is not optimistic. How much room does South Korea have to adjust its policy toward China?

Moon: Yes, you are right. President Yoon's top foreign policy priority is the strengthening of the alliance with the US. His government has been seeking a value, strategic, comprehensive alliance with the US. It was in this context that his government has supported the Indo-Pacific Strategy and has shown a keen interest in joining AUKUS. He has also been strengthening extended nuclear deterrence with the US, including the establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Meeting. In addition, the Yoon government has also been active in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. President Yoon has also been championing trilateral security cooperation with Japan and the US, which President Biden has boosted as one of his great foreign policy achievements. It will be a Herculean task for President Yoon to readjust his foreign policy stance in favor of improved relations with China. Recently, however, his government has shown a somewhat balanced and pragmatic diplomatic approach. Let's wait and see.

GT: The US, South Korea and Japan will hold a trilateral vice foreign ministerial meeting in the US later this week. What impact will the deepening cooperation between the three countries have on the situation in Northeast Asia?

Moon: The deepening cooperation among Japan, South Korea and the US is predicated on growing tension with China and North Korea. Northeast Asia is likely to be polarized between Japan-South Korea-US and China-North Korea-Russia. Such polarization will revive the old specter of the Cold War that can drive the region into protracted confrontation and even major conflicts. Under such bloc diplomacy, the logic of zero-sum game will trump that of a positive sum game. To assure win-win outcomes, we should make every effort to avoid falling into the trap of polarized bloc diplomacy. Otherwise, we will all become the victims of insane great power politics.