

The China-Japan-Korea Trilateral Cooperation as a Bridge to Build Regional Peace in East Asia

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China, Japan and the Republic of Korea are the top powers not only in East Asia but also in world politics. Now the international system is undergoing tremendous changes, for better or for worse, more for worse probably. All three countries are facing unprecedented challenges: Sino-US trade war, North Korea's denuclearization process at a critical moment, Sino-Japanese and Sino-RoK relations at a cross-roads towards warming up or further uneasiness, unilateral US tariff sanctions against Japan and Korea, and renewed RoK-Japanese rift over the history issues.

The uncertainties are abundant and structural but opportunities do exist as well. The Sino-RoK relations have visibly returned to normalcy, as the two countries have put the THAAD dispute behind. Sino-Japanese ties have past the most severe shape of strife and started to defreeze. With the first state visit to Japan by Xi Jinping in more than a decade, the eroded foundation for Sino-Japanese peaceful-co-existence has been repaired and will expectedly usher in a period of stability. Given such complicated economic and security situations in East Asia, the trilateral cooperation between China, Japan and Korea is essential to move things towards a better regional landscape. The following points are important for substantiating this cooperation.

1, The world economic environment is getting worse with intensified trade wars initiated by the US. Although China suffers most, the Korean and Japanese economies have also been negatively affected. The major challenge for this round of trade war is Washington's attempts to reshape the international value chain, supply chain and production chain. While China's place in these chains is undermined, Japan and the RoK have not been immune.

A big question is how the three countries protect their key roles in the original chains while accommodating US demands. Specifically, if the remolding of the new chains is inevitable with a lot of winners and losers, the three countries need to explore how they cooperate to create the region-centric and high-end chains of production based on their already highly integrated economies. One thing is clear that they will not fit well in a US-centric value chain. For self-protection they should strengthen their trilateral economic relationship of complementarity, which gives them great economic strength, particularly in the areas of IT industries, 5-G and AI. China, Japan and Korea have to forge a new type of economic regionalism in response to US efforts to reshape the economic order where the three countries are generally beneficiaries.

This is meant to build their offset economic capability collectively against the inevitable ups and downs in the overhaul of the global economic system, probably as a result of unilateral US endeavors based on its dominant power rather than on the WTO-based free trade regimes. One facilitator for building a trilaterally based and regionally expanded production connectivity is to accelerate the trilateral FTA negotiations. Clearly under the new economic circumstances such a trilateral trade/investment arrangement can partially help reduce the rising economic losses

by each country in their on-going trade frictions with the world.

2, Injecting new life to the stalled denuclearization process in North Korea and as an outcome the once-promising rapprochement momentum between the two Koreas. It is a pity that the second Trump-Kim Jong-un summit failed to deliver what we longed to see. Seriously the failure is capable of re-generating the familiar cycle of provocation-moderation-provocation again by the DPRK, if the US and North Korea likely fall into another round of vicious confrontation.

A denuclearized North Korea serves the best security interests of all three countries but by degree less so for the US. The difference in degree enables Washington to demand more concessions from the DPRK but this may have been the cause of the aborted US-DPRK deal on how to realize denuclearization. A peaceful Korean Peninsula may be perceived to help China's rise and a too quick process towards it may disrupt US rhythm in dealing with Pyongyang, and may even somewhat alienate US-RoK alliance, e.g., over issues of sanctions. Clearly Washington holds the key to further progress in the Peninsula's reconciliation.

However China, Japan and Korea should work together to promote the course of ending the state of war in the Peninsula step by step, with denuclearization as the most important primary objective for the time being. What can they do? At least they can ease sanctions in proportion to Pyongyang's denuclearization moves and re-impose it if Pyongyang violates its promises. Further, China and the RoK should encourage the DPRK to reform economically and open-up to the regions, especially to the South. And Japan can contribute to this with economic opportunities for the

North to trade with Japanese firms.

Most importantly, China, Japan and the RoK should work together to address Pyongyang's security concerns jointly, if the DPRK is really committed to the denuclearization course, even if it does not go for a Big-Bang type of denuclearization. True, the ultimate security guarantee should be in the hands of the US, but a collective and positive approach from China, Japan and Korea would help the overall course. To the neighbors of North Korea, a secure DPRK without nuclear programs may mean a secure Northeast Asia, which is welcome to all. Therefore, it is really conducive for China and Japan to support the reconciliation of the RoK and the DPRK.