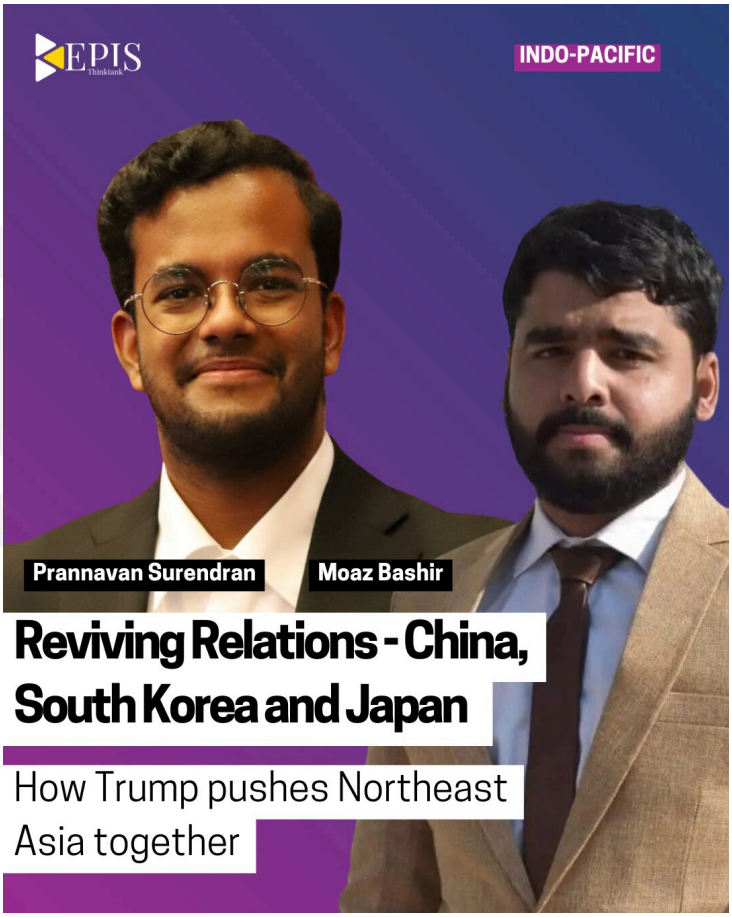
# Reviving Relations – China, South Korea and Japan

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On March 25th, 2025, China, South Korea, and Japan held their eleventh China-Japan-ROK Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tokyo. During their meeting, they agreed on key points that should shape the trilateral cooperation in the upcoming years. First, the focus lies on deepening economic and trade cooperation. The three foreign ministers agreed to resume the talks on a Free Trade Agreement and aim to conclude it at an early date. The Trade Agreement will ensure a smooth flow of the industrial and supply chains. On the same day, Chinese, South Korean, and Japanese ministers of Trade and Commerce met for the first time in five years. On both levels of

government, the respective leaders and members of the government were brought together by the same concern: Donald Trump's trade tariffs as part of his "America First Policy" that aims to reduce trade deficits and further boost domestic manufacturing.

The policies of the Trump Administration have significantly reshaped the strategic and economic calculus in East Asia, driving China, Japan, and South Korea to reassess their trilateral relations in light of Washington's unpredictability and the perceived erosion of American commitment to multilateralism. This brief explains the change in trilateral relations since Donald Trump took office in January 2025. Having explained the policies of the Trump Administration that led to these changes, the article will give a short insight into the historical evolution of the trilateral relations. Next, the prospects for the relations will be explained and negative consequences of a realignment of relations towards China will be discussed.

Trump's approach to trade and defense policy toward South Korea, Japan, and China is rooted in the strong belief that key U.S. allies, particularly South Korea and Japan, are "free riders" who are benefiting from American military protection without sharing a fair portion of the costs. At the same time, the Trump administration seems to have observed large trade imbalances, especially persistent trade deficits, as harmful to America's economic strength and national sovereignty. To counter these perceived injustices, the Trump administration adopted a confrontational stance, which includes imposing heavy tariffs on imports and demanding greater financial contributions from allies for hosting U.S. troops. These measures reflect a broader effort to shift the burden of defense and correct what Trump saw as unfair trade practices.

The US has provided South Korea and Japan with the troops, for example the 35th Air Defense Artillery Brigade in South Korea or the U.S. Navy in Japan, in the past as these countries face a constant threat of Chinese hegemonic designs in the region. Recently, representatives of the Trump administration called on Japan to increase its defense spending to at least three percent of GDP. Trump has also called on South Korea to contribute more to the costs of stationing around 28,500 US soldiers – known as U.S. Forces Korea.

China is one of the largest export markets for US goods and services – second only to Mexico – and vice versa, the U.S. is also an important trading partner for China. Together, the two countries account for around 43% of global gross domestic product. During his first term in office, President Trump launched a so-called trade war with China in 2018. Now, in the first months of his second term, he has threatened punitive tariffs of up to 145% on Chinese goods worth several billion dollars. He accuses China of unfair trade practices, including forced technology transfers and the theft of intellectual property. In response, China has also imposed high tariffs – in some cases up to 125% on US products. Despite these tensions, both

countries are currently negotiating tariff reductions to prevent a full-scale trade war.

Northeast Asia, especially Japan, China, and South Korea look back on bloody past. Wars, violence and political conflict have shaped the countries in the 20th century and even though these countries have not been in an armed conflict for a long time, the question about identity and nationalism has had a lasting impact on their relations.

Japanese imperialism had a huge impact on China and South Korea in the last century. The consequences of this can still be felt today. How Japan deals with war crimes today, such as the comfort women or forced laborers, for example, and conveys this in history books, has often triggered diplomatic crises. In particular, the history book controversy in the early 2000s and the repeated visits by Japanese prime ministers to the so-called Yasukuni Shrine, where, among other things, former war criminals who a war tribunal has already convicted continue to be worshipped, have led to criticism from both South Korea and China.

Territorial disputes have led to additional unrest in the relationship between South Korea and Japan in the past. Both countries claim the Liancourt Rocks archipelago for themselves. The visit of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak in 2012 triggered a diplomatic crisis. Territorial disputes have led to additional unrest in the relationship between South Korea and Japan in the past. Both countries claim the Liancourt Rocks archipelago for themselves. The Dokdo visit of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak in 2012 triggered a diplomatic crisis.

The constant disputes based on irreconcilable historical views often led to a strong distancing between South Korea and Japan. Under Park's presidency, South Korea moved closer to China and distanced itself from both Japan and the USA, both economically and in terms of security cooperation. In the recent past, particularly at the instigation of former President Yoon Suk-yeol, South Korea has moved closer to Japan and distanced itself from China. The reason for this rapprochement lies in Yoon's approach to leave historical debates and identity politics behind.

The history of relations between the three nations shows that cooperation between these three states is rarely a matter of course. The fact that Trump's aggressive tariff policy has even prompted these three countries to cooperate more closely on an economic level clearly shows the seriousness of the situation.

China, South Korea and Japan are facing the key challenge of having to weigh up how to deal with the tariff dispute instigated by Donald Trump during his second term in office. A natural solution would be to deepen economic exchange and trade with the other two countries, as already initiated by the meeting at trade minister level. A joint response from these three countries to Donald Trump's punitive tariffs would not be received positively in the White House. This would also encourage the countries to work together more closely on other levels.

However, the White House is likely to strongly object to such a coordinated economic response, particularly if it were seen as a counterbalance to Washington's trade policy. From a diplomatic perspective, this might put more strain on the already shaky ties between these nations and the US, possibly requiring them to strike an awkward balance between economic realism and strategic cooperation with their security partner.

If relations between South Korea and Japan, and the USA continue to deteriorate, both countries will be forced to stand on their own two feet in terms of security policy. Japan and South Korea must take their defense policy relations to the next level in order to take on more responsibility in Northeast Asia and function as a counterweight to China in the region in the absence of the US on the international stage, characterized by the "America First" policy. This would reshape the security landscape in Northeast Asia.

Northeast Asia is a key region for global economic and strategic change, yet it is far from being a stable one. South Korea, Japan and China want to avert the potential emergence of a new cold war situation in Northeast Asia and are all well aware that any such development leads to additional security and diplomatic challenges for each one. As a Korean proverb states "A single spoon does not make your stomach full" – one trilateral summit will not bring stability in the region in a single stroke.

On the other hand, if US-China economic confrontation escalates, South Korea and Japan will be pulled into security blocs, China will react through economic tools coercively, and the polarization will increase in the region. Yet South Korea and Japan rely on the United States for defense while China perceives the United States' presence as its containment in the region by the US. This increases mistrust which in return leads to a security dilemma where every state increases its defense spending and upgrades its military hardware thus escalating regional tensions. All three countries have a history of bilateral relations with each one which is characterized by lack of trust, unresolved territorial disputes, and popular antipathy. So, in the future things can go further on the wrong track if the trilateral relations deteriorate given the White House's sudden foreign policy shifts towards Northeast Asia.

On the other hand, any strong strategic move by these countries will have a big strategic impact on North Korea's standing in the region. It was evident from the last meeting where South Korea tried to move the agenda of the meeting against its old enemy and made emphasis on preventing North Korea from its nuclear ambitions. So, it is clear a unity between these countries would have stronger diplomatic pressure on North Korea.

In the face of mounting obstacles from U.S. trade and defense policies, the 11th China-Japan-ROK Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting signaled a renewed attempt to fortify regional cooperation. The three nations' common concerns about supply chain disruptions and tariff disputes led them to prioritize economic integration and agree to resume negotiations for a free trade agreement. They are now closer despite long-standing historical

tensions and unresolved conflicts because of the need for regional stability. The U.S.-China rivalry, nevertheless, might put this brittle unity to the test. Their combined position on North Korea's nuclear danger may likewise be strengthened by increased cooperation. In the end, the ability of trilateral relations to manage demands from both the inside and the outside while balancing strategic interests will determine their future.

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