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Japan, China and South Korea hold talks on North Korea and trade

Leaders of Japan, China and South Korea met in Tokyo on Wednesday in their first trilateral summit for two-and-half years. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and South Korean President Moon Jae-in held talks on North Korea, as well as trade in the region. The three leaders each held one-on-one meetings with their counterparts on the sidelines.

The summit was portrayed as a renewal of relations between the three countries. Li is the first Chinese leader to visit Japan in seven years, while Moon is the first South Korean president to do so in six-and-a-half years.

In a joint statement, the three said they “strongly hope that, building on the results of the Inter-Korean summit, further efforts by relevant parties, in particular through the upcoming US-DPRK (North Korea) Summit, will contribute to comprehensive resolution of concerns of the parties for peace and stability in the region.”

Despite this public show of unity, the differences between China and Japan were not addressed. Tokyo is continuing to push for North Korea’s “complete and verifiable” denuclearization and abandonment of ballistic missiles before any negotiations take place. Beijing, on the other hand, has called for simultaneous talks and gradual denuclearization. Li also pushed for closer trade relations with Japan and South Korea. The three countries comprise approximately 20 percent of the global economy. The Chinese premier stated: “In the current circumstances, China, Japan and Korea should stand even more firmly

together, uphold the rules-based multilateral trading system, and proudly oppose protectionism and unilateral actions.”

Li called for the completion of a trilateral free trade agreement, as well as progress on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which, if formed, would be the largest trade bloc in the world. The United States views the RCEP as a threat to its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. Abe and Moon nevertheless both expressed support for pursuing such deals, with Abe calling “for even freer trade” in the region.

China’s desire to normalize relations with Japan follows several tense years marked by territorial disputes with Tokyo over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which were exacerbated by the previous US administration of Barack Obama. The relationship between Beijing and Seoul also deteriorated in 2016 following the deployment of the US’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery to South Korea, but their ties have since improved. Ostensibly aimed at defending against a North Korean attack, THAAD and its corresponding radar system are aimed at China.

Wednesday’s summit allowed the three countries to feel one another out, while asserting their individual interests. China has been threatened with a US ultimatum on trade that reads more like a justification for war. Japan has similarly had US tariffs imposed on its steel exports. South Korea is concerned that a trade war would seriously impact its own exports to China, where it sends a large amount of intermediate goods. All three countries have regularly expressed opposition to protectionist measures.

However, the major concern is the upcoming summit between North Korea’s Kim Jong-un and the US’s Donald Trump. Shortly before Wednesday’s trilateral meeting, Trump announced that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was on his way to North Korea for the second time in little more than a month to discuss the time and location of the Trump-Kim talks.

Their formal support for the US-North Korea summit belies each country’s concerns, particularly Japan and China. Tokyo was caught off guard in March when Trump announced he intended to sit down with Kim. Abe has exploited the supposed North Korean threat to justify revising Article 9—known as the pacifist clause—of the constitution and further Japan’s remilitarization.

Beijing is worried that a deal between Washington and Pyongyang could ignore China’s interests, such as the removal of the THAAD battery in South Korea, or even pull North Korea into the US’s orbit and remove the buffer between it and US forces in the South.

In this context, Kim Jong-un met Chinese President Xi Jinping for the second time at Dalian, China on Monday and Tuesday to further shore up their relationship following a first meeting in March. Xi has praised North Korea's turn toward negotiations but wants to ensure Beijing is not left out in the cold.

China's Xinhua news agency quoted Kim saying after his meeting with Xi that "as long as relevant parties eliminate the hostile policy and security threats against North Korea, North Korea does not need to have nuclear weapons and denuclearization is achievable." At the same time, Pyongyang warned that Washington should refrain from claiming that Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign had forced the North to the bargaining table.

There is no guarantee the Trump-Kim summit will take place. Lee Jong-nam, a professor on North Korea at Seoul's Korea University, stated in the *Financial Times*: "There are already signs of conflict between Washington and Pyongyang over to what extent they want North Korea's denuclearization. Washington is now talking about a permanent dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear programs and disposal of its biological and chemical weapons. This is a much stronger demand than Pyongyang had expected."

Washington has a long history of using phony claims of "weapons of mass destruction" and chemical weapon attacks to justify imperialist aggression against former colonial countries, including Iraq, Libya and Syria. Most recently, Trump announced on Tuesday that Washington was pulling out of the nuclear agreement with Iran.

Pyongyang has its own history of making deals with Washington—in 1994 and again in 2007—only to see the US abandon them. Resembling the current demands being placed on Pyongyang and the abandonment of the Iran agreement, the 2007 deal in particular was scuttled when the US unilaterally imposed additional demands on the North. For this reason, North Korea has long pushed for a treaty to formally end the 1950–1953 Korean War, which only concluded with an armistice.

There is no guarantee anything will come out of the Trump-Kim summit other than a direct ultimatum for Pyongyang to give in to all US demands. This uncertainty has China, Japan and South Korea reevaluating their trilateral relationship.