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U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateralism after the Biden-Moon Summit

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At the end of May, President Moon Jae-in of South Korea held his first in-person meeting with President Joe Biden at the White House. The joint statement released by the U.S. indicates that the leaders discussed a wide range of areas to deepen cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea, from climate change and COVID-19, to democracy promotion and international trade. The U.S.-Korea summit demonstrated “a commitment to expanding cooperation and shaping our shared future in accordance with our democratic values that have made our nations strong [and] highly competitive in the 21st century economies.” President Biden later said at a joint press conference

In discussing areas for multilateral U.S.-ROK cooperation, the joint statement made a short reference to trilateral cooperation with Japan. In comparison to the statement after the U.S.-Japan summit previously, experts note it is interestingly longer. According to the White

House, Presidents Biden and Moon said that U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation was necessary for “addressing the DPRK, protecting our shared security and prosperity, upholding common values, and bolstering the rules-based order.”

The Biden administration has identified repairing relations between Seoul and Tokyo as an important goal. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin have held meetings with their counterparts in Korea and Japan, as has Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines. And before meeting with President Moon, President Biden also held a summit with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in April. “I think that the main thing that both Korea and Japan were looking for after the unpredictability of the Trump administration was reassurance,” said Ralph Cossa, president emeritus of the Pacific Forum think tank in Hawaii. “From my standpoint, both meetings went as well as could be expected, maybe even a little better than could be expected.”

Looking ahead, the U.S. seems like it will continue trying to close the gap between Korea and Japan. Earlier in May, the Kyodo news service reported that officials are working to schedule a trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G7 summit to be hosted by the United Kingdom in June. “The question will be how the Koreans and the Japanese respond,” said Mr. Cossa. If they agree to a trilateral summit just to humor the Americans, “then it’s just a photo op, and it’s not going to make any real difference,” he said.

If a trilateral summit is to be held, experts say the agenda should include policy areas where there are strong commonalities between all three leaders. Shared concerns over North Korea have featured prominently in past meetings, but experts warn there are also significant divergences between the U.S., Korea, and Japan. “It would seem prudent to focus on issue areas where there is clear overlap in the goals and strategies of Seoul and Tokyo, and where concrete progress can be made by the three countries working in unison,” said Dr. John Delury, a professor at Yonsei University. “North Korea does not meet this requirement.”

productive topic for the leaders to discuss. Both joint statements released by the White House after summits with Korea and Japan mentioned the need to expand production of covid vaccines, and work towards reforming the World Trade Organization “I think right now, economic recovery and pandemic recovery are the two safest things [to focus on],” said Mr. Cossa.

Experts say a major obstacle to trilateral cooperation is the domestic situation in both Korea and Japan. Dr. Heung-kyu Kim of Ajou University in Korea says there is an unfortunate “special relationship” between politicians on both sides, who inflame bilateral tensions for domestic political gain. During a webinar hosted by the Center for American Progress, he added that such politicians “pretend to hate each other and find fault each other, but they love each other, actually, [because] they breed each other.”

Thus, the upcoming presidential elections narrow the space for Seoul to rehabilitate the relationship with Tokyo. For politicians standing for elections in Korea, “the better they do with Japan, the worse it looks in Korean domestic public opinion,” observed Mr. Cossa. He said that from his perspective, no Korean leader has made the case that Japan is critical to South Korean national security, and that postwar Japan has generally acted in a more benign way than some of South Korea’s other neighbors. “That requires a leader with some political courage, and that seems to be in short supply in Korea,” said Mr. Cossa.

The South Korean election calendar also underlines Japanese reticence in reaching out to Korea. A report published by *The Japan Times* newspaper suggests that regardless of whether a trilateral summit is held, a bilateral summit between PM Suga and President Moon is unlikely to happen. According to a senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs official quoted by the paper, Tokyo is “not in the mood” to schedule a summit since President Moon is a “lame duck.” Previously, after the foreign ministers from both sides met in London, a government source said that the meeting was held to “save face for Washington,” according to the Japanese *Asahi Shimbun*. Bruce Klingner, a senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation says that while there have been some promising signs coming from both Seoul and Tokyo, a breakthrough remains elusive. “I think both sides seem to want to back off, but neither is willing to go very far without assurances that the other will,” he said.

As policymakers muddle through the continued freeze in Korea-Japan relations, experts caution that the Americans should not have too high expectations for what they can do. “The Biden administration would seem wise to proceed in a cautious and humble manner on its project of reviving ‘trilateralism,’” said Dr. Delury. “Ultimately, Korea and Japan as

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governments and societies, will have to work out for themselves the next chapter of their bilateral relationship.”

But even if the U.S. cannot resolve the root causes of discord between Korea and Japan, other experts say that the Americans should remain engaged in the process. Mr. Klingner said that Koreans point to the 1905 Taft-Katsura Agreement, a memo outlining the American and Japanese positions in the Far East, as the start of American involvement in Korea-Japan relations. “At times, I’ve been yelled at for the U.S. role in Taft-Katsura,” he said. “I think we have, if not a responsibility, an objective, or a purpose in trying to improve relations,” Mr. Klingner said.

The U.S. should do what it can to offset pressure on Korean and Japanese officials in the domestic sphere. Dr. Kim likened the situation between Korea and Japan to a game of chicken, wherein neither side can concede. “The United States can play a very important role into strengthen the relationship between South Korea and Japan,” he said.

This can be done by shaping the conversation, quietly but firmly, to focus on areas of shared concern, whether its covid vaccines, international trade, or China. “What we’re trying to do is not close the door on history, but redirect the focus towards the present and the future,” said Mr. Klingner. “We need to be pointing to the necessity of addressing the common threats of this millennium, rather than rehashing the events of the last millennium.”

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