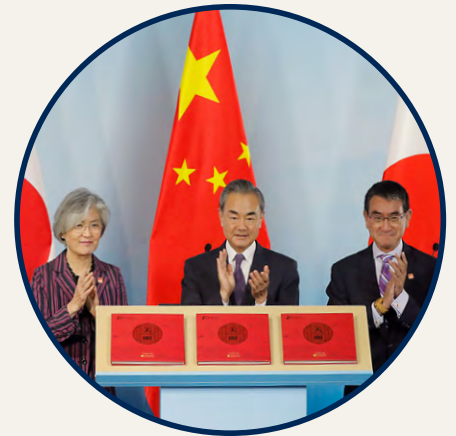


THE LIMITS OF COOPERATION IN NORTHEAST ASIA: JAPAN-ROK-CHINA RELATIONS AFTER THE FUKUSHIMA WASTEWATER RELEASE



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A REPORT OF THE ASIA SOCIETY POLICY INSTITUTE



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INTRODUCTION

More than a decade after the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami that hit northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011, causing the meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, the aftermath of the “triple disaster” continues to shape perceptions of Japan among its neighbors. The Japanese government’s decision to release into the sea more than a million tons of treated radioactive wastewater stored at the wrecked Fukushima plant beginning on August 24, 2023, decisively shifted the narrative of Japan’s experience: whereas the country was once viewed as the victim of one of the world’s worst nuclear disasters, it came to be seen by many in Northeast Asia as an atomic chemical antagonist. Following the announcement of the wastewater release, Japan faced an immediate backlash from neighboring countries and the international community over environmental and health concerns. The decision divided public opinion in both Japan and the broader Asia-Pacific region and threatened Japan’s attempts to position itself as the leader of a free, fair, and open Indo-Pacific. The Japanese government’s decision particularly roiled the public in Northeast Asia, where anti-Japanese sentiment stemming from the collective memory of Japan’s military ambition, colonialism, and atrocities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries persists. Meanwhile, authorities in some countries, especially China, intentionally stirred historical grievances and distrust in an attempt to undermine the trilateral relationship among Japan, Korea, and the United States.

However, are concerns about the wastewater release warranted? In a Comprehensive Safety Reviewⁱ, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – the United Nations nuclear watchdog – determined that the release had no radiological impact on public health

and the marine environment. Emphasizing the Fukushima plant’s compliance with “international safety standards,” IAEA Director General **Rafael Mariano Grossi** focused on the ongoing process of wastewater release and the Japanese’s government accountability for the water’s treatment, while also expressing concerns about the accumulation of tritium (a radioactive isotope of hydrogen that cannot be removed) in the water and the importance of further research on the effects of the wastewater on marine life.

Whereas the country was once viewed as the victim of one of the world’s worst nuclear disasters, it came to be seen by many in Northeast Asia as an atomic chemical antagonist.

Driven by health concerns, geopolitical dynamics, and the absence of regional consultation, the Japanese decision provoked a furious public backlash among Asia-Pacific nations, particularly in South Korea and China. Relations among Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and China have deteriorated in recent years amid rising security concerns over North Korea’s volatility, tensions between China and the United States, and wartime forced-labor reparationsⁱⁱ that caused long-term damage to Japan-ROK relations long before the rapprochement of 2023. Participants in the Japan-ROK-China trilateral summit now have wastewater as another contentious topic to discuss during the renewed dialogue, which is scheduled to be convened in 2024. As the nuclear wastewater decision seems to have surfaced many thorny issues among the three countries, this paper seeks to explain the regional reaction to Japan’s decision, why this reaction matters, and how the trilateral relationship might evolve alongside the wastewater issue.

BACKGROUND

When the Japanese government first announced in April 2021 that it planned to begin releasing treated radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima plant, it ran the risk of triggering a regional backlash amid complex bilateral relations with South Korea and China. The day after the announcement, Tokyo's ambassador in Seoul was urgently summonedⁱⁱⁱ, and then ROK President **Moon Jae-In** released a proposal to petition the decision^{iv}. Meanwhile, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the “unilateral” nature of the decision, suggesting that its Japanese counterparts should “drink treated water”^v to demonstrate that international safety standards had been met. Despite this strong reaction, the announcement did not come as a complete surprise; indeed, it had been long anticipated by the international community. In 2013, the operator of the Fukushima plant revealed that approximately 300 tons of highly contaminated water had leaked^{vi} out of a storage tank; the Atomic Energy Society of Japan subsequently recommended^{vii} that the wastewater must be treated to remove radioactive materials and released into the sea.

The unilateral nature of Japan's decision was a politically inopportune choice that could have long-lasting implications.

Strong regional reaction to the first release of wastewater in August 2023, however, proved more difficult for the Japanese government to overcome. The deterioration of the geostrategic environment and major changes in Korea-Japan relations are relevant factors. Following North Korea's enhancement of its ballistic missile program and intensification of long-range missile tests toward Japan, and in line with the **Joe Biden** administration's push to shore up relations between the two allies, safety concerns persuaded Japan to seek stronger trilateral relations with South Korea and the United States. Although South Korean President **Yoon Suk Yeol** pledged to establish a “partner” relationship with Japan at the highest diplomatic level, his rapprochement did not persuade the Korean public of Japan's sincerity and accountability, evidenced by a strong protest movement^{viii} that turned out an estimated 50,000 people for a rally in Seoul.

China's anxiety about encirclement by U.S. allies, protracted war in Ukraine, and stronger relationships among Pyongyang, Beijing, and Moscow have brought new challenges to the region. Concerns about cooperation between Russia and North Korea ran high following a September 2023 summit between **Vladimir Putin** and **Kim Jong Un** in the Russian Far East, which is thought to have produced an arms deal between the two countries. China's role in supporting both Russia and North Korea^{ix} – despite their aggressive behavior – has been identified as a threat to U.S. allies and partners. The growing separation between explicit blocs in the Indo-Pacific could jeopardize the success of upcoming multilateral conferences, as countries might take the opportunity to make accusations rather than find solutions.

The trilateral political deadlock between Japan, South Korea, and China has been long entangled with the history of wartime grievances, ongoing trade wars, political maneuvering around North Korea, and open confrontation with China. Japan's decision to release radioactive wastewater from Fukushima introduced a new complication and weakened the possibility of regional reconciliation. Although the release may have been necessary for safety reasons, the unilateral nature of Japan's decision was a politically inopportune choice that could have long-lasting implications. The wastewater release is expected to continue over the next 30 years, with each release potentially destabilizing the relationships among Japan, South Korea, and China – especially at the trilateral summit. Deliberate undermining of Japan's precautionary measures by Chinese and Korean government actors will only exacerbate matters. Over the long term, the wastewater issue could become a perennial political minefield, sabotaging regional cooperation in Northeast Asia.

TEPCO'S CREDIBILITY

Since the Fukushima meltdown, the Japanese public has shown little appetite for increasing atomic power and nuclear capacity for electricity generation, regardless of the challenges. However, amid an energy crisis and rising heating bills, few better alternatives have surfaced.

Nuclear energy has always been a national priority in the Japanese archipelago. Until 2011, Japan was actively developing its nuclear energy capabilities, with a goal to increase energy generation from nuclear power to at least 50 percent of its energy mix^x. In the years since the disaster, Japan has drastically reduced that target: it now seeks to generate 20 percent of its energy mix from nuclear by 2030.

As a result of Japan's limited land and natural resources, the country has long relied on energy imports, especially from neighboring countries. Until February 2022, Russia was a primary energy source, from which Japan^{xi} imported coal, liquid natural gas, and oil to sustain its energy needs. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Japan announced a plan to decrease its energy reliance on Russia in line with the G7's 2022 pledge to phase out or ban trade with Moscow. However, Band-Aids such as the "Warm Biz"^{xii} scheme – the Japanese government's latest campaign to prevent blackouts and curb energy consumption by encouraging citizens to turn down their thermostats, wear more layers of clothing, and make use of pocket warmers – cannot comprehensively address Japan's energy deficiencies. Reducing energy reliance should go hand-in-hand with a policy to return to nuclear sources.

Public opinion is starting to shift, though. According to a recent poll conducted by the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, 51 percent of Japanese were in favor of restarting the country's 33 operable reactors^{xiii}, while 42 percent opposed doing so. The government believes that it is time to recover from economic decline and deflation by extending the lifespan of outdated nuclear reactors^{xiv} and forgetting the ghosts of the past. The Fukushima wastewater release is a part of this national momentum toward assessing risk through science. However, in light

of the government's attempts to eliminate any reminders of previous nuclear mistakes, the conversation has shifted to finding fault and casting blame. Former Japanese Prime Minister **Junichiro Koizumi** claimed that the Fukushima disaster was the result of negligence and disregard for the risks of living in an earthquake-prone country and that Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the operator of the Fukushima plant, should be "profoundly embarrassed."^{xv}

Japan lacks clarity and transparency on its nuclear policy and risk mitigation strategy for dealing with the consequences of severe radiation. TEPCO is now in charge of the wastewater release and plans to restart operations at several nuclear power plants^{xvi} to lower overall electricity costs. However, Japan's overconfidence in the nuclear industry may foreshadow a future disaster. TEPCO had a chance to restore its reputation after the initial catastrophe by decommissioning the Fukushima plant, properly storing the contaminated water and soil, and treating the radioactive content. During the first two years after the power plant's collapse, TEPCO finished sealing the radioactive water and installing some 1,000 storage tanks, but about 300 tons of highly contaminated water^{xvii} leaked into the sea in 2013. The rationale for treating and releasing the wastewater is that doing so would prevent accidental leaks of highly radioactive water from storage sites in case of a future natural disaster. However, the question arises, can TEPCO be trusted to manage the treatment and safe discharge of the water? As wastewater release affects not only the domestic aquatic ecosystem but also the Pacific Ocean and beyond, international and domestic communication should be improved. Regrettably, only the IAEA was involved in the assessment process for determining public accountability and safety standards, neglecting consultation with experts from neighboring countries.

After a two-year IAEA task force inspection of Japan's water treatment process, the IAEA director general stated that "the treated water would have a negligible radiological impact^{xviii} to people and the environment." Indeed, discharge of treated wastewater under close monitoring and inspection by the IAEA is standard

procedure at many nuclear plants, including those located in China, Taiwan, and South Korea. Japan claims that a gradual process of releasing wastewater into the ocean over a period of at least 30 years would not be harmful to marine and human life and would follow the standard procedure for discharging nuclear plant wastewater, as in other countries. The only stumbling block in the conversation about environmental consequences is the level of tritium – a radioactive isotope of hydrogen that cannot be directly removed from the water, only purified. In 2018, TEPCO admitted that other dangerous isotopes besides tritium could be present in the water. However, the Japanese government claims that “repurifying” water will help meet regulatory standards.

Transparency on disaster risk management and responses to possible radiation needs to be addressed by the Japanese government and TEPCO. While Japan must have been preparing for this crucial step in its post-Fukushima cleanup for many years, the announcement and the actual discharges appear to have been performed in a hurry, without attention to scientific concerns or completion of a multidimensional examination of the case. TEPCO’s history of errors and concealment is also a point of contention, highlighting the lack of trust and the fear of future nuclear accidents. Even the IAEA’s oversight has been interpreted by some as a fig leaf^{xix} to compensate for regional concerns about conflicts of interests and noncompliance.

THE ASIA-PACIFIC REACTION TO THE WASTEWATER RELEASE

The first wave of public anger was triggered by Japan's April 2021 announcement of its plan to dispose of the treated wastewater by discharging it into the sea. While the European Union and the United States welcomed the IAEA's involvement^{xx} in the process and Japan's transparency about the decision, opposition from environmental groups and criticism from Northeast Asian neighbors soon followed. South Korean government officials expressed strong regret over Japan's decision to approve the release^{xxi} without consulting with other nations in the region and advised Tokyo to "immediately halt" its plan. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson **Zhao Lijian** expressed "grave concern"^{xxii} over the decision and noted that it is "not merely a domestic issue for Japan." UN human rights experts^{xxiii} also voiced deep disappointment in the decision, noting that radioactive elements can pose a threat to humans and the environment. Despite the apparent division of opinion among UN officials, the IAEA director general attempted to reassure the international community that Japan was complying with safety standards, saying, "There is no scandal here."^{xxiv}

However, there was a resurgence of outrage two years later when Japan discharged the first batch of treated wastewater in August 2023. Changes in leadership, politics, and regional relations during that period contributed to a more highly charged regional reaction.

Following South Korea's contested presidential elections in 2022, Yoon Suk Yeol – the current president of the ROK – profoundly shifted the country's foreign policy to establish partner relations with Japan. Attempting to ease tensions with Tokyo, the South Korean government toned down its rhetoric and stated that it would respect the IAEA's findings. The South Korean public, however, condemned the bilateral rapprochement by furiously protesting the decision. South Korean eco-activists camped out at the Japanese embassy, while a coalition of 25 fisheries organizations signed a petition. Surveys conducted by various newspapers and agencies showed that around 80 percent of South Koreans opposed^{xxv} the discharge. The unfavorable public opinion posed the risk of long-term economic losses for Tokyo, as South Koreans refused to consume Japanese seafood^{xxvi} and supported a ban on imports^{xxvii} from Japan.

In China, a fervent anti-Japanese campaign was fueled by media criticism. The situation reached a breaking point when several Japanese institutions and businesses started to receive threatening phone calls^{xxviii} from Chinese citizens. Kickstarted by a message from the Chinese Foreign Ministry blaming the Japanese government for an "extremely selfish and irresponsible act in disregard of global public interest,"^{xxix} mounting public discontent became evident on Chinese social media (Weibo), with the news getting more than 800 million views in a few hours. The Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department made no attempt to soothe the tension, taking advantage of the anti-Japanese sentiment to distract the nation from a range of domestic concerns. To reinforce negative perceptions of Japan and to showcase China's intention to act in "public health interests," the Chinese customs agency announced a ban on imports of all aquatic products originating from Japan, threatening 22.5 percent of the Japanese overseas seafood market^{xxx}. In support of the decision on the mainland, Hong Kong also imposed a ban on seafood imported from 10 prefectures close to Fukushima, jeopardizing 20 percent of the revenue^{xxxi} from Japan's second-largest seafood export destination.

To soften the impact of the trade restrictions, Japanese Prime Minister **Fumio Kishida** promised to allocate \$141 million to an emergency fund for Japanese fisheries industry. Although the seafood bans implemented

by China, Macao, and Hong Kong together had a negligible effect on Japan's total export market, accounting for less than 1 percent of the country's global trade,^{xxxii} Japanese fishery cooperatives strongly opposed the release of wastewater. Since the 2011 nuclear accident, Fukushima and nearby prefectures have struggled to overcome reputational damage amid radiation inspections and seafood bans by Japan's neighbors. In light of public sentiment, South Korea has maintained its ban on seafood from prefectures surrounding Fukushima; as a result Japan's fishery cooperatives have little opportunity to reap the benefits of warmer Japan-Korea relations. Therefore, Japan's National Fisheries Association continues to oppose the wastewater discharge, claiming that its opinion was never considered, and the seafood industry continues to bear the heavy burden of Japan's nuclear legacy. The Japanese government was unable to ensure a stable trade turnover before the 2021 wastewater decision was made, instead promising to establish new export destinations as soon as possible. However, in the absence of a crisis mitigation plan, the fisheries industry was unable to rapidly adapt and recover.

Echoing the fishermen's outrage, the Japanese branch of Greenpeace, an independent and influential environmental watchdog based in Tokyo, publicly condemned the decommissioning plans for Fukushima Daiichi^{xxxiii}, claiming that the IAEA had overlooked the contamination effects of the wrecked plant debris, which still pollutes the groundwater. The group criticized the G7's endorsement of the discharge plan, charging that policymakers chose "politics over science." Indeed, the G7 Leaders' Summit^{xxxiv} was conducted in Hiroshima in May 2023, giving Japan more political leverage to seek international support for the release of the treated wastewater. However, the G7 Ministers' Meeting on Climate, Energy, and Environment, conducted a month earlier, achieved no consensus on the issue, as discussion was blocked by **Steffi Lemke**, Germany's minister for the environment, nature conservation, nuclear safety, and consumer protection. While Lemke noted that Germany respects TEPCO's transparency with the IAEA and the international community, it "cannot welcome the release of the treated water."^{xxxv} By shedding light on the wastewater problem, Germany, which recently phased out its own national nuclear industry, significantly tarnished Japan's reputation and undermined the Japanese government's economic rationale for reviving nuclear plant operations.

However, the most impactful opposition came from China, with this issue blocking bilateral progress across the board. In early September 2023 during the ASEAN+3 Summit, China reiterated the lack of regional consultation, while other ASEAN countries, including South Korea, expressed satisfaction with Japan's adherence to international safety regulations. Unable to discredit Japan and influence the opinion of ASEAN regional partners, China has shifted its strategy to foment discontent among the Pacific Islands, where daily life is deeply interconnected with the ocean and depends directly on aquatic resources. Dismayed by the nuclear history of the Marshall Islands and the lingering effects of radiation around nuclear bomb testing sites, Pacific Islands leaders know the bitter truth of belated recognition of contamination mistakes.

While there was no direct opposition from the Pacific Islands Forum, its Secretary General, **Henry Puna**, stated that "there continue to be divergent views ... within the Forum Membership on this issue, and I recognize the sovereignty and prerogative of Forum Members to determine their own national positions."^{xxxvi} Wastewater discharge was identified as an agenda item for more thorough discussion at the Forum Leaders Meeting in the Cook Islands in November 2023, and it will be a standing discussion topic during the 2024 Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting with Japan. In the context of U.S.-China rivalry in the region, China has leveraged the fear of radiation to bolster its reputation among Pacific Islands nations as a defender of international safety interests. China's closest partner in this regard, the Solomon Islands, issued a robust

statement condemning the release^{xxxvii}, while Fiji's opposition party led protest movement in Suva. Other Pacific Island nations have been less critical, accepting the IAEA's scientific evidence of safety and constant monitoring of radiation levels in the region. However, public distrust persists.

REGIONAL UNITY OVER HISTORICAL INJUSTICES PERPETRATED BY JAPAN

While China and South Korea could also be accused of hypocrisy – nuclear plants in both countries have released their own radioactive wastewater – the backlash against Japan highlights a historical dimension to the trilateral dynamics. Over the years, these countries have attempted to overcome their regional confrontation and revitalize economic and strategic cooperation, first as part of the ASEAN+3 economic dialogue since 1997, and later as part of the Japan-ROK-China trilateral summit, conducted since 2008 and institutionalized as the International Forum for Trilateral Cooperation since 2011. Nevertheless, the shaky rapprochement was repeatedly undermined as a result of differing geopolitical interests and persistent historical grievances.

Two millennia of assimilation, belligerence, resource competition, and land seizures laid the historical foundation of Japan-Korea-China relations. Japan's brutal colonization and exploitation of its neighbors in the early 20th century permanently altered Northeast Asia's development and led to a prohibition on offensive Japanese military activities.

Japan officially annexed the Korean Peninsula in 1910 after more than a decade of confrontation with China, reshaping the Korean economy to serve Japanese interests, working to abolish Korean identity by restricting use of the Korean language, and imposing Japanese culture and military leadership until 1945. Japan took control of Taiwan and other islands in 1895 and then invaded Manchuria, China's northeastern region, and established a puppet regime there in 1931. Simultaneously, the Imperial Japanese Army exploited Korean land, resources, and people as a buffer for its military ambitions. Waging a brutal occupation of the Chinese mainland beginning in 1931, the Sino-Japanese conflict melded with World War II. By 1942, Japan possessed almost a quarter of China's territory, carrying out destructive bombings and killings, including the horrific Nanjing Massacre of 1937–1938, one of the darkest periods in Chinese history. Japanese troops killed an estimated 300,000 civilians and committed tens of thousands of sexual assaults in Nanjing, a permanent stain on the Chinese collective memory. Sexual exploitation was a major feature of Japanese colonization in both China and Korea: attempts to address the issue of “comfort women” – the hundreds of thousands of women who were sexually enslaved by Japanese militants during World War II – evoke the same the level of hatred and resentment in Korea as the Nanjing Massacre does in China.

Japanese leaders argued that the issue of comfort women was settled by a 1965 agreement normalizing relations between Japan and Korea and by the establishment of the Asian Women's Fund in 1995 to support victims and families from South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, and the Philippines. After the adoption of a landmark agreement between South Korea and Japan in 2015, Tokyo provided 1 billion yen to a foundation supporting the surviving comfort women, to resolve the dispute “finally and irreversibly.” Some groups have advocated for formal apologies in the form of direct compensation to the survivors rather than through the fund. Even former President **Moon Jae-In** supported the disbandment of the fund. South Korean activists erected a Comfort Girl statue outside the Japanese consulate in Busan in 2016, and in 2018, the South Korean Supreme Court ordered leading Japanese industries to pay reparations for forced wartime labor exploitation. Japan's inadequate attempts to recognize wartime violations and growing resentment among the Korean people led to the complete deterioration of bilateral relations in 2019, with Japan initiating a trade war with its neighbor and South Korea threatening to withdraw from a vital intelligence-sharing agreement.

In China, advocacy for comfort women and wartime grievances also gained momentum following seemingly unconnected disputes. Most Japanese army brothels were located in occupied Chinese territory. Therefore, the institutionalized discrimination against Chinese women by Imperial Japan is a common narrative used by the Chinese Communist Party to isolate Japan diplomatically. Although the feminist and reparations movements are not as strong in China as in the ROK, this has created a negative perception of Japan, both domestically and internationally, which the Chinese government and the Communist Party have weaponized against any misstep by Japan, including the Fukushima wastewater release.

JAPAN-ROK-CHINA TRILATERAL SUMMIT

Despite lingering historical and political disputes, China, Japan, and Korea plan to resume their trilateral summit after a four-year hiatus. South Korea, the current host, announced in September 2023 that the meeting would be conducted by the end of the year, at the “earliest convenient time.” It was later postponed to early 2024, though no date has yet been set. Initially, trilateral consultations were intended to be convened annually with the heads of government and foreign and domestic ministries to foster economic cooperation, facilitate discussions on an open regional agenda, and promote cross-sector cooperation. Regrettably, trilateral tensions have translated into a “stop-and-go” mode of cooperation. Antagonism over wartime crimes and territorial disputes somewhat negated the progress achieved during the first four years of the dialogue, curtailing the talks from 2012 to 2018, with only a brief high-level meeting conducted in 2015 amid a rising nuclear threat from North Korea. It seems that only the existential threat of North Korea’s nuclear and missile program and rising geopolitical tensions in the region can counterbalance the undercurrents of the three countries’ relations.

A tangled knot of historical mistrust, geopolitical speculation, and economic controversy is at the crux of Northeast Asian trilateralism.

The decision to convene the meeting was provoked, in part, by the long-anticipated U.S.-brokered diplomatic rapprochement between Seoul and Tokyo, culminating in an August 2023 summit at Camp David, as well as by China’s concern over U.S. military presence in the region. A tangled knot of historical mistrust, geopolitical speculation, and economic controversy is at the crux of Northeast Asian trilateralism. Recognizing the need to come to the table, the three countries aim to manage their differences while building greater cooperation amid international security threats.

TRILATERAL RELATIONS UNDERMINED BY AN OVEREMPHASIS ON MILITARY SIGNALING

Continued interconnectivity of regional actors amid rising tensions provides some assurance that the trilateral summit will take place. Undoubtedly, the renewed quest for peace and security will be a prominent agenda item. A new diplomatic commitment between Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul only reaffirms the need to manage relations with China responsibly. China also seeks more security in the region, but it has done so through aggressive sovereignty claims and military threats, raising global concerns over expansion of its nuclear capabilities^{xxxviii}, maritime territorialization^{xxxix} of the South China Sea, and persistent rhetoric describing “reunification” with Taiwan as “inevitable.”

The denuclearization of North Korea is the underlying security issue that necessitates urgent dialogue among the three nations. Before the collapse of the Six-Party Talks between the United States, China, South Korea, North Korea, Russia, and Japan, the North Korean threat was a key component of the military deterrence strategy of the Asia-Pacific and the three regional actors. All three countries’ deep involvement in geopolitical tensions and, paradoxically, familiarity with the explosiveness and insolubility of the North Korean threat contributed to the failed resumption of the Six-Party Talks and the unsuccessful U.S.-North Korea dialogue in 2019. Since the last round of Six-Party Talks in 2009 failed to dismantle the North Korean nuclear arsenal and capabilities, regional-level discussions of the nuclear threat have moved to other formats, including the trilateral dialogue agenda.

The latest hiatus in the negotiations derailed cooperation on a response to North Korean volatility. In fact, North Korea, China, and Russia have expanded their unity in Northeast Asia, causing unease in Japan and South Korea about possible military cooperation among the neighboring countries. The 2024 trilateral summit will target the prevention of militarization in the Asia-Pacific and identify priorities for national security in bilateral and multilateral contexts.

South Korea’s foreign policy focus is defined by the North Korean threat. Recent military exercises with the United States and its former adversary, Japan, demonstrate South Korea’s anxiety over North Korean military enhancement. Diplomatic developments include real-time information sharing on North Korean missile launches^{xl} and high-level consultations on cyber deterrence^{xli}. South Korea will seek China’s support in preventing full-scale arms cooperation between Russia and North Korea. China, meanwhile, aims to expand its military advantages in the Asia-Pacific to counter the increased U.S. presence and prevent the formation of an alliance network. Despite opacity about China’s leverage over North Korea, China still has the capability to facilitate the Korean Peninsula denuclearization dialogue while the United States is occupied by ongoing crises outside the Asia-Pacific. That said, political stability and border security remain China’s top priorities. For that reason, it is unlikely that China will provide full-scale support to South Korea, especially in light of the latter’s closer ties with the United States and Japan.

The complexity of the negotiations has been exacerbated by the release of the 2022 Japanese National Security Strategy^{xliii}, in which Japan plans to double down on its military capabilities, including the development of long-range missiles. Japan is particularly concerned about the long-running dispute over the Senkaku islands, which are called Diaoyu in Chinese and are contested by China as a part of “safeguarding sover-

eignty” measures. Any indication that Japan is increasing its military ambitions resurrects wartime grievances – already a sore spot amid the wastewater release.

Any improvement of Sino-Japanese relations would be particularly beneficial to South Korea, as it would bring counterparts together and revitalize the regional response to North Korean armament. Following the wastewater release, China leveraged every opportunity to project resentment toward Japan in an attempt to forestall a closer partnership between Tokyo and Seoul. It succeeded in fueling public anger about the wastewater release and Japan’s seeming immunity from the consequences of its actions. It is estimated that around 80 percent of Korean respondents were against Japan’s decision, providing a path for the opposition party to gain more than 50 percent approval. South Korea’s opposition leader, Lee Jae-myung, described Yoon Suk Yeol’s approval of Japan’s wastewater discharge as “the most shameful and disastrous moment in our country’s diplomatic history.^{xliiii}” By fueling such divisions, China is attempting to undermine the reputation of the U.S. alliance and prevent South Korean President Yoon from pursuing further diplomatic ties with Japan. The wastewater case is especially untimely for South Korean leadership, as South Korea will hold legislative elections in April 2024. Yoon’s ineffective handling of the ongoing protests and public criticism presents the opposition party with a chance to dominate the election. That outcome would play directly into China’s hands, overshadowing the U.S. diplomatic milestone and raising questions about South Korea’s commitment to play a supporting role in a Taiwan contingency.

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INTERMITTENT TENSIONS FRACTURE SUPPLY CHAINS

In addition to regional security concerns, the trilateral summit will provide a venue to discuss economics, a significant contributor to regional dynamics. China, Japan, and South Korea, representing the second, third or fourth, and thirteenth largest economies in the world, respectively, all decided in 2022 to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a multilateral free trade agreement. This regional deal spans the Asia-Pacific countries, including ASEAN, Australia, New Zealand, and three major East Asian countries: China, Japan, and South Korea, which account for 80 percent of RCEP's total GDP.

Despite the positive opportunity for mutual economic benefits, the three trading partners faltered on advanced semiconductor export controls. China faces severe economic restrictions imposed by the United States and its allies, including Japan and South Korea. In July 2023, Tokyo joined Washington in curbing the export of key technology manufacturing equipment to China. Simultaneously, following the rapprochement between the two historical rivals, Japan and the ROK resolved a years-long trade dispute by restoring the status of bilateral preferential trade partner. The thawing of Japanese and South Korean trade relations is indicative of Washington's substantial contribution to the bilateral partnership, but it does not come without consequences: Beijing announced tightened graphite export controls to South Korea in October 2023. Trilateral maneuvering over technology has always been a factor in the regional economic struggle, with or without the involvement of U.S. interests. During the summit, none of the three countries will miss the chance to advocate for the principles of free trade and condemn any violations of World Trade Organization (WTO) rules.

However, the ritual of concessions and promises accompanied by every diplomatic commitment can be disrupted by the worsening status of the Japanese seafood ban imposed by China, Hong Kong, Macao, and, recently, Russia. South Korea also has been reluctant to lift the export ban on near-Fukushima aquatic products in spite of strengthening economic ties with Japan. Strained by mutually imposed bans that cannot be resolved through the WTO's dispute procedure, the three countries should use the rare opportunity to soothe economic tensions and proceed with trilateral free trade agreement negotiations. Amid rising inflation, a weakening global economy, and fragmented regional trade, the continuation of historical disputes and decoupling will plague the partnership for years, hurting market competitiveness in all three markets. And Japan's release of a fourth batch of wastewater by the end of March 2024 jeopardizes the success of trilateral negotiations, underscoring Japan's unwillingness to cede ground.

BILATERAL THAWING USEFUL FOR TRILATERAL RAPPROCHEMENT

Recent diplomatic and societal upheavals have catalyzed the deterioration of trilateral relations. Therefore, enhancement of bilateral interaction between the three countries is crucial to put them back on track to stability and prosperity. In the case of bilateralism with South Korea, neither Japan nor China has any strong conflicts. Korean leadership has drastically reformed foreign policy toward Japan since the new presidential administration took office, setting aside past grievances, including the wastewater release. Although societal dissatisfaction with Tokyo's disregard of history and the active anti-Japanese campaign before the upcoming elections underscores the divergence of public opinion, South Korean leadership has reiterated that its priority is to strengthen ties with Japan.

Despite leaning toward a full-scale security deal with the United States to avert a crisis on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea maintains its neutral status with China in case it needs help to counter a North Korean nuclear threat. As far as China is concerned, its status as an indispensable partner to deal with North Korea is secure. As two sanctioned nuclear leaders, Russia and North Korea have united amid challenging circumstances and sought a renewed alliance, including possible military-strategic cooperation; China is the only nation that can substantially restrain such attempts. South Korea understands the balance between Japan and China better than anyone else. Even amid technological competition between the United States and

The degree to which the three nations find common ground will be determined by the scale of national ambitions and the compromises that Japan, the ROK, and China are ready to put forward.

China, South Korean chipmakers have continued to export semiconductors and related equipment to China. Consequently, South Korea is the most interested party in the three-party negotiations and was the first to propose revitalizing the trilateral summit.

Arguably, success in “reviving long-lasting friendship^{xliv}” between Japan and China would predetermine the outcome of the meeting. By

announcing the discharge of treated radioactive wastewater inspected by the IAEA, Japan tried to reinforce the narrative of rules-based order. Japan expected its actions to correct for the original nuclear incident and to be widely accepted and praised. In reality, Japan should have put more effort into fostering regional acceptance, including the relatively simple step of consulting with its closest neighbor. The decision to discharge wastewater enabled China to exploit the narrative of historical grievances on social media, drawing attention away from domestic issues. Also, by simultaneously pursuing stronger ties with the United States, Japan made it more difficult for China to bypass the nationwide outrage and sustain the status quo. China did not miss the opportunity to facilitate an extensive social campaign against the wastewater discharge, Japanese impunity, and, most importantly, Japan's alliance with the United States as a constraint on China's ambitions. The scientific nature of radiation and discharge was never the main reason for China's anger. It was always a political ambition to prove the wrongdoing of neighboring countries allied with United States. Now, as the balance of power in the region is shifting in a year of elections and intensifying geopolitical interests, it remains to be seen whether Beijing and Tokyo are ready to put their differences aside.

Historical and geopolitical unrest underscores that the region is at a critical stage for the improvement

of bilateral and, consequently, trilateral cooperation. China's backlash against the Fukushima wastewater release was only the latest reason for postponing the high-level talks. But it is in China's interest to reverse "bloc confrontation"^{xlv} and participate in the dialogue despite the intense geopolitical confrontation. As international and regional issues of concern multiply, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, conducted in San Francisco in November 2023, laid the groundwork for bilateral consultations between **Xi Jinping** and Fumio Kishida and between Xi and Biden. Instead of pursuing economic and political isolation, these countries should seek opportunities to revitalize their relations. The degree to which the three nations find common ground will be determined by the scale of national ambitions and the compromises that Japan, the ROK, and China are ready to put forward. The trilateral summit will also provide an opportunity to express regional anxieties, including speculations about the wastewater release process and how Japan can ensure better examination of the wastewater by granting regional experts access to the Fukushima nuclear site. If Japan wants to present a positive case of rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific, the trilateral summit is the perfect opportunity to push forward a diplomatic resolution of the wastewater dispute. If the Chinese government can scale back public resentment over Japanese impunity – or at least refrain from fueling it further – prior to the dialogue, that would build considerable goodwill for productive dialogue and continued cooperation in the year ahead.

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