

Leaders of Japan, China and South Korea meet in Seoul

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Political leaders from Japan, China and South Korea met Sunday for their first trilateral summit in more than three years. The meeting came amid heightened tensions in the Asia-Pacific region following the provocative decision by the United States to send a destroyer within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang traveled to Seoul to meet South Korean President Park Geun-hye, holding two hours of talks. Park and Abe both met separately with Li before their joint discussions. Park is scheduled to meet with the Japanese leader today in what will be their first bilateral summit since they each took office.

Significantly, no mention was made publicly of US actions in the South China Sea or the ongoing territorial dispute between Beijing and Tokyo in the East China Sea over the rocky outcrops known as the Senkakus in Japan and Diaoyu in China.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who was also in Seoul to meet his Japanese counterpart, rhetorically alluded to Tokyo's involvement, declaring on Saturday: "I wonder what Japan has to do with the South China Sea." However, neither Wang nor Li complained about joint US-Japanese naval exercises, currently taking place in the South China Sea for the first time.

Just one day after USS Lassen, a guided-missile destroyer, entered the 12-mile limit around Chinese-controlled islets in the Spratly Islands last Tuesday, the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS Theodore Roosevelt and Japan's Fuyuzuki, a destroyer, began drills in the region, just to the north of Borneo. The exercises are expected to last two weeks.

Just as significant was the lack of any reference to the

bitter criticisms of the Abe government by South Korea and China over its whitewashing of the crimes of Japanese imperialism in Asia during the 1930s and 1940s. The fact that Li and Park were willing to meet Abe was a significant concession on their part, given that the historical disputes had previously been an obstacle. Their joint statement contained only a general reference to "facing history squarely and advancing toward the future."

The joint statement issued from the summit focused on closer collaboration, declaring: "We reached the common recognition that the situation in which economic interdependence and political/security tensions coexist must be overcome in order to build permanent peace, stability and co-prosperity in the region, and to continue to develop trilateral cooperation unwaveringly."

The three leaders agreed to resume the high-level economic dialogue that was suspended in 2010 amid disputes over maritime territory and historical issues. They agreed to boost efforts to sign a 16-nation trade agreement, known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, that China has pushed. They also sought to revive plans for an economic pact between the three countries, which account for about 20 percent of the global economy.

Efforts to establish greater economic cooperation take place as the three economies each face major problems. China is continuing to slow, while Japan is stagnating. The South Korean economy hit its highest growth rate in five years—just 2.6 percent—in the third quarter, but only on the basis of government stimulus measures. Both Japan and South Korea have been hit by falling exports to China, their largest trading partner.

Japan's involvement in economic talks with China follows last month's conclusion of the Trans Pacific

Partnership (TPP), which the US envisages as the means for marginalizing China and setting the rules for trade and investment in the Asia Pacific region. Having secured Tokyo's support for the TPP, Washington will be concerned to ensure that yesterday's tri-lateral talks in Seoul do not undermine efforts to ensure American domination in Asia.

The Obama administration may also be concerned that Tokyo and Seoul appear to have broken ranks over North Korea. Yesterday's joint statement expressed support for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and called for efforts to return to "meaningful" six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear program.

The six-party talks involving the US, China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas, and sponsored by China, have been stalled since Obama came to power. The US has insisted that North Korea take major steps toward dismantling its nuclear facilities and primitive nuclear weapons before any meeting can take place. The Obama administration has exploited North Korea's nuclear programs to justify its military build-up in North East Asia that is primarily directed against China.

While Abe has fully backed Obama's "pivot to Asia" aimed against China, his government is intent on remilitarizing Japan, above all to pursue its own imperialist interests, which will not necessarily coincide with those of the US. As it strengthens its hand militarily, Tokyo will increasingly pursue its own course in Asia and globally.

Washington is also concerned about South Korea. During Park's summit with Obama in Washington on October 16, the US president made clear that he expected Seoul to take a stronger stance against China over the South China Sea dispute. Park was openly criticized in the American media when she appeared at a military parade in Beijing to mark 75 years since the end of World War II, standing alongside Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The South China Sea was not discussed during Park's one-on-one meeting with Li on Saturday. Instead, the two focused on economic questions, signing 13 memoranda of understanding in relation to trade. They also discussed reunification of the Korean Peninsula, North Korea's nuclear program and the

recent trip to that country by Liu Yunshan, a member of China's Politburo Standing Committee.

Today Park and Abe will meet for a bilateral summit for the first time. Park only suggested the talks last Monday, most likely at the insistence of Washington, angered that the dispute between its two allies in the region was damaging its anti-China "pivot." The meeting is expected to focus in part on Japan's wartime exploitation of Korean "comfort women" as sex slaves for the military, which has been a major obstacle to the development of closer relations between the two countries.



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