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IN CRISIS: CAN CHINA-JAPAN-SOUTH KOREAN COOPERATION STABILIZE IN A WORLD IN DISORDER?

EN CRISIS: ¿PUEDE LA COOPERACIÓN CHINA-JAPÓN-COREA DEL SUR ESTABILIZARSE EN UN MUNDO DESORDENADO?

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ABSTRACT: The Asia-Pacific region is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by the intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China. This geopolitical shift compels countries in the region, particularly South Korea, to reassess their diplomatic strategies and alignments. Northeast Asia, emerging as the epicenter of this great-power competition, faces mounting volatility and uncertainty. Within this context, the China-Japan-South Korea (CJK) trilateral cooperation framework offers a crucial mechanism for navigating these challenges. It provides a platform for regional stability amidst the chaos, allowing South Korea to balance its security and economic interests while contributing to regional equilibrium. This essay explores the potential of the CJK framework to serve as a “diplomatic shock absorber,” mitigating conflict and promoting stability in the region. By examining the current geopolitical dynamics, the challenges and necessities of trilateral cooperation, and its potential to function as a stabilizing force, the analysis highlights the critical role that CJK cooperation can play in maintaining regional stability and fostering a pragmatic partnership.

KEYWORDS: CJK Cooperation, U.S-China rivalry, China-Japan-South Korea, Trilateral Cooperation

Resumen: La región del Asia-Pacífico experimenta una profunda transformación, impulsada por la intensificación de la rivalidad estratégica entre Estados Unidos y China. Este cambio geopolítico obliga a los países de la región, en particular a Corea del Sur, a reevaluar sus estrategias y alineamientos diplomáticos. El noreste de Asia, que se perfila como el epicentro de esta competencia entre grandes potencias, se enfrenta a una volatilidad e incertidumbre crecientes. En este contexto, el marco de cooperación trilateral entre China, Japón y Corea del Sur (CJC) constituye un mecanismo crucial para afrontar estos retos. Proporciona una plataforma de estabilidad regional en medio del caos,

lo que permite a Corea del Sur equilibrar sus intereses económicos y de seguridad, al tiempo que contribuye al equilibrio regional. Este ensayo explora el potencial del marco CJC para desempeñar el papel de «amortiguador diplomático», mitigando los conflictos y promoviendo la estabilidad en la región. Al examinar la dinámica geopolítica actual, los retos y las necesidades de la cooperación trilateral, así como su potencial como fuerza estabilizadora, el análisis destaca el papel fundamental que puede desempeñar la cooperación CJC en el mantenimiento de la estabilidad regional y en el fomento de una asociación pragmática.

Palabras clave: Cooperación CJC, rivalidad EE.UU.-China, China-Japón-Corea del Sur, Cooperación Trilateral

Geopolitical Dynamics in Northeast Asia

The relationship between the United States and China has become increasingly adversarial, characterized by economic conflicts, military posturing, and ideological differences. On the East Asian battlefield, experts have emphasized the importance of maintaining a robust U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific to counterbalance China's rising influence, as evident in projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative and China's military expansion in the South China Sea. These actions are perceived as challenges to the U.S.-led international order, highlighting a notable distrust among its allies, and have prompted a strategic response from Washington (McMann, 2025).

The recent imposition of tariffs by former President Trump on Chinese goods, as well as on imports from traditional allies, has exacerbated economic tensions, disrupted global supply chains, and heightened uncertainties for countries like South Korea, which must navigate their trade relationships with special care to avoid any collateral effect (Su, 2025). As trade wars and protectionist policies persist, the economic interdependence that has historically served as a guarantor of regional stability is facing disruption.

According to the ASEAN Studies Centre's 2025 Survey Report, the growing uncertainty about U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia may also have some potential implications for Northeast Asian economies (ASEAN Studies Center, 2025). Security concerns are also heightened by the military posturing of both superpowers, which increases the potential for miscalculations and accidental conflicts. This environment necessitates careful management of alliances and regional partnerships to prevent escalation (Cha, 2025).

On the other hand, in terms of security concerns, although the U.S. has increased its presence in the region, Trump's second-term foreign policy doesn't seem to follow this pattern. At the same time, China has focused on military modernization and expanding its nuclear capabilities. These developments create

a security dilemma, raising the risk of direct confrontations (Ji, 2025). According to the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, the South Korean public is increasingly supporting nuclear armament due to skepticism over Washington's security commitments, reflecting broader concerns about the reliability of U.S. support in the face of China's growing influence in the region and its military modernization (Lee, 2025). The strategic interests of Northeast Asian countries are deeply intertwined with these geopolitical shifts. South Korea, in particular, must carefully manage its alliances and regional partnerships to maintain a balance between its national security and economic interests.

These sore points between the United States and China significantly contribute to regional instability in Northeast Asia, complicating diplomatic efforts and forcing regional actors to choose sides, thereby leading to strategic polarization (Kausikan, 2025). This dynamic is particularly challenging for countries like South Korea, which employs a hedging strategy to maintain flexibility amid these tensions (Hu et al., 2025). South Korea finds itself at a strategic crossroads, managing its long-standing alliance with the U.S. while navigating its economic interdependence with China.

The geopolitical landscape demands a nuanced approach, where South Korea leverages trilateral cooperation with China and Japan to mitigate tensions and enhance regional stability. This approach aligns with South Korea's middle power diplomacy, which emphasizes multilateralism and soft power to influence regional dynamics (Watson, 2018). By engaging in trilateral cooperation, South Korea can enhance its diplomatic flexibility and strengthen its role as a mediator in the region. This strategic positioning enables South Korea to navigate the complexities of the geopolitical landscape effectively, ensuring its national interests are safeguarded while contributing to regional stability. However, South Korea's cautious approach toward trilateralism is shaped by multiple factors that create a nuanced diplomatic landscape and require careful management to avoid exacerbating tensions and to maintain stability.

Challenges to Trilateral Cooperation

Trilateral cooperation among South Korea, China, and Japan faces significant challenges rooted in historical grievances and territorial disputes, which have been major impediments to cooperation.

Historical grievances and Territorial disputes

Japan's colonial past and unresolved territorial claims have left deep scars, with nationalist sentiments often exacerbating political and diplomatic tensions (Ku, 2016; Zhang, 2025). Such historical grievances act as persistent barriers to building trust and fostering cooperation among the three countries

(Chakravorty, 2013; Choi, 2013). The Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, claimed by both China and Japan, and the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands, claimed by both Korea and Japan, exacerbate regional tensions entwined with nationalistic sentiments and historical narratives (Kim, 2022; Li and Park, 2022).

These disputes have implications for trilateral cooperation, particularly in economic realms such as the establishment of the CJK Free Trade Agreement, but also critical fluctuations of political relations, such as the diplomatic fallout from Japan's nationalization of disputed islands in 2012 and China's response to the deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea (Zhang, 2025). The emotional and nationalistic fervor surrounding these issues strains political ties. It underscores the need to strike a balance between national sovereignty and relinquishing some control to regional institutions, thereby fostering greater unity (He, 2008).

Recent developments, such as South Korea's judicial rulings on wartime forced labor compensation and Japan's responses, continue to draw public attention and influence diplomatic interactions to this day (Kim, 2025). However, these grievances, while significant, do not necessarily mean the end of trilateral efforts. South Korea's "wait-and-see" strategy often prioritizes a pragmatic position, suggesting that under certain conditions, historical tensions can be mitigated in favor of broader cooperation (Zhang, 2016).

Additionally, the differing national interests and policy priorities of each country further complicate trilateral cooperation. Despite increasing economic exchanges, these countries have not developed a corresponding sense of mutual respect, mainly due to unequal interdependence. China's rapid economic growth has elevated its significance to Japan and South Korea; however, this shift has not been reciprocated, diminishing incentives for China to prioritize its relationships with these neighbors. In Japan and South Korea, declining political credibility and trust have fueled nationalistic rhetoric among politicians eager to secure public support. Such nationalistic sentiments exacerbate existing tensions and obstruct diplomatic efforts (Kimura, 2014; Ryu, 2007).

Economy as a driving force

Economic exchanges also emerge as critical factors driving trilateral cooperation. The robust trade relationships among CJK economies have led to significant interdependence; however, they have not been exempt from challenges such as fluctuating economic conditions, sectoral interest conflicts, and international political strategies (Wang, 2025). Despite these obstacles, the potential for strengthening trilateral economic liberalization remains a key goal for all three countries. The significance of the 2024 Seoul Summit underscores the positive enhancement of supply chain cooperation and the need to accelerate CJKFTA (Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership)

negotiations; however, tangible progress remains limited due to differing national priorities (Shin, 2024).

Some economists believe that an FTA among Northeast Asian powers would benefit all member countries by boosting their economies and fostering closer economic integration, and, despite potential adverse effects on specific sectors, the overall benefits are significant, including substantial economic gains and increased intra-regional trade (Ahn et al., 2005; Jin, Koo, and Sul, 2006). At the same time, the concept of *decoupling* has gained prominence as countries reassess their economic dependencies in response to geopolitical shifts. South Korea, in particular, has adopted a strategy of *de-risking*, which involves diversifying trade and investment to reduce dependency on China without severing ties completely.

According to the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE), this approach reflects a cautious attempt to maintain economic stability by mitigating risks associated with over-reliance on a single market (Yeo, 2024). This strategy is not about a complete economic separation but rather about balancing dependencies to safeguard national interests and reduce vulnerabilities in global supply chains. De-risking enables continued economic cooperation while providing a buffer against potential economic disruptions resulting from geopolitical conflicts (Benson and Sicilia, 2023).

Recently, the Trump administration's tariffs have strained economic relations, increasing the need for South Korea, China, and Japan to seek alternative avenues for cooperation (Sun, 2025). The State of Southeast Asia 2025 Survey Report recently shows that, although 40.7% of respondents believe that U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia under Trump second term will increase, due to his firm approach toward China aimed at preserving a balance of power, over half of the respondents (51.2%) expect a reduction in engagement, attributing this to Trump's unpredictable nature, which introduces uncertainty into U.S. relations with the region (ASEAN Studies Centre, 2025). This uncertainty in U.S. policy could prompt CJK nations to strengthen their economic ties as a counterbalance to shifting external influences.

Cultural Exchanges

In addition to economic ties, cultural exchanges have played a crucial role in fostering connections between the three nations. Additional strategies, including robust public diplomacy and policy coordination, have shown recent improvements (Shin, 2024). In May 2024, the ninth CJK Trilateral Summit was held in Seoul, marking the first such meeting in over four years. The summit focused on revitalizing cooperation in areas such as economic integration, sustainable development, and cultural exchanges. One significant outcome was the agreement to designate 2025–2026 as the China-Japan-South Korea Cultural

Exchange Year, which underscores the importance of cultural diplomacy in enhancing trilateral relations.

On May 30th of this year, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) marked its annual TCS Day at Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul (Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, 2025a). Later this year, in August, the Trilateral Youth Summit will take place, a student exchange program designed to deepen mutual understanding and foster friendships among university students while discussing key agendas that emphasize the role of youth in promoting a deeper understanding between the three countries (Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, 2025b). This renewed commitment suggests a window of opportunity for South Korea to deepen trilateral ties and leverage the collective strengths of the three countries.

Leadership and Public Opinion

Leadership and public perception also play crucial roles in facilitating cooperation among CJK nations. The three countries have faced challenges in effectively raising awareness about the importance of trilateral cooperation (Zhang, 2025). Despite intergovernmental efforts, such as trilateral summits, these initiatives have not effectively communicated the significance of cooperation to the general public, underscoring the need for the CJK Framework to expand beyond government-to-government interactions and reach the broader public to foster a deeper understanding and support for regional collaboration (Kimura, 2014). Domestic political changes, such as shifts in leadership or ideological divisions, also significantly influence the path of trilateral cooperation, as public opinion often fluctuates in response to critical events (Li and Park, 2022).

The intensifying competition between the United States and China presents a strategic dilemma for South Korea and many other East Asian countries. In response, former South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol prioritized strengthening alliances to enhance regional security and economic cooperation (Yoon, 2022).

In 2023, Yoon proposed compensating Koreans forced into labor by Japanese companies during World War II using local funds, a plan that faced domestic backlash from victims and political opponents demanding formal apologies and direct payments from Japan (Lee and Kim, 2023). His administration also faced criticism over Japan's release of wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant, with public skepticism highlighting historical tensions and distrust towards Japan (Choi, 2023). Despite these challenges, Yoon emphasized the importance of future-oriented cooperation with Japan for regional stability (Green, 2023). Regarding China, Yoon adopted a more assertive stance, describing Taiwan Strait tensions as a global issue and aligning

more closely with the United States and Japan (Nam, 2023). This stance, including the Camp David trilateral summit, was viewed by China as a threat to regional stability, potentially straining China-South Korea relations (Jang, 2023).

The political crisis that led to Yoon's impeachment, which began on December 3, 2024, and the subsequent political turmoil, provided China with an opportunity to increase its influence over South Korea while potentially strengthening its position in the region amid Seoul's domestic challenges (Pankaj, 2025). In synthesis, Yoon's policy toward China and Japan was characterized by a complex balancing strategy, attempting to strengthen security ties with the U.S. and Japan while managing economic dependencies on China, reflecting broader challenges and striving to maintain strategic autonomy amid great power rivalries at the same time (Han and Lee, 2022).

The future of trilateral cooperation among South Korea, Japan, and China remains uncertain, despite the recent political restart of the Lee Jae Myung administration. The success of these efforts will depend on striking a balance between diplomatic objectives and domestic sentiments, as well as addressing historical grievances to foster genuine regional collaboration.

Necessity of Trilateral Cooperation

The complexity of historical grievances, economic interdependence, and regional security issues essentially characterizes the trilateral relationships among these three Asian superpowers. Despite these challenges, certain factors might prompt South Korea to reconsider its approach to trilateral cooperation.

Leadership transitions in any of the three countries can influence the trajectory of trilateral cooperation. Zhang emphasizes the role of leadership in shaping public perception and policy directions, suggesting that new administrations could prioritize regional collaboration (Zhang, 2025). In South Korea, the recent election of President Lee Jae-myung has sparked speculation about potential shifts in the country's foreign policy. As reported by international news, both Japan and China are keenly observing whether President Lee will maintain continuity or initiate a reset in diplomatic engagements (Sim and Wei, 2025). Such leadership changes can refresh diplomatic dialogues and potentially mitigate historical tensions by highlighting the importance of political will in overcoming nationalist sentiments. Also, offers an opportunity to recalibrate diplomatic priorities and foster regional collaboration (Sim and Wei, 2025).

Shortly after his election, Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru also reached out to President Lee, highlighting the importance of maintaining strong ties and signaling Japan's commitment to enhancing cooperation with South Korea (Koh *et al.*, 2025). This gesture underscores the significance of trilateral cooperation among CJK nations as they navigate complex geopolitical dynamics. The outreach from both China and Japan signifies a mutual recognition of South

Korea's pivotal role in regional stability and the potential for these interactions to foster a more integrated and harmonious Northeast Asia.

Economic challenges present another avenue for fostering trilateral cooperation. The recent impact of global trade disruptions, exacerbated by the Trump administration's tariff policies, has highlighted the need for closer economic collaboration and interdependence as a stabilizing force in regional relations. Some experts report growing interest among the three nations in strengthening supply chain cooperation, particularly in the semiconductor industry, where Japan and South Korea seek raw materials from China. At the same time, Beijing looks to purchase chip products from its neighbors (Alarcon, 2025). Official statements may have downplayed the idea of a coordinated response to the U.S. tariffs. However, there is still a strong push to expedite talks on a South Korea-Japan-China free trade agreement to bolster regional and global trade.

Security concerns, particularly those stemming from North Korea but also the notorious increase of direct confrontations such as the Ukrainian war and the recent escalation between Israel and Iran, present a compelling rationale for enhanced trilateral cooperation. Regional security dynamics in the region often need cooperative mechanisms to address shared threats (Li and Park, 2022). At the recent trilateral summit, the leaders recognized the need to address these challenges and focus on building a collaborative, forward-looking relationship between the three parties (Ji, 2025).

In the case of South Korea, the potential withdrawal of U.S. troops introduces another layer of complexity. Former President Trump's unilateral approach to policies on the Korean peninsula highlighted the risks of strategic miscalculations. If North Korea or other regional actors perceive these moves as a weakness or opportunity, it could lead to opportunistic aggression or strategic miscalculations, undermining the broader goal of a stable regional security environment, including Taiwan (Cha, 2025).

In conclusion, the potential for a shift in South Korea's approach to CJK trilateral cooperation hinges on a confluence of leadership changes, economic imperatives, and security dynamics as well as underling the critical role of political leaders and public perception in shaping these relations. By strategically navigating these conditions, South Korea, along with China and Japan, can advance its shared interests, fostering a more integrated and resilient regional framework. This approach addresses immediate problems while also laying the groundwork for lasting peace and prosperity in the Asia region.

Trilateral Cooperation as a Diplomatic Shock Absorber

As discussed throughout the essay, the trilateral cooperation framework among South Korea, China, and Japan is crucial, especially given the heightened

volatility of the geopolitical arena nowadays. Former high-ranking officials and experts emphasize that this cooperation is essential as a buffer, especially in times of uncertainty, as we are currently experiencing (Ji, 2025). By fostering a united front, CJK countries can collectively manage regional security challenges and develop effective tools to mitigate emerging risks. The collaborative efforts among these nations can serve as a bridge for promoting shared prosperity and safety, helping to ease or neutralize tensions and mitigate sources of conflict.

The CJK trilateral cooperation framework has the potential to serve as a diplomatic shock absorber. Kim Sung-han, a former national security adviser in the previous Yoon Suk Yeol administration, underscored that enhancing economic interdependencies and pursuing pragmatic, interest-based strategies can significantly strengthen trilateral cooperation and buffer against external pressures (Ji, 2025). Existing frameworks, such as the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), provide mechanisms for dialogue and collaboration among the three countries. By leveraging platforms such as the TCS and other collaborative frameworks, and focusing on shared economic and security interests, the CJK framework can help ease regional tensions and prevent further polarization. These mechanisms strategically support South Korea's middle power strategy by increasing its choices through diverse forms of multilateral inclusion and by enhancing structural autonomy (Watson, 2018).

Strengthening and revitalizing multilateral institutions is crucial for providing platforms for dialogue and conflict resolution. The successful reconvening of the trilateral summit, after a long hiatus, marks a significant step in revitalizing this key mechanism. It highlights the importance of trilateral summit diplomacy as a symbolic yet essential tool for managing bilateral discords and fostering cooperation. In this sense, strategies to enhance trilateral cooperation should prioritize pragmatic approaches and economic integration, focusing on practical initiatives and shared interests to collectively address regional challenges and maintain equilibrium and stability.

In conclusion, South Korea's strategic approach to CJK Cooperation should be broad, covering diplomatic, economic, historical, cultural, and institutional aspects. By leveraging its unique geopolitical position, South Korea has the opportunity to act as a bridge between the United States and China. Through ongoing trilateral cooperation and efforts to revive dialogue, Seoul is well-positioned to ease tensions and foster understanding in Northeast Asia. This strategic flexibility could lead to a future where balanced partnerships and regional stability contribute to greater global integration. The CJK trilateral cooperation framework, serving as a diplomatic shock absorber, has the potential to mitigate geopolitical tensions and promote regional stability, aligning with South Korea's middle power approach, which emphasizes multilateralism and soft power to influence regional dynamics.

Conclusion

The trilateral cooperation framework involving China, Japan, and South Korea stands, in retrospect, as a pivotal strategic instrument for mitigating geopolitical tensions and promoting a minimal level of stability across Northeast Asia. By enhancing economic interdependencies and pursuing pragmatic, interest-based strategies, South Korea, China, and Japan can collectively navigate the complexities of the current geopolitical climate.

Existing platforms, such as the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), have provided important institutional anchors that reaffirm South Korea's established middle power approach, which is fundamentally rooted in the principles of multilateralism and strategic deployment of soft power. However, in the context of an escalating rivalry between the United States and China, the continued efficacy of the CJK framework cannot be taken for granted. Our findings confirm the CJK's capacity to serve as a "diplomatic shock absorber" against intra-regional dynamics. Still, they simultaneously highlight the urgent need to recalibrate its strategic purpose in the face of systemic geopolitical imbalances.

For policymakers, the primary implication of this study is the need to transform the CJK framework from a mere dialogue mechanism into an adaptive counterweight strategy. Serious deliberation is required on designing diplomatic alignments that contribute to generating an efficient collective counterweight capacity against the destabilizing forces of the hegemonic rivalry. The risk extends beyond polarization to include the potential for a long-term strategic withdrawal of the United States from the region. This phenomenon would compel middle powers to redefine their own pillars of security and prosperity fundamentally. This work establishes the foundation for an ambitious research agenda that seeks to deepen and broaden our understanding of the vitality of multilateralism in a multipolar world.

Firstly, future studies must explore the necessity of multilateral innovation and adaptability by investigating frameworks that are highly adaptable and inclusive, capable of accommodating diverse economic interests in a complex system. This includes analyzing how CJK cooperation can effectively integrate new variables, such as disruptive technologies and supply chain reorganization, to construct a more resilient, balanced, and sustainable regional economic system. Such research is imperative for understanding how middle powers can secure their economic autonomy amidst structural shifts.

Secondly, research must address the long-term political costs and volatility that threaten to undermine these regional efforts. A critical area of inquiry lies in the empirical connection between domestic political volatility and external commitment. The recent shifts—including the recent election of President Lee Jae Myung in South Korea and the change in the Japanese

premiership with the designation of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi—serve as salient, real-time case studies demonstrating how abrupt ideological shifts and changes in leadership affect the efficacy of soft power and the credibility and durability of multilateral commitment over the medium term. Scholars should focus on systematically evaluating these transitions to assess the region's capacity for consistent policy implementation.

Furthermore, given the prospect of future US disengagement, research should center on the effectiveness of CJK cooperation as a viable long-term hedging strategy against strategic uncertainty. Analyzing the evolution of trilateralism under scenarios of reduced American presence will yield crucial insights for designing future foreign policies that secure the strategic autonomy of middle powers.

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