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## *The Meeting of China's and South Korea's Foreign Ministers — Political Background and Perspective of the China–Japan–South Korea summit*



On May 13-14, 2024, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea Cho Tae-yul came with an official visit to China, the first such visit in six years. The main event during this trip was his talks with Wang Yi, his Chinese counterpart. The guest also had a meeting with representatives of Chinese business circles and South Korean businessmen operating in China.

This visit is noteworthy, if only because it was one of the few events that (with a considerable stretch, but still) can be characterized as positive in the stream of negativity accompanying

the development of political processes in the world as a whole and specifically in the Indo-Pacific region. This was further evidenced by the ambiguity of the wording **in the official commentary on this visit** on the long-discussed topic of holding the China–Japan–South Korea trilateral summit. This summit was last held as far back as December 2019.

### **What prevents China–Japan–South Korea integration**

Meanwhile, this topic was the focus of a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the three countries held six months earlier **at Busan, South Korea**. And even the date (late May) of the expected Summit was more or less certain a month or two ago. But, pursuant to the same commentary, during the negotiations held in Beijing, an agreement was reached only with respect to holding (also “at the end of May”) some trilateral business forum in Seoul. With regard to the Summit only the readiness of the Republic of Korea to provide it with organizer services was mentioned.

It should be noted that the very fact of the gradual (since the late 1990s) formation of the “China–Japan–South Korea” platform fit into the generally positive mood of the 2000s (and early 2010s) on the prospects for the development of the global political puzzle, whose focus already began to move to the Indo-Pacific region. However, at the turn of the 2020s, processes of such a negative nature have emerged that nowadays those previous sentiments are merely remembered “like a dream of times that never were.” In particular, the representation of the People’s Republic of China at the 2019 Summit by the then Prime Minister, rather than Chinese President Xi Jinping, was viewed as an alarming sign.

In the past six months alone, since the Busan meeting mentioned above, a number of events were held in the IPR that have contributed to further aggravation of the situation in the region as a whole and in the South China Sea in particular, as well as to the continuing tensions around Taiwan.

### **Who is the target of the emerging tripartite alliance of Washington, Tokyo and Manila**

It is worth noting first of all the first **US–Japan summit in Washington, DC, in April 2024**, which later became a trilateral event but with the Philippines joining its ranks instead of South Korea. And if the outcome of the US–Japan summit continued the more than half-century-old (i.e., quite “usual”) course of comprehensive strengthening of the said bilateral alliance, the actual inclusion of the Philippines has become the most remarkable innovation in the nature of the regional developments.

This trend, very significant in and of itself, was also confirmed in the innovations to the scenario of the annual US–Philippines military exercise Balikatan held from April 22 to May 10 in the South China Sea. Its geography went beyond Philippine territorial waters for the first time, and the scenario involved simulating (also for the first time) offensive amphibious operations on islands disputed by Beijing and Manila. The possibility of landing troops (again, the US–Philippine’s troops) in Taiwan was also simulated. The list of US weapons involved in the exercise included (also for the first time) medium-range missiles. The need for their “forward deployment” in the Indo-Pacific region has been discussed in the US Armed Forces leadership for quite some time.

The emergence of all these alarming innovations is accompanied by propaganda about the “growing Chinese military threat.” Which is understood mainly (but not only) as a quite natural upgrading process of the armed forces of the second world power. And that despite its (Chinese military) budget being three times smaller than that of the US Armed Forces.

As a response to the above propaganda cliché, the “American expansionism” in a region 10-15 thousand kilometers away from the US coast is usually lambasted. It is worth noting, however, that global powers, which today’s China definitely is, are wont to exercise their strategic posturing on the world stage in one way or another.

In the case of the Balikatan exercise, the fact that the US Armed Forces came to the Philippines at the invitation of the country’s leadership, which has been headed by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. since mid-2022, is significant. **However, during his election campaign** Marcos Jr. showed no hints of his current overtly pro-American (and increasingly pro-Japanese) foreign policy course.

The position of Japan, that is, again, a participant in the trilateral configuration with the Republic of Korea and China, is becoming more and more distinctly oppositional, if not confrontational, towards the latter. On the world stage in general, and in the Indo-Pacific region specifically, Tokyo acts mainly and so far jointly with Washington. The above-mentioned summits were another evidence of this matter. One of the main topics of the negotiations between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at the time was the **plans to improve the management of joint operations** between the US Armed Forces stationed in the Pacific and the Japan Self-Defense Forces.

Also, of note was **the announcement** of the imminent departure to the Marshall Islands of a group of Japanese Navy and Border Guard ships. It cannot but evoke associations with the events of 80 years ago, when the issue of control over the waters of the Sanaa became a fierce

armed struggle. The difference is, today both major former enemies stand against China. Beijing, on its part, is also taking a keen interest in the processes going on here.

Nevertheless, strong expressions, of which the phrase “Japanese militarism” is an indispensable element, hardly correspond to current realities. Particularly because Japan’s defense budget only marks the process of growing from a multi-decade level of 1% of national GDP. That is, it is still one of the lowest in the world (in relative terms, of course). Still, there is definitely an emerging trend towards the “militarization” of Japan, unfortunately becoming almost ubiquitous.

Meanwhile, the already announced **participation of a Japanese delegation** comprising more than thirty MPs from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party in the inauguration of the new Taiwanese President William Lai scheduled for May 20 is promising to be quite noisy. Although the LDP has long been firmly established on the island, it has never shown this level of blatantly anti-Chinese demonstrations.

Japan’s “big brother” also contributes to the creation of excitement around this procedure, as evidenced, in particular, by **a Reuters’s piece** (citing an “anonymous source”) on a joint exercise by the US and Taiwanese navies back in April 2024. **This information leak** was understandably condemned by China.

As for the third participant of the discussed trilateral configuration, i.e. the Republic of Korea, after the failure in the recent parliamentary elections of the political forces led by the current president Yoon Suk Yeol, who advocates a shift of the country’s political course towards the US and (especially) Japan, we can expect a certain restoration of the balancing policy, which will in some way take into account the interests and concerns of the main trade and economic partner and great geopolitical neighbor, i.e. China.

Apparently, the latter is what Foreign Minister of the Republic of Korea Cho Tae-yul was primarily concerned with during his visit to Beijing. The outcomes of his negotiations with his counterpart Wang Yi were assessed in China as moderately positive, despite a number of **complaints made to the guest**.

In general, in the context of the political background in the Indo-Pacific region as described here, it would be rather strange if China were to participate in the process of resuming the Summits with Japan and the Republic of Korea. Not to mention the actualization of the project of creating a joint Free Trade Area, which served as one of the main goals of creating this trilateral platform.

In particular, as vague as in the above-mentioned commentary on the visit of the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Korea to Beijing, was the **response** of May 8 from the spokesman

of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan to a quite specific question about the prospects of holding the Summit discussed here.

It seems that it is tentatively necessary to at least outline a trend to correcting all the above and other negativity accumulated in recent years in the Indo-Pacific region in general, but mainly in Japan-China relations. And it cannot be said that these latter lack any signs of positivity at all. This would certainly include **the announcement of an upcoming trip to Japan** by a group of “senior officers” of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army.

But the author still links his hopes for crucial changes in relations between the two leading East Asian countries to the prospect of the removal of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, which has ruled for many years. Which may well happen in the upcoming parliamentary elections in that country.

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