

**ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CHALLENGES
OF THE CHINA-JAPAN-KOREA
TRILATERAL SUMMITS**

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Executive Summary

1. Historical memories, geopolitical rivalries and maritime disputes continue to be issues that hamper Northeast Asian trilateral (China-Japan-South Korea) cooperation.
2. The lack of trilateral cooperation is visible in the three countries' handling of the common threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Embedded within the trilateral are bilateral meetings where each Northeast Asian country will make known its own domestic agendas to lobby the other two individually to support its causes.
4. Before the institutionalisation of the trilateral summits, meetings between the three Northeast Asian countries were piecemeal and organised through other forums.
5. The trilateral breakfast meetings gradually became more formal with strengthened institutionalised features like secretariat formation and went beyond breakfast meetings, institutionising foreign ministerial working meetings before the formal top leadership summit.
6. In 2013 and 2014, relations between the three countries broke down. Beijing was upset with the Japanese government (then led by the inexperienced Democratic Party of Japan coming into power after half a century of LDP rule) for nationalising the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.
7. Rocky relations between Seoul and Beijing over the 2016/2017 discussions and deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defence (THAAD) system in South Korea reversed and mitigated the South Korean Park administration's growing outreach with Beijing. Beijing was angered by the deployment as the THAAD's radar range swept over a large area of Chinese airspace.

8. By the eighth trilateral, a trilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was launched and the Trilateral Investment Agreement became effective, leading to an increase in the volume of people-to-people exchanges by a factor of 2; twenty-one ministerial meetings have been organised since the sixth trilateral and over 100 cooperative items are in place.
9. East Asia and the Asia-Pacific regions are no longer the only focal point for US strategic planning, starting from the Obama administration. In fact, US strategic thinking has widened to accommodate the Indo-Pacific strategy.
10. China's growing relations with Russia (still an influential Northeast Asian player) and their joint patrols in Northeast Asia, naval exercises with Iran, and UN lobbying efforts on behalf of North Korea may also introduce changes to the Northeast Asian strategic order.
11. Northeast Asian regionalism may have to take into account these new changes in the regional order and the fact that previous constraints and restrictions remain in place, especially since maritime disputes have been downplayed but not gone away.