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Camp David summit - more than a security alliance

Serving as the birthplace of the US-East Asian defence alliance could be added to Camp David's long diplomatic history, but this is far-fetched speculation.

Even before the first stand alone summit of the US, Japan, and South Korea, it is clear that Camp David will be a place where Japan and South Korea have moved past the historical issues that have burdened them and realise how important it is to collaborate on 21st-century challenges.

The three leaders invested a lot in the tripartite summit. Without their personal energy, there probably wouldn't have been a meeting at Camp David, which was labelled "historic" long before it began.

The President of South Korea, Yoon Suk Yeol, took the biggest step and the biggest risk when he called for a fundamental strengthening of ties with Japan during the election campaign last year, despite the ongoing antagonism caused by Japan's 35-year occupation of the Korean Peninsula at the beginning the 20th century.

As he arrive at Camp David just 3 days after National Liberation Day (August 15), which marks the end of the 35-year Japanese occupation (1910–1945), he will provide a powerful symbolic accent to his policy of rapprochement with Japan.

Security at the heart of the agreement

But the trilateral summit has much bigger ambitions than being the site of a historic reconciliation between the Koreans and the Japanese, or at least the beginning of that process.

Its structure incorporates this symbolism as a significant foundation, but expectations are very much related to the present time and particularly to the future.

None of the participants disputes the fact that the meeting of the leaders of three important allies has a security dimension as its principal purpose.

Several high-level preparatory meetings took place before the summit of the 3 leaders - US President Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and President of the Republic of Korea Yoon Suk Yeol. Last March, Japan and South Korea held their first meeting in the previous 12 years.

Due to the agreement on joint military exercises and launching an early warning system in the event of a missile launch from North Korea, the security dimension will emerge as the most significant aspect of the Camp David summit.

But a tripartite summit meeting might not have been necessary for this agreement. The US, Japan and South Korea are still the closest military allies in the Indo-Pacific, and 80,000 US troops in both countries are only part of that alliance.

A narrow Chinese view

Given the enormous security changes in the world and the need to respond to them as effectively as possible, the three allies' emphasis on security issues at the summit reflects their desire for a more comprehensive and long-term agreement on cooperation.

In this respect, China (understandably) does not look favourably on the Camp David summit. It perceives it as a threat, even though

it refrains from qualifying it as such.

But, if China's position is reduced to considering the Camp David meeting as the creation of a mini-NATO-style alliance, then that is a very narrow and, thus, incorrect perspective.

The US and its most significant Asian allies will improve security and military relations, but still not close to Article 5 of the NATO Charter, according to which an attack on one member means defensive engagement of all others.

China has reason to be unhappy with the even tighter security ties between the US, Japan and South Korea. It misses the point of the Camp David summit if it thinks its reach is limited to security alone.

The three allies are building a much broader political, economic, technological, and even cultural platform by focusing on security, which should draw the surrounding regions - Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands - into their orbit.

“The region is looking for a lot more America”, said Rahm Emanuel, former congressman and chief of staff to President Obama, now US ambassador to Japan.

“China’s entire strategy is based on the premise that the US’s number one and number two ally in the region can’t get together and get on the same page”, Emanuel said at a panel discussion at the Brookings Institute ahead of the Camp David summit.

Gravitational force for the region

One of the most significant motives before the summit participants, perhaps more than the decisions regarding the security aspect, is how to institutionalise this strenuously established level of cooperation, that is, how to make it permanent.

The leaders and their administrations, whose energies coincided and led to the breakthrough, do not want to leave the whole process at risk of being reversed, should any following government or administration wish to do so.

South Korea will hold parliamentary elections next year, but regardless of its resistance, there should be no risk for new agreements with the US and Japan before President Yoon's term ends.

However, the task before the Camp David summit is to develop forms of permanent cooperation that will not depend on the will of national political groups to avoid the risk that some future president of South Korea, the Japanese government, or the new administration in Washington will turn the process backwards.

That is why expanding the field of cooperation, based on shared security, towards the economy, technological exchange and ensuring stable supply chains is the true essence of the new agreement.

Permanent, institutional forms of cooperation, of which the three leaders' once-a-year summits would be the most significant but still only a portion of the new architecture, might be used to achieve its goal of acting as a strong gravitational force over the entire region.