

EASTERN ASIA: So-called *historic* Asian Summits; much ado about nothing?

An event
Its decoding
An analysis
Prospects

FACTS

➤ While various crises torment South Asia (Pakistani-Indian relations, never-ending Afghanistan conflict, Nepalese-Indian crisis) and while Burma celebrates a historic poll (along with historic proceedings and historic results) in a new post-junta era ending half a century of military rule, North-east Asia keeps itself busy with an impressive series of bilateral, trilateral and regional diplomatic summits.

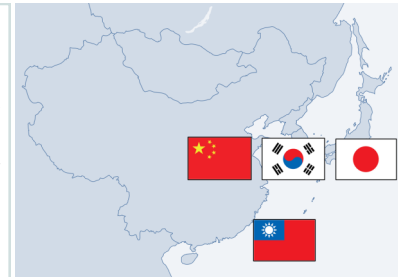
➤ These unusual yet positive and promising occurrences, filled with a lot of handshakes and forced smiles, gathered for a few hours the region's main political figures, including Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Keqiang, Japanese Prime Minister S. Abe, South Korean President Park Geun-hye, and Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou. The watchful audience of international media was of course also present, for one had to immortalise such instance. It fell to Seoul —hosting South Korean President and Japanese PM meeting as well as South Korea, Japan and China summit— and Singapore —hosting Taiwanese President MA Ying-jeou and Chinese President Xi Jinping meeting— to make these significant events shine righteously on the international stage; which they successfully managed, even if the tangible follow-up may not be as successful.

ANALYSIS

■ Although national interests were at stake, Eastern Asia's diplomatic meetings did not impact history in an equal manner. Some undeniably made it into history: Chinese President Xi Jinping and Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou meeting in Singapore (7th Nov) was the first since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949 — i.e. the proclamation of Mao's People's Republic of China (PRC)— and the withdrawal of the nationalist Kuomintang's troops to Taiwan.

■ However, gathered in Seoul for the first time since 2012 (and since the current Japanese PM took office), Chinese, Japanese and South Korean politicians (respectively Xi Jinping, S. Abe, and Park Geun-hye) most definitely did not make history in Seoul Blue House. Anyhow, the main objectives of this trilateral meeting were to unjam the dialogue somewhat seized up over the past three years and to settle differences of opinion; Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo did just that and appreciated to the full the simplicity of the instance.

■ Now, S. Abe's visit to South Korea can be considered a satisfying instance in the tense regional environment, for it demonstrated an easing of tensions between Tokyo and Seoul albeit a substantial political, territorial and emotional past.



SUMMIT series in East Asia:

■ 1st November

Summit **CHINA-JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA**

Location: Seoul (South Korea)

Delegates: PM Li Keqiang, President Park Geun-hye, PM S. Abe

■ 2nd November

Summit **SOUTH KOREA-JAPAN**

Location: Seoul (South Korea)

Delegates: President Park Geun-hye, PM Shinzo Abe

■ 7th November

Summit **CHINA-TAIWAN**

Location: Singapore

Delegates: President Xi Jinping, President Ma Ying-jeou.

ONCOMING EVENTS

■ 18th-19th November

APEC summit in Manila, Philippines

Delegates: 20 delegations, including the United States, China, Japan, Russia, Australia.

ACTORS

BEIJING (PRESIDENT XI JINPING ; PM LI KEQIANG)

SEOUL (MS PARK GEUN-HYE)

TOKYO (PM SHINZO ABE)

TAIPEI (PRESIDENT MA YING-JEOU)

RESPECTIVE **PUBLIC OPINIONS**

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

WASHINGTON, ATTENTIVE 'ALLY'

QUOTES

"History will remember today. We are seated together here today so that the tragedies of history will not be repeated, so that the gains from peaceful development across the strait will not be won and again lost, so that compatriots on both sides of the strait continue making peaceful and tranquil lives (...)"

Chinese President Xi Jinping, Singapore, 7th November 2015

DECLARATIONS & REACTIONS

"This summit meeting carried a historic significance because it restores a system of cooperation among the three countries, which in turn is an important frame of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia" South Korean President Park Geun-hye, Seoul, 1st November 2015

"Both sides should respect each other's values and way of life. Over the past 66 years, the two sides have developed as different systems (...). On those persisting sensitive issues both sides must be realistic (...)" Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou, Singapore, 7th November 2015

"It's the 50th anniversary of the normalization of Japan-South Korea ties this year. Keeping that in mind, we've agreed to accelerate talks for the earliest possible resolution" (regarding the issue of 'comfort women') Japanese PM Shinzo Abe, Seoul, 2nd November 2015

"The United States has a deep and abiding interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait (...)" J. Kirby, US State Department spokesperson, 7th November 2015

CHALLENGES AND CONSEQUENCES

◆ Amongst this rare collection of diplomatic meetings, the absorbing political and economic agendas, and the overall goal to demonstrate transparency through extensive media coverage, one meeting in particular stole the spotlight of the international stage: the bilateral meeting between *both Chinas'* heads of state, the PRC and Taiwan, which drew the global community's attention, including the West's...

◆ This literally *historic* summit —it has no precedent— showcased model attitudes of courtliness and seamliness from both guests, Chinese and Taiwanese presidents Xi Jinping and Ma Ying-jeou. The location of the meeting, hosted in the Shangri-la hotel in Singapore, added the perfect dose of comfortable elegance; it was picture perfect. Notwithstanding both parts' efforts to avoid becoming estranged from public opinion yet not be considered too obliging towards the opponent's *de facto* diverging opinion, both duellists put down their swords and replaced them with mellow discourses and peacekeeping handshakes. A tricky task that the duo mastered, although risky for both of them, especially for the Taiwanese president.

◆ Two months before presidential and parliamentary elections are set to take place mid-January in *Rebel Island*, it is more or less certain that the ruling national Kuomintang will be defeated by the opposition separatist Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). In fact, the DPP's stronger *Sino-scepticism* and reservations towards the nature and intensity that future Beijing-Taipei relations should adopt may well secure a comfortable win; and give the opposition a second opportunity since

the first DPP government between 2000 and 2008.

◆ Evidently, such a scenario does not please Mainland China, for Beijing was entirely satisfied with the development that Sino-Taiwanese relations have been undertaking since 2008 with President Ma Ying-jeou (around twenty agreements signed).

Having said that, repercussions of the Singaporean summit on the running of the elections has yet to be proven. The incumbent president being unable to seek a third consecutive term, neither him nor the Kuomintang's gamble seem to have turned the situation in their favour; one may even say it has done quite the opposite.

PROSPECTIVE

Even though Seoul and Singapore summits (South Korea-China-Japan and South Korea-Japan) did not lead to spectacular announcements, it nonetheless came down to the admittedly modest agreement to perpetuate the principle and the format of such meetings. The highlight of this summit series was elsewhere anyway; Beijing, Taipei, Seoul, and Tokyo demonstrated their willingness and ability to move forward despite febrile regional and bilateral contexts in addition to unsettled historical disputes. The international community acknowledged such initiatives and Washington congratulated their instigators, slightly more fond of its regional allies —Seoul and Tokyo— when they have courteous manners for lack of honest kinship.

Paris, 17th November 2015

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