# China, Japan and South Korea strengthen cooperation to counter US tariffs and boost tech innovation



Imported vehicles are seen parked at Pyeongtaek port in South Korea amid rising concerns over increasing US tariff threats, highlighting calls from regional experts for strengthened cooperation among China, Japan and South Korea in key technological sectors. This move reflects growing efforts to bolster economic and trade ties among the three East Asian neighbours, aiming to counteract the escalating wave of US protectionism.

Choi Pil-soo, a professor specialising in Chinese trade and commerce at Sejong University in Seoul, articulated the urgency for enhanced collaboration. Speaking to China Daily, he emphasised that “cooperation among the three countries is more crucial than ever amid rising protectionist pressures from the United States.” Choi proposed that the nations focus on joint product development and coordinated component research, which would necessitate robust cooperation among industry players, government agencies, academic institutions and research bodies.

Highlighting specific areas with significant potential, Choi identified emerging industries such as AI-powered smart factories, carbon-reducing renewable energy technologies, robotics for industrial and household use, and next-generation communication technologies as central to future collaborative efforts. He further advocated for “a new economic cooperation framework — one that reduces nontariff barriers and fosters technological collaboration to create a more cooperative economic environment.”

This regional momentum comes as US tariff actions have raised concerns internationally. During a meeting in Washington on Thursday, Japan’s Finance Minister Katsunobu Kato described the recent US tariff measures as "extremely regrettable," expressing that these protections contradict a trade agreement between Japan and the US signed in 2019. He urged the US to reconsider these policies. Correspondingly, Japan’s government announced emergency response measures on Friday, including corporate financing assistance and initiatives aimed at stimulating consumption. Additionally, Ryosei Akazawa, Japan’s chief tariff negotiator, is preparing for a second round of talks in Washington scheduled from April 30 to May 2, following an initial meeting earlier this month.

Economic experts are optimistic about the prospects for trilateral cooperation to mitigate the challenges posed by US tariffs. Hidetoshi Tashiro, chief economist at Japanese consultancy Infinity LLC, underlined that "the three neighbours have the potential to collaborate closely in advanced technology sectors by leveraging their respective strengths to create new drivers of economic growth." He proposed that mutual protection of direct investments and intellectual property rights could help establish stable and efficient industrial and supply chains across the three countries. Moreover, Tashiro proposed the pursuit of a trilateral free trade agreement, along with investment protection and intellectual property rights pacts, to collectively address rising US protectionism.

Kumiko Haba, former vice-president of the International Studies Association and a distinguished professor at Josai International University, pointed out Japan’s lag in artificial intelligence and information technology relative to its neighbours. She suggested that Japan should actively engage in joint development projects alongside China and South Korea to accelerate progress. “Collaboration in areas such as electric vehicle innovation, autonomous driving and AI development should harness the unique technological strengths of China, South Korea and Japan to accelerate regional advancement,” Haba stated. An example of this cooperation is Toyota’s integration of the Chinese startup Pony.ai’s self-driving technology into its Lexus RX model, with ongoing autonomous driving trials in Beijing.

South Korea is also deepening economic and trade ties with China in light of global supply chain restructuring and international geopolitical shifts. According to China’s General Administration of Customs, total trade between China and South Korea reached $328.08 billion in 2024, surpassing China’s trade with Japan, which stood at $308.27 billion. South Korean technology leader Samsung Electronics has advanced its presence in China with a NAND flash memory chip manufacturing plant in Xi’an, Shaanxi province. The facility currently produces approximately 250,000 wafers per month, accounting for nearly 40 percent of Samsung's worldwide NAND production capacity.

Reinforcing the significance of trilateral cooperation, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi remarked at the 11th China-Japan-ROK Trilateral Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Tokyo on 22 March that cooperation among the three nations is “one of the most deeply rooted, highly institutionalised and potentially dynamic cooperative frameworks in East Asia.” The ministers highlighted progress made in six key cooperation areas identified during the previous year’s summit, including science and technology collaboration and digital transformation.

Kang Ho-gu, director of the Sino-Korea Economy/Society Institute, commented that although opportunities for cooperation might be contracting in mature sectors such as electronics and automotive, the three countries can still expand information exchange and adopt more nuanced divisions of labour. Kang added that exploring long-term strategies for collaboration in emerging industries and new markets remains a promising avenue.

These developments signal a strategic push within East Asia for increased unity in advanced technological ventures, spurred by shared economic interests and external pressures. The region’s leading economies appear intent on harnessing their combined strengths to navigate an evolving global trade environment.

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