

3 nations set date for new key summit

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Leaders from China, ROK, Japan to meet in Seoul

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi cautioned the United States on Tuesday not to act rashly by sending its military vessels within the 12 nautical miles of the Chinese islands in the South China Sea.

Reuters, quoting an unnamed Pentagon official, reported on Monday that the US Navy plans to send the destroyer USS Lassen within 12 nautical miles of Chinese construction in the South China Sea within 24 hours, triggering widespread concern over the issue of the South China Sea, which many expected to quiet down a bit after President Xi Jinping's state visit to the US last month.

When asked by reporter in Beijing on Tuesday about the news, Wang said the Chinese side is verifying. "If it is true, we would advise the US side to think twice, not to act rashly and not to make trouble out of nothing," Wang told reporters on the sidelines of a conference in Beijing on China, Japan and South Korea.

Government leaders from China, the Republic of Korea and Japan will hold a summit in Seoul on Sunday - the latest sign of thawing ties between Beijing and Tokyo.

Discussions on a long-awaited free trade agreement and developed strategies for deeper economic integration will be on the agenda.

The summit will be the first of its kind between leaders from the three countries for three years after such meetings were halted due to disputes over wartime history and territorial issues.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry confirmed on Monday that Premier Li Keqiang will make an official three-day visit to the ROK from Saturday and will attend the summit. But it did not say if Li will meet Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the summit sidelines.

Liu Zhenmin, deputy minister of foreign affairs, said Beijing and Tokyo are still in contact at "working-level" on this issue. The trilateral meeting is aimed at boosting exchanges among the three nations and maintaining stability in the region, Liu said.

Tong Daochi, assistant minister of commerce, said China will push for "substantive progress" in the free trade talks with Japan and the ROK, now in the eighth round of negotiations after being started in 2012.

Premier Li will try to "synergize" Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative with the ROK's ambition for closer ties among Asian and European countries during his visit, Tong said.

Douglas Paal, vice-president for studies and director of the Asia program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said restoring momentum towards a three-way free trade agreement will be high on the agenda.

"In light of the recent agreement on TPP, Seoul and Beijing will not want to be outliers, and Tokyo has already made sensitive concessions in TPP that it can easily offer to the other two," he said.

Paal also believes getting North Korea back into Six-Party Talks will be another topic.

Ted Carpenter, a senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, said: "It is especially gratifying given the continuing tensions between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute and Tokyo's attitude regarding the atrocities that Imperial Japan committed in World War II."

Carpenter also believes trade, investment and other economic topics are likely to have an important place in the discussions.

He said the two prominent security issues will be how to deal with North Korea and how to reduce tensions in the East China Sea, adding that tensions in the South China Sea may also receive some attention.

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On Monday, the US Department of Defense was exposed for conducting a spying program in North Korea through US non-governmental organizations, such as religious and charity organizations, according to a report by The Intercept.

Zhang Tuosheng, director of the Research Department at the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies, said the summit will be a breakthrough, as trilateral relations have suffered a great deal from tension between China and Japan since 2012.

"The trilateral meeting should have been held in 2012, in a manner to facilitate free trade talks among the three parties," he said.

"Now the three countries have set up separate free trade agreements with other nations, but not a single treaty in terms of free trade has been completed among the trio."