Regional Community Building in East Asia: A Mirage Yet Again?

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“Will regional community building progress and flourish or will it flounder midway?” asks the Concept Paper for this Conference. The Background Paper also asks “How can alliances, bilateral arrangements and ad hoc mechanisms be augmented with multilateral and institutional approaches to security? Has multilateralism in East Asia stalled?”

In Asia, bilateralism has traditionally been the mainstay in weaving regional relationships. While a certain degree of multilateralism has existed in the region, it has long been marginalized. In recent years, however, the balance between bilateralism and multilateralism in Asia has changed, with more multilateral dialogues and cooperation underway. Even in bilateral discussions, countries are devoting more time to regional issues, instead of limiting themselves to solely bilateral agendas. The region has come to recognize multilateralism as an effective tool to build confidence and to ease bilateral tensions. It is worth noting that the geographical footprint of regional cooperation in Asia has evolved: from Pacific to Asia Pacific and most recently to East Asia.

Since 2004, with the Six Party talks demonstrating the potential to be developed beyond the current negotiation on North Korean nuclear development, and with Malaysian proposal to host a East Asia Summit in Malaysia in December 2005, renewed attention has been focused on regional cooperation in Asia. Although ASEAN+3 commenced meeting in 1997, it was some time before the term “East Asia” began to be used. The East Asia Vision Group formed by ASEAN+3 first proposed the establishment of an East Asian community and the convening of an East Asia Summit in 2001. The proposal did not receive a great deal of attention when it was made, and the phrase “East Asia” would not surface in official discussions until Malaysia’s proposal to host the East Asia Summit.

Momentum towards regional cooperation in Asia has been generated and regenerated against a background of globalization and growing transnational issues. However, the regional situation is a complex one with regard to cooperation. On one hand, it seems that Asia is finally ripe for multilateralism on non-traditional security issues or human security issues such as terrorism, pandemics, piracy, energy and environment. These issues are transnational in nature and have induced the countries in the region to cooperate out of pragmatic considerations, i.e., to promote functional cooperation. It is also worth noting that ASEAN+3 explicitly included security and transnational issues in the scope of cooperation in their joint statement in 1999. On the other hand, however, on traditional security issues the region is marked by rivalries and mistrust. North Korean nuclear development is a shared concern in Asia but involves different calculations of national interest. The
ascent of India and China has also put other countries in the region on guard. Reconciling these opposing tendencies will be key to the achievement of more substantive regional cooperation in Asia.

The “hub-and-spoke” alliance relations of Asian countries with the United States is considered to be a basic stabilizer in the region, providing a framework of deterrence and enabling response to contingencies. Security cooperation in the area of transnational non-traditional security issues, either in the framework of the Six Party mechanism beyond the North Korean nuclear issue or of an East Asian community, can function as “a peace keeping mechanism,” as other forms of functional cooperation help the region to build confidence and pave the way for a possible functional integration. Multilateral security cooperation in Asia on non-traditional security issues can thus augment the hub-and-spoke relations for traditional security issues. In the very distant future, if fundamental changes occur in the security landscape of the region, the hub-and-spoke relations may develop further into a wheel or even a security community. Meanwhile, Asia has to maintain peace and stability by effectively managing both the hub-and-spoke alliance relations and multilateral security cooperation.

The regionalism gaining momentum in East Asia has a unique feature. Instead of multilateralism in its purest form, multilateralism in East Asia today is sometimes composed of a web of bilateral relations, as exemplified in the Chiang Mai initiative, bilateral FTAs and EPAs.

There is an emerging consensus that an East Asian Economic community can be created by bundling ongoing economic cooperation measures such as FTAs and currency swaps together. However, there is little consensus beyond this: the notion of East Asian community attracts both enthusiasm and skepticism, if not outright opposition. It will take a long while for Asia to develop a community like the European Union. However, it is important to create a more cohesive Asia by means of promoting a variety of forms of loose functional cooperation. Mechanisms of this type and a focus on the objective of regional integration will help the region to maintain peace and stability. In order to ensure that regionalism in Asia does not stall again, it will be important for Asian countries to share their visions for the region. One common vision should be a peaceful East Asia, and one common aim to build a community to prevent war in the region. Japan, as a key nation in the region, should endeavor to maintain the focus on the ultimate goal of building a regional community and attempt to suggest common values that the nations in the region can share.