New Security Challenges in East Asia

Security in Asia, and particularly East Asia, has been facing a number of new challenges. First, the most distinct phenomenon is the rise of China. As a rising China has generated a sense of uncertainty and anxiety in the region, China has been emphasizing its policy of “peaceful rise” to assure neighboring countries (and the US) that its rise to great power status will not hamper, but contribute to peace, stability and prosperity both at the regional and global level. China has been also improving relations with neighbors, as observed in its trade diplomacy (e.g. an FTA with ASEAN), the joint military exercise with Russia, and its leading role in the Six Party Talks to peacefully resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Its tough stance against Taiwan’s independence is the only exception. While the US and Japan are concerned about China’s emergence as a strategic competitor or a regional hegemonic state, China suspects that the US is strengthening ties with Asian countries including Japan and India in order to check a rising China to a certain extent. If such anxiety on both sides coincides with competition for scarcer energy and natural resources, there will be a lot more possibility for competition and confrontation than cooperation between the US and China, which would in turn compel Asian countries to collaborate with one or the other.1

Second, growing rivalries between China and Japan are proving problematic. Japan is anxious about the rise of China (e.g. fast growing economy and potential military threat) and China frets about Japan’s aspiration for becoming a “normal state” by strengthening its ties with the US and increasing military capabilities. Resurging nationalism, which is complicated by the history between the two countries and a sense of rivalry for future dominance in the region, has further aggravated their ties. The relations between South Korea and Japan also plunged in early 2005 as President Roh Mooh-hyun and Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro were leading the two nations back to history to address loose ends for political purposes.

Third, North Korea’s nuclear development programs remain as one of the most prominent security concerns in the post-Cold War world. The issue has not only increased regional instability but also raised the possibility of proliferation in the region. Currently, the fourth round of the six-way talks is in recess, but it remains uncertain if further talks could produce any tangible achievements. On the issue of the current nuclear standoff, there still remain several thorny issues to be resolved on a bilateral basis with the US, rather than through multilateral frameworks. Therefore, the role Asian countries can play in addressing this issue is limited.

Fourth, the main direction of the US policy toward East Asia is focused on maintaining and consolidating US bilateral alliance relations, so as to deter the rise of any potential powers in the region. These bilateral security arrangements were concluded during the Cold War era in line with its containment policy toward the Soviet Union and China. With the end of the Cold War, the US has pursued a more comprehensive security policy, which includes various efforts to promote multilateral security cooperation so as to effectively respond to the political, military and economic changes that were taking place in the region. Geopolitical complexities and the aforementioned tensions and competition among East Asian countries in recent years make the role of the US in the region all the more crucial. Its role has been emphasized not only from the traditional military standpoint but also in economic and humanitarian aspects, as exemplified by its role in the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis and the disastrous tsunami in South and Southeast Asia in December 2004.

Fifth, the need to address non-traditional security issues including human security issues in East Asia became stronger with the increase in poverty and illegal migration after the financial crisis of 1997. The SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic of 2003 and the increase of HIV/AIDS infections in the region, the “yellow dust” phenomenon and air/marine pollution have emerged as health and environmental security issues. Moreover, the debate on the North Korean issue, which was mostly focused on its traditional security aspects during the last decade, now includes debate on the famine situation and economic difficulties in the country, as well as on the North Korean refugee issue. It is thus imperative that policy-makers and academics in the region develop a comprehensive regional security mapping wherein human security issues, traditional security concerns, and economic development should be dealt with collectively.

Challenges and Opportunities for Multilateral Security Cooperation in East Asia

Despite several multilateral security cooperation efforts in East Asia, skepticism still remains dominant in the region due to a combination of the following complex issues. Such skepticism could also be largely derived from the pre-existing belief that the region has evidenced a poor history of institutional frameworks (formal or informal) that could address relevant issues at the regional level.

First, the greatest barrier to the establishment of a recognized framework for regional integration or community is confusion about regional identity: Are we talking about the broader Asia-Pacific region or a narrower East Asian (or even Northeast Asian) region? In the case of Europe, there was, until lately at least, much less argument over defining an European community vis-à-vis an Atlantic community.

Second, tension and distrust remains strong among countries in the region as a historical legacy of colonization and war (e.g., World War II, the Korean War and the Cold War). Even in the post-Cold War era, various traditional, military and security threats still remain in areas of potential conflict. Furthermore, Japan’s “unapologetic” foreign policy, manifested in the controversial Japanese history textbooks, renewed attention to the disputed island Dokdo (Takehima in Japanese), and Koizumi’s visits to the Yasukuni shrine, has posed an important barrier to the intra-regional reconciliation process.

Third, because foreign policies of countries in the region have developed based on their respective
bilateral alliance relations with the US since the Cold War era, a “paradigm shift” in a US-centric approach to security is needed in constructing a multilateral regional security cooperation regime that would complement existing bilateral security arrangements. In addition, unlike the case of Europe where the US supported a stronger and more integrated Europe, aimed at containing the Soviet threat, the US has shown a conflicting attitude toward multilateral security cooperation efforts in East Asia. While such efforts would partially reduce the US security responsibilities in the region, there has also been anxiety that these processes would weaken existing bilateral security arrangements, and thus undermine US influence in the region. Despite the ongoing six-party talks process, it would thus be difficult to see this as an expression of US support for multilateral security cooperation in the region.

Fourth, the region lacks leadership in facilitating and coordinating the community building process. Neither China nor Japan, which both seek regional hegemony in constructing a multilateral security cooperation regime in the region, could take the initiative in the establishment of such a regime. Nor is it one in which South Korea could secure a balancing role considering its geopolitical position between China and Japan.

In summary, the following four conditions are necessary in order to develop a coherent and viable regional security cooperation regime: i) shared values and goals of common security and cooperation; ii) preference among the regional powers for a regime; iii) rejection of the idea of promoting security through expansion; and iv) an awareness of the high costs of war and the individualistic pursuit of (military) security. Unfortunately, the current security situation in East Asia, and Northeast Asia in particular, does not sufficiently meet these conditions for institutionalizing a regional security cooperation regime.

Yet, there are reasons to be hopeful. Because countries in the region value economic growth as one of the most important objectives in their national policies, regional peace and security will be an indispensable condition for trade and continued economic growth. Accordingly, countries including China will continue to move toward promoting multilateral security cooperation in the region. Also, countries that had been hostile towards each other during the Cold War period have worked towards normalizing their diplomatic relations and are currently seeking to promote military cooperation and exchange efforts. Though countries in the Northeast Asian region have been competitively working towards expanding their military capabilities, this competitive relationship could also provide the opportunity for states to increase their awareness of the need for multilateral security cooperation in the region. The increasing economic interdependence, people-to-people contacts, and transboundary security concerns have been also an important impetus for countries in the region to cooperate and integrate for advancing a community, however its term and scope are defined.

Therefore, it would be important to develop a concrete strategy for systematic, multilateral and regular security cooperation efforts based on on-going bilateral cooperation efforts. Plans to promote confidence-building would also be important as a prerequisite to security cooperation. Currently, there are debates on holding regular seminars on security cooperation, constructing hotlines, exchanging liaison officials, carrying out training observation programs, and sharing information among East Asian

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countries. A concrete and feasible plan in implementing these efforts should also be examined.

All these efforts to promote multilateral security cooperation in the region would be more effective when simultaneously pursued with comprehensive security cooperation efforts, which would also include non-traditional security issues. Scholars and policy-makers, who are carrying out this debate, regard non-traditional security cooperation among countries in the region as a stepping stone towards a broader regional security community. For instance, regional approaches towards transnational problems like environmental degradation can not only help resolve this issue, but can also set the stage for exchanging and coordinating views on more sensitive and intransigent issues and therefore serve as a catalyst in building mutual trust in the region.

However, such “functionalist approaches” may not work in the case of Northeast Asia where geopolitical complications and urgency prevail. Indeed, intensifying economic and social interdependence and transfrontier environmental problems alone have not generated the necessary conditions for a regional community. Therefore, consolidating confidence building measures in a “more traditional” political and military sense seem to be more crucial at least in advancing Northeast Asian security cooperation. For this, the role of political leaders with strong commitment is of the utmost importance.

Still, the efforts of institutionalizing multilateral cooperation on the issue of non-traditional security should be continued. The process of building a sustainable and effective regional security regime is expected to be long and tedious. During this process, non-traditional security issues will not be able to receive the same amount of attention as traditional security issues. Nevertheless, the whole process itself would be able to promote dialogue and the exchange of views, ultimately contributing to setting the stage for political dialogue. Once a multilateral security cooperation regime is established, regardless of whether or not it succeeds in addressing and resolving particular security issues, the regime itself will have the authority to promote inter-state cooperation efforts.

In conclusion, despite obstacles, efforts will continue to develop a regional community for security cooperation, however it is defined. It is likely that these efforts will develop into a “bi-multilateral cooperation framework,” which will be a multilateral mechanism to complement existing bilateral relations and alliances. In order to increase the synergy effects of this mechanism, governments in the region need to make a systematic and concerted effort to devise a security policy that would reflect increasing public awareness of changing international and regional security environments, while at the same time accommodating various views on security issues. Track II level cooperation efforts should also be utilized as “pressure and support” to encourage inter-governmental security cooperation.