

The Possibility of Regional Security Framework on the Korean Peninsula

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- 1 Introduction : “Two plus two plus two” in Northeast Asia
- 2 Emergence of Six-Party Formula : “Korea Problem” vs. “Regional Security”
- 3 Visions for a CSCE in Northeast Asia
- 4 Regional Framework to End the Korean War : Four-Party Talks
- 5 Reemergence of the Six-Party Formula
- 6 Conclusion : Lessons and Prospects

1 Introduction : “Two plus two plus two” in Northeast Asia

With the end of the Cold War, various forms of regional/sub-regional security arrangements emerged in many different regions of the world. Regionalism has become a “catchword,” or a trend, in the post-Cold War era, not only in the economic, but also in the security spheres. In most cases, these regional security frameworks are explained as products of easing, if not disappearing, of Cold War tensions and confrontations. Freed, at least relatively, from the constraint of the global confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, regional states are now groping for new arrangements to cope with the uncertainty caused by changed distribution of power. In addition, there are growing agenda of non-conventional security issues which usually cross over borders between states, thus requiring cooperative approach. These new security agenda include the management of natural resources, the protection of environment, in particular transborder air pollution and nuclear waste dumping, the regulation of refugees, and the prevention of international criminal activities such as piracy, smuggling, drug trafficking and terrorism. (Harding, 1994) Concern for changing power distribution and need to cope with new security agenda are two prime movers that have pushed states into regional cooperation.

In this respect the region of Northeast Asia is unique in two ways. First, it is the only region that lacks in a stable regional framework. For a decade after the demise of the Cold War, a series of attempts were made for subregional organizations, but

to no avail so far. It means that the Cold War has not come to an end in this region. Second, therefore, in Northeast Asia, the establishment of regional security framework is not the result, but the beginning of the end of Cold War confrontation. It is not surprising that Northeast Asian countries have often looked to the European experiences, in particular the Helsinki process and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Their interest was focused on the role that CSCE played in ending the decades-long, or even century-long, confrontations in Europe.

The statement that Northeast Asia needs a regional security arrangement to put an end to the Cold War is more than a rhetoric. Actually, two Koreas in the peninsula are still technically at “hot” war, involving the United States and China. In 1953 the Armistice Agreement was concluded. However, the belligerents, the United Nations Command led by the United States, China (Chinese People’s Volunteers), and North Korea, failed in 1954 to reach a formal peace treaty to end the Korean War. Rhee Syngman government of South Korea even refused to sign the truce, insisting on the continuation of the war. The Armistice Agreement, which has functioned as the only framework to manage the military confrontation in the peninsula, has come to a virtual end, when North Korea withdrew unilaterally from the Agreement in March 1994, as part of a brinkmanship strategy to press the United States for a bilateral peace treaty. Under request from Pyongyang, China also withdrew from the Military Armistice Commission in December 1994. Since then, legally there is no formal mechanism to manage the armistice in the peninsula.

The Korean War has three dimensions : civil, regional, and global. The war was started as a civil war between the two Korean governments competing over legitimacy on the whole peninsula. But it soon became an international war, reflecting both regional and global structures of confrontation, when the United States decided to dispatch forces under the flag of the United Nations.

Accordingly, the process to put an end to the Korean War is inevitably to be a multi-layered one. First and foremost, there should be accommodation between the two Koreas. However, quite ironically, this dimension of the process has proved to be the most difficult and delayed. It is mainly because the North has adamantly refused to treat the South as a formal counterpart for ideological and strategic reasons. Ideologically, government-to-government framework between the two Koreas would inevitably undermine Pyongyang’s claim for monopoly of legitimacy. Strategically, the North has tried to balance the overwhelming South by giving priority to normalizing relations with the United States and Japan. With the South-North summit meeting of June 2000, the two Koreas agreed to move toward formal

accommodation.

As a framework for a formal peace treaty to end the Korean War, four-party formula was started in 1997. Although North Korea still dissents, the four-party conference is a result of a loose consensus among the United States, China, and South Korea, on the “two plus two” formula : that is, the peace treaty to be concluded by the two Koreas, and to be supported by the United States and China. The four-party conference has been in suspension since December 1999, partly because Pyongyang has concentrated on diplomatic offensives toward Seoul and Washington.

The third layer is the six-party, or six-party plus, formula, which would include Russia and Japan. The Soviet Union was not a declared belligerent in the Korean War. However, it is also true that Moscow was an integral participant in the whole course of the war, and in the Cold War structure afterwards. Although the status of Japan is more ambiguous, mainly because its involvement in the peninsula during the Cold War was indirect, its historical relations with the peninsula, and its economic potential for regional stability are often cited as reasons in favor of the six-party formula which includes Japan.

From this perspective of multi-layered dimension of the Cold War structure in the Korean Peninsula, this paper will focus on the emerging trend toward regional security arrangements in Northeast Asia. In particular, the paper will explore what premises security multilateralism/regionalism holds for the peninsula, and assess its merits as well as limitations. To do so, the paper will first trace a series of proposals and discussions on the multi-party security frameworks since the end of the Cold War, in particular focusing on the six-party formula. It will then examine the positions of each country, and attempt to draw lessons and prospects on the possibilities of regional security framework.

2 Emergence of Six-Party Formula : “Korea Problem” vs. “Regional Security”

Since 1985, when Gorbachev came to power in the Kremlin and took initiatives for reforms in both domestic and foreign policies, it became increasingly evident that the world began to enter into a new era. Against this background, a series of proposals were made by a variety of countries for new security frameworks for the region of Northeast Asia.

It worths emphasizing here the fact that most of the new initiatives came from South Korea, or so-called middle-power countries such as Canada and Australia, while big powers such as the United States or China showed little enthusiasm. In

particular, Seoul was quick to seize the historical opportunity to advance its own long-held foreign policy goals.

In the address delivered at the United Nations General Assembly in October 1988, President Roh Tae Woo of South Korea called for the "Consultative Conference for Peace in Northeast Asia," which would include two Koreas, the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan. It was one of the earliest of proposals for regional security framework in Northeast Asia, and was the first that presented the six-party formula regarding the Korean Peninsula. Roh reiterated his proposal for a Northeast Asian peace conference at the Japanese Diet in May 1990, when he visited Japan, and again at the United Nations General Assembly in September 1992.

Seoul's new interest in security regionalism was apparently stimulated by the Soviet Union. In Vladivostok in July 1986, Gorbachev called for an Asian version of Helsinki conference, which was followed by another proposal for an "All-Asian Security and Cooperation Conference" made at the address in Krasnoyarsk in September in 1988. He also suggested an "All-Asian process" for regional security when he visited Beijing in May 1989.

Boosted by the success of the Olympic Games, Roh Tae Woo government of South Korea made active use of this emerging trend, while accelerating its "Nordpolitik" toward socialist countries. Roh's initiatives were designed for multiple purposes. First, Seoul apparently wished to enhance its international standing and presence by playing an active role in initiating a regional security framework. A policy report prepared by a ROK Foreign Ministry thinktank repeatedly emphasized the "active participation" in regionalism, and "enhancing international status and influence." (Park 1991 : 45-51)

Second, in a broader strategic context, South Korea tried to maximize its choices in coping with the growing uncertainties in the regional redistribution of power. In addition to the traditional security ties with the United States, a regional framework was expected to provide a new arena for diplomacy toward Beijing and Moscow.

Third, more direct and immediate motivation behind the initiatives might be concern for growing competition among surrounding powers over the peninsula diplomacy. South Korea has long maintained the position that Korean problems should be resolved by the Koreans. Economic and diplomatic success in the 1980's heightened Seoul's hope for enhanced influence over the destiny of the peninsula. However, rapid change in power relations might cause instability, if not power vacuum, which in turn would intensify power struggle, thus threatening the principle of the "Koreanization of the Korean problem." For South Korea, the proposal for a

regional arrangement was a sort of “preemptive action” to check and contain power political struggles.

It should be noted here that in his proposals, Roh made clear that the agenda of the six-party conference would not be confined to the Korean problems. According to the original proposal, the peace conference would evolve in three phases : 1) international guarantee to the peace in the Korean Peninsula, 2) peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia, 3) establishment of multilateral framework in the Asia-Pacific region. (Ohm 1999 : 224) In his address, Roh suggested that such issues as tension-reduction between the US and the Soviet Union, Russo-Japanese territorial disputes, and rapprochement between China and the Soviet Union, as well as the Korean problem, could be discussed in the conference. (MOFAT 1998 : 83-84)

Initial United States reaction to Roh’s proposal was ambivalent. When he visited Seoul in November 1991, Secretary of State James Baker stated that Washington was ready to support the “two plus four” formula on the Korean problem. However, it was different from the one Seoul wanted. Through high-level meetings between Secretary Baker and ROK leaders, including President Roh, it became evident that Seoul and Washington had different understanding of, and interest in, the same six-party formula. ROK officials made clear that they could not accept the “two plus four” formula, if it was confined to the Korean problem, while the United States were not interested in any regional security arrangement that would only constrain its own strategic freedom of action.

For the South Koreans, the six-party framework could be understood as a “two plus four” on the Korean problem, only in the sense that the four powers should offer “cooperation and understanding” to the efforts of two Korea toward accommodation and ultimate re-unification. As Kim Jong Hui, then national security advisor to President Roh, stressed to Secretary James Baker and Assistant Secretary Richard Solomon, the roles of the “four powers” should be complementary ones. President Roh himself reiterated this point to Baker, when he made clear that the “two plus four” formula should not be applicable to the issue of Korean reunification, different from the case of Germany. (Ohm 1999 : 224-225)

The broader dimension of the six-party conference, which called for a sub-regional security framework, was a “right thing to do” in terms of theory and morality. However, South Korea lacked in diplomatic resources and strategies effective enough to elicit support from the regional states. Quite understandably, some favorable reactions came from Tokyo and Moscow. In April 1990 Japanese Prime Minister Kaifu responded with his own proposal for a six-nation conference on

tension-reduction in the Korean Peninsula. Although the details were not made public, the Japanese proposal seemed to be confined to the Korean issue. Russian reactions were more favorable to Seoul's hope for an expanded version of a Northeast Asian regional arrangement. When he paid a state visit to Seoul in November 1992, President Yeltsin responded with proposals for multilateral security consultations by the Northeast Asian regional states, as a preparatory step for eventual establishment of a regional framework. (MOFAT 1998 : 88-89)

It is not clear whether the South Korean government made any organized diplomatic efforts to mobilize political support from Japan and Russia, two most promising potential sympathizers. In particular, the Soviet Union had shown very active interest in forming a regional system in Northeast Asia, where it thought its influence was on the wane, and in strengthening economic relations with Seoul in terms of investment and trade. However, there is no evidence that Seoul made any serious contacts with Moscow on its own proposal before or after the announcement.

China, another important regional power, did not show any hint of interest on these discussions. Partly, the lack of eagerness can be explained by Beijing's traditional preference of bilateralism. China might also have considered the six-party forum as a potential conduit of increasing influence of Japan and the Soviet Union on the Korean Peninsula.

Faced with U.S. objection, China's silence, and ambivalent reactions from Japan and the Soviet Union, Roh's proposal for a regional framework in Northeast Asia failed to be a springboard for official consultations.

3 Visions for a CSCE in Northeast Asia

Despite the "failure" of its first regional initiatives, the succeeding South Korean government of Kim Young Sam broadened the scope of diplomatic offensives toward security regionalism, based upon the new approaches to security, such as "common security" or "cooperative security." In May 1993, shortly after his appointment, the new Foreign Minister Han Sung-joo proposed a "Mini-CSCE-like Framework for Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia," at an address to the Korean Diplomatic Society. In July, when he met with U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher, he elaborated on the proposal, and asked for support from his counterpart.

Apparently, South Korea was inspired by the developments in post-Cold War Europe, and encouraged by ASEAN countries moving toward the launching of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). According to Seoul, the scope and target area of the ARF was so broad and wide that the region of Northeast Asia should have its

own security dialogue forum. The Northeast Asian security dialogue forum would complement and reinforce the Asia-Pacific region-wide multilateral security regime building. Han suggested to Christopher that a sub-regional forum could be convened in tandem with the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (ASEAN-PMC).

Followed by both formal and informal overtures on various levels, Foreign Minister Han made an official proposal for a six-nation Northeast Asian security framework based on the CSCE model, at his address to the Asian Society in October 1993.

Drawing lessons from past experiences, South Korean government emphasized the following four points as “working principles” in pursuing the “Mini-CSCE” forum.

“First, any multilateral security forum in Northeast Asia should not undermine or erode the existing bilateral relations in the region. To introduce multilateral dialogue in security matters is not necessarily to deny the role of the existing bilateral arrangements in the region. Certainly it will not be a substitute for close bilateral relations where they exist.

“Second, emphasis must be placed on a gradual or step-by-step approach in pursuing the forum. The Northeast Asia region lacks a habit of dialogue among states. Hence, it is important to nurture habits of consultation and cooperation gradually among regional states and more emphasis should be placed on the development of less ambitious measures in the early stage to increase confidence among mistrustful governments. For example, the process could start with efforts to increase transparency, by exchanging information on defense budgets and military deployments, in the hope that each nation can reassure its neighbors of its capabilities and intentions. This could then lead to consideration of more sophisticated arms control measures, such as prior notification of military exercise and force reduction, building on the previous work done at the lower level.

“Third, in addition to official or governmental talks, there is a need for unofficial channels of dialogue on security—known as “track two” diplomacy—whereby experts from the academic, governmental, official, non-governmental, and private communities can meet, each in their individual capacity.

“Finally, there should be some consideration of the principle of inclusiveness on the issue of membership. Cooperative security, the subject which the multilateral approach to regional security intends explicitly to promote, is not *a priori* restrictive in membership. Hence, the forum should involve all the members of the region as much as possible. However, this principle must be flexible in practice. That is to say, in the first stage, a multilateral forum can be established without the participation

of certain countries that show negative responses. Such nations can join the forum later.” (S. Lee 1993 : 4)

It is noteworthy that the US-ROK relations on the issue of Northeast Asian security forum were an awkward mixture of tension and cooperation. Against the emerging trend toward security multilateralism in ASEAN region, the United States took initiative of its own in the form of track two dialogue. Since July 1993, the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation (IGCC) of University of California, San Diego, in close cooperation with the U.S. State Department, has hosted the Northeast Asian Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD), where officials and scholars met together to discuss and explore ways “to enhance mutual understanding, confidence, and cooperation among countries in Northeast Asia through dialogue.” The United States, Japan, China, Russia, and the two Koreas were supposed to be the members. However, North Korea did not participate in any of the plenary sessions of the NEACD after attending the preparatory meeting in July 1993. Nonetheless, the NEACD process, launched officially in November 1993, has provided so far the only forum for regional security dialogue among the other five countries. Plenary sessions are convened in every seven to eight months.

In addition to the plenary sessions, the NEACD members organize workshops and study groups to discuss various security-related issues such as energy and maritime transportation. A set of eight general principles governing state-to-state relations approved by the 1997 Tokyo plenary meeting is a good example of “spill-over” from track two to track one activities. (E. Kim 1999 : 52) NEACD study projects have examined mutual reassurance measures, defense information sharing, and regional energy cooperation. (S. Lee 1999 : 40)

The relative “success” of NEACD is in contrast with continuing struggle of South Korea in pursuit of its own vision of a regional system. In coincidence with the launching of the NEACD, the South Korean government made an official proposal for a multilateral security forum, called the Northeast Asia Security Dialogue (NEASED), at the ARF Senior Officials Meeting (ARF-SOM), held in Bangkok in May 1994. According to the proposal document presented to ARF, the consultative forum was intended to be a subregional version of CSCE. The membership was not specified, but implied to be the six regional states. The issues to be taken up were not confined to the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula, but expanded to include “issues likely to affect regional peace and security,” such as “political and territorial disputes between some countries in the region,” “environmental questions of air-pollution and nuclear waste dumping, refugees and humanitarian problems as

well as drug trafficking and other transnational crimes.” The influence of European experiences was evident in the document, which emphasized the concepts such as preventive diplomacy, military mutual reassurance measures (MRMs), and cooperative security. The proposed “six basic principles” showed striking similarity to the “ten principles” of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. (MOFAT 1998 : 210-215)

Seoul’s strategy was to “upgrade” the burgeoning NEACD into an official government-level forum. At the third ARF meeting held in July 1996, in Jakarta, Foreign Minister Gong Ro-myung suggested to elevate the NEACD to the government-to-government level, while trying to induce North Korea to join the forum.

However, the reactions of the member states were split : Russia and Japan were positive, while the United States and China favored the status quo of the track two. This was the pattern, repeatedly shown in the discussion on the regional security framework in the 1990’s. China and the United States were in common in their preference for bilateralism over multilateralism in security.

4 Regional Framework to End the Korean War : Four-Party Talks

As stated above, South Korea has long pursued the policy objective of the “Koreanization of the Korean problem.” The signing of Basic Agreement between the two Koreas in 1991 represented a major breakthrough toward the goal of resolving the Korean issues by the Koreans. However, the historical agreement has not been implemented, mainly because of North Korea’s wariness of being overwhelmed by the South. Frustrated by the lack of any meaningful progress in inter-Korean relations, the South had to set aside its principles and accommodate a multilateral approach in pursuing the establishment of a peaceful coexistence on the Korean peninsula.

The result was the Four-Party Talks, which were formally launched in December 1997 in Geneva with the participation of the two Koreas, the United States and China. The purpose of the talks was to initiate a process aimed at achieving a permanent peace regime by replacing the Armistice with a formal peace treaty and thus ending the state of war in the peninsula.

By August 1999, when the talks went into an indefinite adjournment, the four parties had held six plenary sessions. But they were only able to reach an agreement on the operation of two sub-committees to deal with, respectively, the establishment of a peace regime, and tension reduction on the Korean peninsula. Still the views of

the two Korea on the form of peace treaty are far apart from each other. Progress has been irritatingly slow, and since the end of 1999, talks are in de facto suspension, because of dramatic developments in relations among the two Koreas and the United States.

Short-term prospect for the talks does not seem bright. However, it is a remarkable step forward that a basic framework for ending the Korean War was formed, regardless of the disagreement in the details of the arrangement.

5 Reemergence of the Six-Party Formula

With the launching of the Four-Party talks, a renewed interest emerged in the six-party formula. It was the result of active initiatives from the two regional states that were not included in the diplomacy over the Korean peninsula : Russia and Japan. In July 1996, South Korean Foreign Minister Gong agreed with his Russian counterpart Primakov to push forward a six-nation security framework as a long-term regional agenda, on a strong request from Primakov. In Japan, the governing Liberal Democratic Party stipulated the establishment of a regional security organization as a major foreign policy objective in April 1997. (Ohm 1999 : 229)

The newly inaugurated Kim Dae Jung administration of South Korea also took energetic initiatives to make use of such eagerness, in particular, of Japan and Russia that were excluded from the Four-Party talks, for its long-held policy goals. In February 1998, Kim Jong Pil, who would become Prime Minister, visited China, and called for a "Six-Nation Declaration on the Peace and Stability in Northeast Asia," to President Jiang Jemin. It was again modeled on the Helsinki Final Act, and the one that was supposed to evolve from a declaration into a permanent security forum.

He then flew to Tokyo, where he reiterated the proposal to Japanese leaders. Prime Minister Hashimoto and Foreign Minister Obuchi were particularly enthusiastic toward the idea. Since then, Japan has become a major proponent of the six-party formula, in close collaboration with South Korea. In September 1998, when he visited the United States as Prime Minister, Obuchi made official proposal to President Clinton.

Two factors can be pointed out regarding the reasons of renewed interest on the part of South Korea. First, for Kim Dae Jung, six-party formula was considered as an important means for his engagement policy toward Pyongyang. He wanted to mobilize political and economic support from Japan and Russia to induce the North to international society. Second, it seemed that Seoul realized the need to make a

concerted diplomatic efforts to overcome ambivalence of the United States and reluctance of China.

However, Japan's rare activeness in regional diplomacy has been seriously hampered by its own weakness : the lack of minimal relationship with North Korea. In spite of strenuous diplomatic efforts, in particular by Japan recently, the six-party formula seems to be still years away from fruition.

6 Conclusion : Lessons and Prospects

Multilateral security dialogue can provide an important vehicle for ensuring long-term peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Such a dialogue, by its mere existence, will be a significant confidence-building measure for regional states, as it will increase mutual understanding and confidence and, in turn, reduce distrust and miscalculation. The dialogue will also allow voices of middle-power countries like South Korea to be heard on discussions of regional security issues. It is critical for the long-term security of the region that lesser powers also participate in regional security discussions with the major powers.

However, as we have seen, a multilateral security dialogue in Northeast Asia continues to be elusive despite the increasing awareness of the need to create such a forum and its potential benefits. It remains a long-term proposition at the moment, largely due to U.S. ambivalence, China's reluctance, and North Korea's refusal to participate.

One major reason that makes regional consensus more difficult is the "dual nature," or "dual mission," of regional security framework in Northeast Asia. On the one hand, it is needed to resolve "Korean problems," ending the Cold War and building peace in the peninsula. On the other hand, its agenda will include security issues among regional states.

As is shown in the fact that the Korean War was fought on multiple dimensions, two aspects, "Korean" and "Northeast Asian," of the regional framework are intertwined and overlapped with each other. Often the security of the Korean peninsula is identified with that of Northeast Asia. However, the two mechanisms are distinctly different from each other in terms of agenda, purpose, and possible membership.

Over time the gap between the two aspects has widened, as the Koreans became more assertive, backed by political and economic development, particularly in the South. With the launching of the Four-Party talks, whose specific aim is to build permanent peace regime, it is now becoming technically as well as politically

difficult to confine the scope of the regional framework to the Korean dimension.

U.S. ambivalence can be explained in this context. In the postwar period, Washington has been basically favorable toward a regional scheme by regional powers to stabilize the Korean peninsula. Attempts by Nixon and Kissinger for cross-recognition and a four-party formula, different from the present one, in the early 1970's, are good examples. However, reluctance has been the rule in Washington to a multilateral framework regional security issues. A major reason is, above all, concern about the impact on U.S. military presence in the region. In recent years, however, there are signs of increasing interest in regional security dialogue toward "cooperative security," at least in track two forms. When they are ready for a substantial restructuring of military posture, the United States might take the initiatives to transform those track two experiments into track one formality.

Alienated from the formal peace process in the Korean peninsula, Japan and Russia have been two most promising candidates for proponents, or supporters at least, of a Northeast Asian forum. In fact, for the last decade, nearly half of the regionalist proposals, formal or informal, were from the two countries. However, there is a contrast in their respective approaches toward it.

Russia's position has been close to that of South Korea, laying emphasis on a broader range of issues related to regional security. It may reflect Moscow's relative weakness in its strategic foothold in the region. For Russia which has territorial and border disputes with China and Japan, and has declining power resources to defend its position, application of CSCE-like regional forum into Northeast Asia might be an strategic asset, because of its emphasis on status quo.

Japan, by contrast, has been characteristic in its shyness from regional security initiatives. Much of the passiveness is an inevitable result of strategic dependence on the United States. Reflecting historical and geopolitical interest, Tokyo has shown increasing willingness to participate in the discussions on the Korean affairs, taking rare diplomatic initiatives for six-nation formula.

However, as is shown by the frustratingly sluggish pace of the Japanese-North Korean negotiations, Japan's involvement in the Korean issues is critically compromised by historical legacies. A broader framework might provide a more effective venue for Japanese regional diplomacy.

With its sheer size and increasing influence, China holds a key to the establishment of a multilateral security dialogue in the region. So far China, while participating in the track two activities, such as the NEACD, has maintained a wait-and-see attitude toward six-party proposals, citing North Korea's refusal to participate. However,

the real reason for China's lukewarm attitude does not come from its concern of Pyongyang, but has to do with its preference for bilateralism.

In this respect recent Chinese experiences in ARF and Central Asia, where Beijing took initiatives for regional security dialogues, might have positive impact on the prospects for a Northeast Asian framework.

Given its strong advocacy of multi-polar world, China could begin to cast more positive light on a multilateral security dialogue in an attempt to neutralize the "hub-and-spokes" regional system led and dominated by the United States.

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