Feasibility of Regional Security Framework in Northeast Asia
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ABSTRACT
In this era when the geopolitical center of gravity is shifting to Northeast Asia where a strategic competition between great powers is resurgent, there are new opportunities for cooperation in the region in spite of significant challenges. In order to overcome traditional tensions, ongoing disputes, and struggles over hegemony in the region, it is necessary for the countries of the region to change the way they think and act. In that regard, it would be beneficial to develop some form of multilateral cooperation that promotes peaceful coexistence and mutual prosperity. By scrutinizing the current situation with an eye to the requirements and variables of building a multilateral security cooperation architecture, this article analyzes why Northeast Asia has yet to establish such a framework and tries to determine whether the region has the potential to do so. It concludes that while South Korea, Japan, and Russia are in favor of a multilateral approach, the United States, China, and North Korea are less enthusiastic about the idea. However, the United States and China recently have developed a basis for multilateral security cooperation from their experiences, especially in North Korean issues. A related question is how the countries involved would institutionalize cooperation. This analysis concludes that the best approach would be to start with a small but specific undertaking based upon existing architectures that can utilize existing resources. This idea can be realized by first holding a regional summit to discuss common security issues.

Introduction
In the realist approach to international politics, nations are perceived to pursue only their own interests and to defend themselves through military buildups and alliances (Lee 2018, 107). However, this conventional conception of security has generally been accompanied by a security dilemma and led to two world wars after the end of 19th century (Shin 2010). Nowadays things have changed a lot – comprehensive interrelations among states are more common; Weapons of mass destruction represent a transnational threat that forces countries to cooperate; various security interests are more enlarged and are more likely to overlap worldwide than ever before; and a nation’s security cannot be secured by itself and its allies but rather is intertwined with that of other countries. This trend makes us pay attention to liberalism, in which security issues are seen from an institutionalist point of view. In this view, multilateral cooperation shapes states’ preferences and collective actions by official procedures within institutional frameworks. In contrast, constructivism puts more
emphasis on thinking about how the interests and identities of states are created and how
the power of the international order is historically and socially constructed even though
power is in itself still an important concept to explain international relations. And the theory
also suggests that transnational communication and shared civic values create new forms of
political association beyond national loyalties (Walt 1998, 40–41). This approach could be
a more active and dynamic alternative to improve international relations by managing
interactions of enduring conflicts and strengthening the basis to share values, cultures, and
identities among states (Lee 2018, 108–111).

To manage interactions among the regional members within an institutional framework,
a regional security complex, or RSC, (Buzan 1984; Buzan and Waever 2003) could be
considered. The concept covers how security is clustered in geographical regions. In
Northeast Asia, the RSC, as an upper structure of Korean Peninsula, presumably consists
of the United States, China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and North Korea from a regional
security point of view rather than from geographical standpoint (Park and Kim 2018,
73–74). From the beginning of 2018, a great transition in the security paradigm around
the peninsula has been occurring even if there inevitably have been some ups and downs in
the interactions among the major players of the region. On one hand, South and North
Korea have resumed making efforts to lay the foundation for reconciliation and coopera-
tion. Intensified strategic dialogues and tugs-of-war with regard to North Korea’s denuc-
learization start and stop between the United States and North Korea. On the other hand,
the struggle for regional hegemony between the United States and China is ongoing. In the
competition between the two, each utilizes policies and strategies to attract the countries
neighboring the region to its side. The US policy for attracting neighbors has been actualized
through the Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy of the Obama administration in 2011 and
the Indo-Pacific strategy of the Trump administration in 2019 as an expansion and revision of
Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy to contain China’s rise and safeguard US leadership in
the region. Meanwhile, having relatively a weak security coalition, China perceives US encircle-
ment of China and efforts to constrain it as threats to its core interests. This strategic rivalry
increases the security dilemma in the region and in some cases, forces countries in the region
to choose between the United States and China (Friedman 2019). The increase in dynamism
and power struggles has made the region, which used to be on the margins of international
politics, a strategic area to establish a new international order.

1RSC is a group of states consisting of neighboring actors that are insulated from one another by natural barriers such as
oceans, deserts, and mountain ranges. Primary security concerns of the states are linked closely to the extent that their
national security cannot realistically be considered apart from that of one another. Since the relations among states in
a RSC exhibit geographically clustered patterns, the level of interaction between units in the RSC is high. Thus the RSC
depends primarily on the pressures deriving from geographic proximity, the interplay between the anarchic structure,
and how balances of power play out in the system (Buzan and Waever 2003).

2The Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy indicated that the United States expanded and intensified its already significant
role in the Asia-Pacific region to deepen its credibility there. The fundamental goal is to devote more effort to
influencing the development of the Asia-Pacific’s norms and rules, particularly as China emerges as an ever-more
influential regional power (Manyin et al. 2012).

3The Indo-Pacific strategy is an enduring US commitment to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific in which all nations are
secure in their sovereignty and able to pursue economic growth consistent with accepted international rules, norms,
and principles of fair competition (US DoD 2019).

4China’s “core interests” are a set of interests that represent the nonnegotiable bottom lines of Chinese foreign policy. According to the Chinese government’s white paper China’s Peaceful Development 2011, they include 1) state
sovereignty, 2) national security, 3) territorial integrity, 4) national reunification, 5) China’s political system established
by the Constitution and overall social stability, and 6) basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social
development (Feng 2014).
In light of these developments, it is logical to consider the potential benefits from a regional security framework for Northeast Asia and ask whether the key actors in the region would be able to create one. This essay will address those questions.

**The Need for Fundamental Change in Security Cooperation in the Region**

What is the rationale for establishing a multilateral security cooperation regime in Northeast Asia? Multilateral security cooperation can be defined as an official and unofficial process in which multiple nations participate in coordinating their interrelated interests, at least in the domain of national security. Many of the current security issues lie beyond the capacity of any one country. Therefore, national security includes “common security” defined as the idea that no country can obtain security simply by taking unilateral decisions about its own military forces but through cooperative undertakings (Kaldor 1985). “Cooperative security” refers to a process whereby countries with common interests work jointly through agreed mechanisms to reduce tensions and suspicion, resolve or mitigate disputes, build confidence, enhance economic development prospects, and maintain stability in their regions (Moodie 2000, 1–5). Multilateralism is an institutional form to coordinate international relations among three or more countries in accordance with generalized rules. In that sense, multilateral security cooperation connoting common security and cooperative security is appropriate in the region where the strategic competition between the United States and China is unfolding.

Then what would be required to bring a multilateral security regime into this region? First, it would help to overcome the negative impact of the US-China strategic competition and regional conflicts. The current competition could lead to an unstable balance that can be upset at any time. Nonetheless, it seems that an even balance among powers in the region is being narrowly maintained. Thus, it is high time that a cooperative tool is put to use in the region, with a view to alleviating mutual distrust and suspicion, reducing the incentives for a military buildup and the resulting security dilemma, and transforming the unstable struggle for power into a more predictable competitive relationship. Second, drawing upon the fact that the phenomenon of power transition (Organski 1958) is observable in the region, the odds are higher than ever before that nationalism as a political ideology will be activated as the ideological foundation of diplomatic security policy among contending states. Under these circumstances, the multilateral security regime can play a role as a buffer to minimize side effects derived from geographical competition based upon nationalism. Third, regional states’ pursuit of sustainable economic growth paradoxically means a growing competition to attain resources to support their growth and their security, which results in expanding their power militarily, geographically, and economically and ends up aggravating confrontation and conflicts. An institutionalized system of crisis management can harmonize their interests and institutionally prevent the confrontation and conflicts from deteriorating. Fourth, the establishment of a multilateral security regime in the region can work as a catalyst that has a positive

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5According to Organski (1958), an even distribution of political, economic, and military capabilities between contending groups of states is likely to increase the probability of war; peace is preserved best when there is an imbalance of national capabilities between disadvantaged and advantaged nations. Thus, historically, when a nation achieves hegemonic power and then is challenged by a great power, this leads to a war which has created a transition between the two powers.
influence on the interaction among regional states lying in the postwar balance representing as alliance-oriented or state-centric system of international relations. This work could erode traditional notions of sovereignty and alter the legitimate purposes for the state power to mitigate conflictive tendencies of the states (Walt 1998, 41). Lastly, considering the geographical location of the Korean Peninsula, which historically a victim of the great-power politics (Cronin 2019a, 12), and still is a place where the national interests of four major regional players (the United States, China, Japan, and Russia) often collide, a multilateral security regime is a prerequisite for establishing permanent peace on the peninsula and completing unification (Park and Kim 2018, 73–78). Especially in the current context, when the door to the negotiation of the denuclearization of North Korea has been opened – even though the negotiation occasionally reaches a stalemate, casting doubts on both the US-North Korea and the two Koreas bilateral diplomacy – and the military tension between the South and North has eased, at least according to official statements, a multilateral security regime can help facilitate and guarantee these activities.

What Is Going On, and What are the Problems of Security Cooperation in the Region?

Northeast Asia is now facing an intensified military and nonmilitary imbalance that is manifested in a new Cold War structure6 that goes beyond trade issues to encompass security, international norms and rules, and high-tech hegemony between the United States and China (Oba 2018), and has strengthened nationalistic confrontation. These developments are coming in the wake of extended US-China trade discord, military and diplomatic tension in the East and South China Seas, and the Sino-Japanese dispute over territorial sovereignty. The military buildup – particularly in the maritime arena – strengthening the US alliances, and competition to gain military superiority in the region have paradoxically made multilateral security cooperation more likely.

The structure of power distribution amid antagonism (Ryoo 2003, 101–102) between China and the US-Japan alliance is changing owing to the expansion of China’s economic and military capability, which has increased China’s influence in the region. In the meantime, as the need to solve the problems of Northeast Asia increases for the international community, South Korea has the opportunity to play a strategic role as a bridge or a mediator to make peace in the region.

But, taking a close look at the foundation of the region, we can see the split between economic interdependence and security cooperation. Although economic interdependence among states in the region continues to deepen, bilateral alliances oriented to the United States are still maintained (Kim 2015). The imbalance between economic cooperation and

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6The deepening confrontation between the United States, the dominant power, and China, the challenger, to expand their spheres of influence may be starting a new Cold War. The new Cold War tears apart a multilayered and multilateral regional architecture of the Asia-pacific, built during the era of liberal internationalism after the Cold War. While the Cold War was based upon antagonism between the United States and the Soviet Union, the work of new Cold War is based upon economic and social interdependent networks of regional states that are well aware of the danger of an excessive dependence on one camp. And the greatest difference is the absence of a strong ideological element. Any norms and values that provide the foundation for a new world order for other countries to follow are not seen. Thus, the new Cold War involves an even more complicated structure of conflict and cooperation, division and unity than the last one (Oba 2018).
security cooperation has delayed institutionalization of regional cooperation that can solve the regional conflicts.

The advancement of North Korea’s nuclear capability dramatically changes the structure of economic benefits and security cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and China. After the decision-making to deploy the missile defense system known as THAAD – for “Terminal High Altitude Area Defense” – in South Korea in June 2016 by the South Korea-US alliance, China has regarded the deployment as part of a US containment policy against China’s rise, and, on the pretext of dealing with North Korea’s missile threats, has imposed an economic retaliation on South Korea (Cho 2019, 5, 137). It is a typical case that illustrates the diminishment of the strategic space that South Korea has enjoyed between the United States and China ever since the Korean War ended in 1953. It has become increasingly difficult for South Korea to navigate a situation in which its national security is dependent on its alliance with the United States while its economy leans on China. This is particularly true because South Korea quite often encounters situations in which its security interests collide with China’s core interests. For instance, China has kept an eye on the potential threats to its national security, such as the possibility of deployment of intermediate-range ballistic missiles in South Korea by the United States since the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in August 2019. Also, in October 2017, South Korea promised not to deploy additional THAAD batteries, taking into consideration China’s deep concern that they would do harm to China’s national interest.

As for the South Korea-US alliance and the relationship with North Korea, seeking North Korea’s denuclearization in return for security guarantees and assurances to Pyongyang may increase uncertainty in that any consensus on the elements of such an agreement has yet to be reached among states in the region. In addition, if the differences with regard to how the United States and South Korea perceive China’s threats manifest themselves and if the trade tension between South Korea and Japan is not effectively reduced, South Korea could be in an awkward situation. It may be excluded from discussions of regional strategic cohesion, and yet it may exacerbate antagonism between the United States and China in the process of establishing a peace regime that will be fundamental to its security and prosperity on the peninsula and in the region after the denuclearization.

The regional security complex in Northeast Asia is immature when compared with the European Union. Even if the existing regional cooperation arrangements such as the ASEAN\textsuperscript{7} Regional Forum, East Asia Summit (EAS), and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) have already made some strides in terms of developing the habits of dialogue among regional powers (Chung 2005), they are far behind in solving the complex security problems. No other organization than APEC would not be expected to devote a great deal of time to security issues. If we see the advent of EU as the result of a mature regional security complex that has accomplished regional integrity, cooperation, and friendship among units, the regional security complex in Northeast Asia has shown a limitation in dealing with military problems and thus has not yet reached the stage of building a security regime (Park and Kim 2018, 79).

A relevant example is the Helsinki Final Act, the culmination of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which was established to discuss improvement of dialogue between the East and West and protection of human rights during the Cold War.

\textsuperscript{7}ASEAN stands for “Association of Southeast Asian Nations.”
Signed in the Finnish capital on 1 August 1975, by thirty-five countries – including the United States, Canada, and almost all European countries – “it involved political and moral commitments aimed at lessening tensions and opening further the lines of communication between peoples of East and West” (US Department of State Bulletin 1975). It produced a continuous and stable norm of security cooperation, and standardized multilateral cooperation dealing with common security issues. It also promulgated the Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States in CSCE, consisting of 10 principles called Helsinki Decalogue, a basic obligation for signatory nations to undertake to respect and to practice in their mutual relations. It included sovereign equality, refraining from the threat or use of force, inviolability of frontiers, peaceful settlement of disputes, and non-intervention in internal affairs. At the same time, the declaration stipulated specific measures for the parties to take. The Helsinki Final Act ultimately came to play a significant role in establishing a peace regime in Europe (Lee 2018, 112). It laid the groundwork for the later Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the world’s largest security-oriented intergovernmental organization. It is now playing an active role as a normative and practical organization pursuing objectives such as promotion of democracy, improvement of human rights, preventing disputes, and arms control in Europe. The spirit of the Helsinki process seemed to serve as a guide for the participants in the transitory situation of East European socialist countries in the 1990s and helped make them part of a peaceful European regime. They came to realize empirically that they could enjoy their common interests by abiding by the rules of the Final Act and putting them into practice (Lee 2018, 112–119).

One might reasonably ask why Northeast Asia has yet to develop this sort of security regime. The region has shown a strong concentration of military power, relatively weak regional identity, and insufficient accumulation of friendly experience among states in the region. What is worse, two different sub-complexes of the region are being formed again. The continuing tension between the one sub-complex (South Korea, the United States, and Japan) and the other (North Korea, China, and Russia) hinders the maturation of the regional security regime. In addition, in increasing competition and interdependence with the economies of neighboring countries, trade conflicts between competing countries are inevitable (Park and Kim 2018, 73–81). Later on, these economic conflicts stemming from non-economic security interests have had a negative effect on their relationship, resulting in the high possibility of a vicious circle.

Two Most Important Variables: End State of “Destined for War” and “Unnecessary War”

Two different kinds of wars confronting the region are presumably the most important variables. One is a war for which countries are “destined” (Allison 2017)\(^8\), and the other is an “unnecessary war” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2003)\(^9\).

\(^8\)Graham Allison looks into the future of US-China relations in *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* The book is specifically based on Thucydides’s observation that it was the rise of Athens and the fear in Sparta that made war inevitable. Allison has popularized the phrase “Thucydides’s Trap” to describe the dangerous historical dynamic that develops when a rising power threatens to displace an established ruling power.

\(^9\)In *An Unnecessary War*, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt criticized the US campaign to wage war against Iraq, arguing that it was about to be carried out on a flimsy foundation. A month before the war broke out, they asserted that even if such a war went well, it would still have been unnecessary.
Drawing upon the consensus that the United States is currently the only global superpower and China is the likeliest challenger in the future, it is not an overestimation to say that US-China relations will shape the character of Northeast Asia. If US-China relations become beset with geographical conflicts, an arms race, and a zero-sum rivalry, peace and stability in the region will be in jeopardy. But if the two countries succeed in finding a good way to recognize their differences and to cooperate in economic, political, and security arenas, the prospects for peace and stability in Northeast Asia will brighten (Ikenberry 2013, 53).

It is not clear how the US-China relationship will unfold. The competition between the two countries may lead to a severe confrontation or China may seek to integrate itself into the US-led unipolar international order. Undoubtedly, economic interdependence, norms and institutions, diplomacy, and mutual vulnerabilities of nuclear strikes can shape and constrain conflicts. China probably will continue to play a role as a responsible stakeholder and provider of strategic reassurance in the region for the foreseeable future. But China does not seem to have many options to the competition since the prevailing global liberal order creates the conditions for the rise of China and will continuously influence and at the same time constrains China’s rise (Ikenberry 2013, 54–55).

The United States engaged in two world wars and the Cold War in which it fought for ideology and international hegemony and emerged victorious. With that history, one can expect that the United States will not easily compromise in a “destined” war against China as long as it fears the rise of China and feels China may undermine the existing order, irrespective of whether China has any intentions, capacities, or incentives to do so. Ultimately, geopolitical turbulence is inevitable during the power struggle in the region.

When it comes to an “unnecessary war,” for the first time since the end of the Korean War, internal and external forces are converging on the Korean Peninsula with profound implications for regional security and stability (Lee and Botto 2019, 67).

First, South Korean President Moon Jae In keeps trying to pursue political and economic integration between the two Koreas, an effort that could result in dramatic changes in the region. Nevertheless, at the very beginning of 2020, North Korea declared that it would introduce a new strategic weapon in the near future and would come back to the table for a dialogue on denuclearization only after the United States abandoned hostile policies on North Korea. Also, US President Donald Trump still apparently trusts North Korean leader Kim Jong Un’s “goodwill” to denuclearize even after leaving Hanoi empty-handed in February 2019 and acknowledging North Korea’s provocative firing of a series of projectiles including submarine-launched ballistic missiles. But there is a still military option on the table; Kim Jong Un will not easily give up the nuclear program until he feels completely secure. One lesson that can be drawn from the history of Eastern European countries such as Poland, East Germany, and Romania in 1989 is that the more repressive the regime, the more sudden the collapse (Lee and Botto 2019, 68). The pressure is accumulating within North Korea.

Second, regardless of President Trump’s willingness to make a so-called “big deal” with Chairman Kim in a top-down approach to the negotiation, US strategic leverage in the region could be diminishing as the stalemate of the negotiations expectedly takes a long time. This is because North Korea increasingly depends heavily on China under growing isolation from international sanctions (USIP 2019). Furthermore, the new geographical balance of power and a transitional security environment in the region
require that South Korea and the United States rethink the value, objective, and level of their robust alliance.

**Key Actors’ Perceptions of and Interests in a Multilateral Security Framework**

One way to compare the actors in Northeast Asia is to assess their attitudes toward multilateral security frameworks. The United States generally prefers bilateral alliances (Chung 2005, 255). Ironclad bilateral alliances in Northeast Asia are the foundation of US regional policy and are critical to reinforcing a postwar system that is under siege by revisionist powers. The US alliances with South Korea and Japan remain the best means to achieve their common ends; among them are increasing contributions to a rules-based order and deterring North Korea’s persistent threats and China’s ambitious bid for regional hegemony. These alliances provide the United States with a unique advantage not enjoyed by a rising China, especially during an era in which the strategic center of gravity is shifting to Asia (Cronin 2019b, 6–7). The United States usually considers a multilateral cooperation mechanism in the region to be supplementary rather than essential, even in cases that need a cooperative approach to manage regional issues, such as North Korea’s denuclearization. The United States is concerned that multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia might hinder traditional bilateral relations and would lead to an expansion of China and Russia’s influence on the region. However, the United States is actively involved in the Indo-Pacific strategy, a quadrilateral regional security dialogue with Japan, Australia, and India, in which the United States defines China as a revisionist power, Russia as a revitalized malign actor, and North Korea as a rogue state (US DoD 2019). And the United States are taking a cautious look at the rocky relationship between Japan and South Korea, which may jeopardize US vital interests in the Indo-Pacific region. All in all, the United States perceives a multilateral mechanism as having a limited role in handling regional issues and as a complementary tool for engagement in the region. As long as the multilateral mechanism is concerned, the United States preferred only to focus on having China and Russia support UN led sanctions against North Korea.

China is inherently concerned that the multilateral framework might function as a platform for China-bashing (Chung 2005, 258). But China also believes that the framework could reduce regional suspicion of China’s hegemony, deter Japan’s military buildup, and lessen US military deployment and the chances of US intervention in the region. Ultimately, the framework not only contributes to China’s sustainable economic growth and serves as a forum for enhancing China’s defense strategy, but also provides China with a better position to join the denuclearization process of North Korea as a stakeholder.

Japan is worried about the possibility that the multilateral framework would harm the US-Japan alliance (Chung 2005, 259). But Tokyo also thinks the framework may dilute

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10Revisionists are those states that seek to change the distribution of goods (territory, status, markets, expansion of ideology, and the creation or change of international law and institutions), whereas status-quo seekers are those states that seek to maintain the goods in the current international system. Rising countries are likely to adopt revisionist goals when they face domestic and international pressures to do so (Davidson 2006, 1–14). China, North Korea, Iran, and other nations dissatisfied with their position in the international system are regarded as revisionist states.
a negative perception of Japan’s effort to strengthen its security role in the region and may help contain China’s emergence as a military superpower. At the same time, a multilateral framework is considered likely to help prevent the proliferation of WMD, and, in the end, to increase Japan’s security role in the region.

Russia has been the strongest advocate for the multilateral approach (Chung 2005, 260). Moscow believes that such an approach will help Russia create a favorable environment for its economy. The Russians see the multilateral cooperation mechanism as being a particularly useful tool in actualizing President Vladimir Putin’s policy toward Far East Asia and in helping to cut defense expenditures. Russia is historically concerned about Japan’s threats to Russia’s security since it has had the bitter experience of a war against Japan during 1904–1905 and still has a territorial dispute problem with Japan. And Russia is trying to find a channel to influence North Korea’s denuclearization process through a multilateral mechanism.

During the Cold War era, North Korea was reluctant to participate in regional multilateral security cooperation (Chung 2005, 261). More recently, however, it has come to seek security cooperation and assurances. This is because North Korea wants to receive diplomatic recognition to prevent isolation by collective pressures that would come from multilateral mechanisms and tries to circumvent international sanctions under the multilateral security complex. In the long run, North Korea seems to believe that multilateral security cooperation will help maintain the regime by helping to overcome the current economic hardship resulting from the sanctions. In the short run, multilateral security cooperation will presumably help North Korea to have a better win-set to make a deal with the United States in the denuclearization negotiation.

South Korea has made consistent efforts to establish a multilateral security architecture in the region on the basis of the South Korea-US alliance. It has pursued a policy of minilateral security cooperation,\(^{11}\) including the South Korea-US-Japan cooperation system and the South Korea-Japan-China trilateral summit. In addition, South Korea’s diplomatic balancing between the United States and China, its growing unease with the ironclad alliance with the United States in terms of national security, and the importance of its geoeconomic, political, and strategic location contribute to facilitating the establishment of a Northeast Asia multilateral security cooperation system (Chung 2005, 261). South Korea thinks that the multilateral security cooperation system can reduce tensions on the peninsula and create a favorable environment to turn the 1953 armistice, which ended hostilities in the Korean War, into a peace regime. Furthermore, Seoul thinks that the existence of such a system could induce North Korea to become a responsible regional member, be innovative and open, and contribute to Korean unification.

**Then, Who Can Lead to Shape the Regional Security Framework?**

The two Koreas could take the lead in shaping the regional security framework, given that President Moon and Chairman Kim announced in the Panmunjeom Declaration on 27 April 2018, that “South and North Korea will actively cooperate to establish a permanent

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11.Minilateralism, a form of multilateralism, describes diplomacy that is performed by a limited number of participants and deals with specifically defined subjects. It is usually to supplement or complement the activities of international organizations in tackling subjects deemed too complicated to be addressed appropriately at the multilateral level (Moret 2016).
and solid peace regime on the Korean Peninsula” (Inter-Korea Summit Preparation Committee 2018). Chairman Kim also resolved to begin the process for establishing a peace regime via multilateral negotiations in his 2019 New Year Address.

Other alignments are possible – the two Koreas and the United States, or the two Koreas and their respective allies during the war, the United States and China. With regard to the second possibility, it is worth noting that on 12 October 2000, the United States and North Korea issued a joint communiqué. In that document, the two sides agreed to a variety of available means, including four-party talks, to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula and to formally end the Korean War by replacing the 1953 armistice agreement with a permanent peace arrangement. Furthermore, in the Panmunjeom Declaration, South and North Korea agreed to actively pursue trilateral meetings involving the two Koreas and the United States, or quadrilateral meetings involving the two Koreas, the United States, and China, with a view to declaring an end to the war, turning the armistice into a peace treaty, and establishing a permanent and solid peace regime. In the joint statement of President Trump and Chairman Kim at the Singapore summit on 12 June 2018, the two sides agreed to make a joint effort to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the peninsula.

Thirdly, “US-South Korea Coleadership” could be taken into consideration (Chung 2005, 316). US President Bill Clinton and South Korean President Kim Young Sam proposed the four-party talks in April 1996 as a way to overcome North Korea’s unwillingness to negotiate directly with the South. It has long been reluctant to meet face to face with the South to improve the North-South bilateral relationship, even after it succeeded in resuming regular meetings with the United States for the denuclearization negotiations in early April 2018.

Several types of ongoing minilateral talks provide useful examples of possible approaches. These include South Korea-US-Japan trilateral military cooperation, South Korea-US-China strategic dialogue, and the South Korea-Japan-China trilateral summits. A particularly useful precedent is the third example of talks among them in that minilateral approaches are informal and flexible. This appeals to those who are skeptical about multilateralism’s traditional focus on norm adherence and community-building (Tow 2018). The South Korea-Japan-China trilateral summit began as a side meeting within the ASEAN+3 summit in 1999 and developed into a trilateral summit in 2008. Since then, the three countries have taken turns holding the summits. In 2010, the three countries agreed to establish a trilateral secretariat in Seoul and in 2018 adopted a joint statement committing themselves to efforts to contribute to a comprehensive resolution of regional peace and security issues.

Last but not least among the potentially instructive past approaches is that of the six-party talks, a series of multilateral negotiations attended by China, South and North Korea, the United States, Japan, and Russia from 2003 to 2009 to dismantle North Korea’s nuclear-weapon program in return for security assurances, energy assistance, and the normalization of relations with the United States. But, through six rounds of negotiations, the talk failed to produce progress. In the joint statement after the completion of the fourth round on 19 September 2005, the six parties committed themselves to joint efforts for lasting peace

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12 This was a time when CIA Director Mike Pompeo for the first time secretly flew to North Korea to meet with Kim Jong Un on March 31–1 April 2018.
and stability in Northeast Asia; they promised to negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at an appropriate separate forum and agreed to explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation in the region. However, on 5 April 2009, North Korea attempted to launch a satellite despite repeated warnings from the United States, South Korea, and Japan that perceived it as a technology test for an intercontinental ballistic missile. On 13 April 2009, the United Nations Security Council issued a presidential statement condemning the launch as a violation of Security Council Resolution 1718. The next day, the six-party talks collapsed as North Korea withdrew from the talks (Arms Control Association 2018). More than a decade passed until the idea of six-party talks reappeared on a summit level. During the North Korea-Russia summit on 25 April 2019, President Putin mentioned six-party talks as a way to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue (President of Russia 2019). But, three days later, John Bolton, the US national security advisor, retorted that the six-party talks were not the US preferred method. He explained that this approach had failed in the past but added that “that does not mean we don’t consult other countries” (Hwang and Kim 2019). There is a consensus among South Korea, Japan, and the United States that the six-party talks represent a fruitless and time-consuming approach. A particular complaint by the United States is that the talks only provide China and Russia with room to intervene in the North Korean nuclear issue and that such an intervention will ruin the ongoing intensified US-North Korea bilateral negotiation. On the other hand, there is a concern even by South Korea that it is quite difficult to find a plausible alternative to the six-party talks to deal with the wickedly complex security problems in the region in that the US-North Korea bilateral negotiation have repeatedly reached a stalemate.

A Proposal for A Northeast Asia Security Framework

Historically, while South Korea, Japan, and Russia have been in principle in favor of a multilateral security framework in Northeast Asia, the United States, China, and North Korea have been less enthusiastic about the idea (Chung 2005, 262). Nonetheless, in reality because of path dependency, South Korea and Japan have reason to prefer a bilateral alliance with the United States. However, the recent experience of the United States and China with North Korea issues has provided an argument for the value of multilateral security.

Widely divergent priorities among the regional actors regarding negotiations on issues dealing with the Korean Peninsula will complicate or even undermine South Korean and US strategy and end up creating a gap between those two countries that China is willing to exploit (USIP 2019). Thus, the United States should actively begin multilateral conversations with North Korea, South Korea, and China, and later on with Japan and Russia, on a peace regime for the peninsula. More-dynamic multilateral security cooperation activities, such as raising minilateral dialogues to the summit level and establishing a mini-lateral working group for that purpose, are required to actually form a security regime. That is true whether the goal is to create a new regime to effectively deal with regional and transnational issues or to complement and facilitate the existing mechanisms.

Considering that the US-China relationship is a decisive factor in creating a regional security framework and in achieving North Korea’s denuclearization, the most desirable scenario is that the United States and China at last resolve their strategic conflicts to have an opportunity to institutionalize multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia. But
the antagonism between the Trump administration, which categorizes China as a strategic competitor, and President Xi Jinping, who will never give up China’s core interests, will not disappear, probably until the United States is satisfied with a regional order in its favor. In that case, the US-oriented regional order will be more solid than before. Nevertheless, in the short term, China will be more actively engaged in securing diplomatic, economic, and military agreements seeking security assurances for North Korea. This will create a new Cold War frontier, pitting the South Korea-US-Japan camp against the North Korea-China-Russia camp. The chasm between the two camps will be very wide.

The greater the tension and conflict are, the more a multilateral order is needed. Thus it is urgent to restrain the tendency of countries to pursue what they perceive as their national interests in the region, a tendency that could manifest itself in military and expansionistic moves in regional policies. Such policies actually are likely to end up hurting each country’s national interests as well as the region’s common interests. Instead, the relevant countries should work to prevent regional disputes from taking place by establishing a peace and security cooperation framework in Northeast Asia, based on the experience of multilateral economic cooperation in the region through institutions such as APEC.

Given the various interests at stake, starting the conversation early to have a common understanding and working toward a consensus in advance of formal discussions will be helpful in reaching a sustainable outcome (USIP 2019). A key issue is whether the goal is to complement the existing security order or to create a new one. Once the regional actors determine that there is a broad consensus among them that a multilateral security cooperation arrangement needs to be institutionalized, the arrangement should focus on establishing a framework for mutual trust, reconciliation, peace, stability and co-prosperity by implementing feasible options relating to common security issues (Chung 2005, 345).

In order to do that, they should begin by identifying issues relating to regional security cooperation. It could be a good trial to start by addressing some nonmilitary emerging security issues – fine dust pollution, maritime pollution, epidemics, etc. – and then gradually to move to conventional security issues. After that, the countries need to determine how to proceed in developing regional security cooperation and how to measure progress. Security cooperation needs to be implemented step by step, taking the feasibility and the impact into consideration (Chung 2005, 345). Establishing a comprehensive regime as an immediate goal could be too risky to maintain peace in the peninsula and stability in the region, because pushing the countries too hard to the comprehensive regime would only bring out an inertial force directed outwards from the regional security complex, which is still weak and immature. To begin with a small but specific approach based upon existing architectures such as EAS or South Korea-Japan-China summit is a good option. That would allow the countries to utilize existing resources rather than rush to build a new institution. Promoting a favorable environment to build confidence among regional countries will be a good start, which could then be followed by steps that enlarge the realistic cooperation. After that, these efforts could bear fruit to establish enduring institutions. For instance, given that, as of 1 January 2020, North Korea would not officially participate in any further negotiations on denuclearization without complete and irreversible security assurances, it would be a good start to discuss how and how much security assurances the regional states want in the course of North Korea denuclearization dialogue. This is a desirable sequence of actions that could lead to the success of the overall negotiation process and institutionalization of the negotiation.
This idea can be realized by holding a regional summit first. The South Korea-Japan-China trilateral summit could be developed into a multilateral regime in a way to invite the other countries to the annual summit one after another, hopefully North Korean leader Kim Jong Un first. Annual summits need to be established to provide guidance and policies related to resolving transnational security issues. Once the summits of the regional countries are included within a framework, they probably will have a better chance to generate a more predictable, peaceful, and liberal international order in the region.

Considering that the US-oriented alliances dominate in Northeast Asia for the time being, it could be argued, especially from the realist point of view, that creating a multilateral security framework in the region is not feasible at this moment. However, in this region, at this time of transition, no more war should be allowed. And it is the right time to open a window of opportunity to establish the basis of a multilateral security framework. Thus we have to make every effort to establish the framework in the region as a multiple layered security architecture beyond the current alliances, and in the end, to come true a permanent regional peace regime.

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Notes on Contributor

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