

CONSTRUCTING MULTILATERALISM IN AN ANTI-REGION: FROM SIX PARTY TALKS TO A REGIONAL SECURITY FRAMEWORK IN NORTHEAST ASIA?

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“Realize the Commonwealth of Europe for a single day,
and you may be sure it will last for ever.”

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau,
“Judgement on the Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s
Project for Perpetual Peace,” ca. 1754

Does multilateralism have a future in Northeast Asia, or is it an empty dream that tantalizes but inevitably disappoints? Is it like the Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s eighteenth-century conception of a European federation: highly desirable in theory but, at least in its time, unachievable in practice?

Past thinking about these questions has produced skepticism and outright cynicism on the one hand, and occasional bursts of high hopes and brimming optimism on the other. In his 2000 survey of two decades of multilateral proposals and activities in Northeast Asia, Gilbert Rozman concludes that they have failed. His view corresponds with the accumulated academic wisdom. On the ultimate realist playing field of blood and guts, competing nationalisms, unresolved disputes, historical ghosts, and intractable security problems, even modest institutional aspirations seem misplaced, naïve, and bordering on fantastic.

The title of this essay may thus seem whimsical or mischievous, in that it builds a discussion of multilateral futures in Northeast Asia on a fledgling multi-country process that still has limited prospects of success and is fraught with uncertainty. The prospects for continuation of the Six Party talks (6PT) look brighter after the February 2007 agreement in Beijing, but the obstacles ahead remain huge. And only a few of their proponents see them as anything more than an effort to deal with the very immediate problem of the North Korean nuclear weapons program.

Since the inception of the 6PT, several informed commentators and a few officials have suggested that the 6PT may be the institutional embryo for a new security and economic order. “If successful,” argued Young-jin Choi, a senior Korean diplomat, the talks “have a great potential to serve in the future as a broader multilateral security arrangement for Northeast Asia.”¹ South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun has recently stated that the 6PT “should evolve into a multilateral consultative body for peace and security cooperation in Northeast Asia” and serve as “a permanent multilateral security cooperation entity devoted to controlling armaments and mediating disputes in the region Moreover, the security cooperation body may well develop into a consultative entity encompassing economic, diplomatic, environmental and other diverse issues.”² And Francis Fukuyama has exhorted Washington to take the lead in creating a “visionary institutional framework for the region,” in which the 6PT would be converted into a “permanent five-power organization that would meet regularly to discuss various security issues in the region, beyond the North Korean nuclear threat.”³

It is thus an interesting moment to revisit the foundations and prospects of multilateral cooperation in a seemingly alien setting. To do so, I look first at the history and context of past initiatives, with special emphasis on the abiding obstacles that have hindered their success. Second, I try to clarify the terms *multilateralism* and *multilateral*, to distinguish two different conceptions that help define the range of current thinking in Northeast Asia. Third, I consider leadership issues. Finally, I outline a possible route to deepen multilateralism *in*, and mainly *beyond*, Northeast Asia.

My basic argument is that while there remain huge obstacles to deeper cooperation in Northeast Asia, there are positive prospects. These include (a) a narrow form of problem-specific multilateralism on a regional level; and (b) more elaborate multilateral institution-building that involves the principal countries of Northeast Asia in broader regional frameworks, especially those built on an East Asian basis.

The Idea of Northeast Asia as a Region

So far as multilateralism and regionalism intertwine, it is difficult to think of an area of such size and significance that is more bereft of multilateral institutions. This is immediately apparent if we compare the level of institutional development in Northeast Asia to the Americas, Africa, and the Middle East, much less to Europe. Even within Asia, Northeast Asia operates at a lower base than Southeast Asia, the broader Asia-Pacific, or even South Asia and Central Asia. As Lowell Dittmer observes, “many of the factors normally constitutive of a ‘region’ are in scant supply.”⁴ Almost all the English-language assessments come to the same conclusion.⁵

It is difficult to make the case in geographic terms for an area that lacks common or defining topographic boundaries, similar climate patterns, or an integrated transportation infrastructure. In terms of identity, differences heavily outweigh similarities. Culturally, parts of Northeast Asia have a common Confucian heritage, but others do not. There is no unifying religion, language, consciousness, or sense of shared destiny. Perversely, most of the definitions of Northeast Asia include the United States, clearly not a part of Asia, but so deeply involved in economic and security terms that it is not just the key external player but, to many, an integral part of the region.

Peter Hayes goes further and refers to Northeast Asia as an “anti-region,” observing that, “the national political cultures of Northeast Asia largely define themselves by virtue of their differences and in relation to their opposition against their neighbors.”⁶ Nevertheless, the concept of Northeast Asia is in common usage, and there is a general consensus that it covers an area that includes China, Japan, the two Koreas, the Russian Far East, and arguably Mongolia, Taiwan, and the United States. In what ways can this configuration of entities be conceived of as a region?

One route is to look at Northeast Asia as a security complex where China, Japan, Russia, and the United States intersect, frequently in conflict over the Korean peninsula. Peter Van Ness argues that, “the history of Northeast Asia shows how necessary it is to build new security institutions in the region” but also portrays the region as “the cockpit of battles,” adding that “the geopolitics of this area . . . has been one of the most volatile in the world. For more than one hundred years, the countries of the region have been in conflict with each other.”⁷ There is a high level of militarization and rising defense spending. Long-term competition and rivalry define the region. Despite the remote prospects of war among the major powers, the vexing issues of divided countries and historical legacies remain unresolved, and there is nothing more than a balance of power to preserve the peace.⁸

Another route is to look at Northeast Asia through the lens of social and economic interactions and new commercial possibilities. The rise of bilateral trade and investment in the past two decades among the region’s maritime countries has been striking, especially between China and Japan, Japan and Korea, and China and Korea, all now outward-looking, global-trading nations. Turning to continental Northeast Asia (principally where Dongbei, the Russian Far East and Mongolia connect), there have been several attempts in the past fifteen years to create cross-border trade zones and development areas. On the drawing board are proposals for several large-scale infrastructure projects related to rail and road transportation; oil and gas pipelines connecting Siberia to energy-thirsty China, Japan, and South Korea; and power lines and electrical grids connecting producers and consumers across the region.

In short, Northeast Asia can be seen as a region in the very specific sense of shared geopolitical problems and economic aspirations.

Building Regionalism

Despite the skepticism and obstacles, hope springs eternal in the multilateralist breast, including in Northeast Asia. There have been dozens of proposals and projects in the past twenty years to build various forms of multilateral institutions to address the region's political, security, economic, and development challenges. They have fallen into three categories.

The first category of proposal seeks to create a regional security dialogue structure. This began with Gorbachev's proposal in 1986, and has subsequently included proposals by four South Korean Presidents and a host of academics. A variety of nongovernmental Track 2 dialogues and research programs have taken place, chief among them the North Pacific Cooperative Security Dialogue (or NPCSD, 1990–93),⁹ the North Pacific Forum in Hokkaido (1990 to present), the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (1993 to present), the North Pacific Working Group of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) and new study group on Northeast Asia (1995 to present), and the intermittent meetings organized by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy. Subregional multilateral consultations began in the mid-1990s, chief among them the Trilateral Coordinating Group. It is hard to know whether to classify the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) as an economic or a security institution. But until its "suspension" in late 2003 and subsequent dissolution, for almost a decade KEDO was the most important regionally centered, multilateral institution for addressing Northeast Asian security issues. The 6PT is the latest, and certainly the most ambitious, attempt to create an inclusive multilateral forum to address at least one security issue, and possibly more, on an explicitly regional basis.

The second category of multilateral proposal is the cluster of efforts in the 1990s to build multilateral processes to address environmental issues. These include, at the intergovernmental level, the Northeast Asian Conference on Environmental Cooperation, the Northeast Asian Sub-Regional Program of Environmental Cooperation, and the Northwest Pacific Action Program. There have also been a variety of expert and nongovernmental organization (NGO) meetings, such as the Atmospheric Action Network East Asia. Lee Shin-wha's examination of these processes concludes that "the level of environmental cooperation in Northeast Asia is still in its infancy" and "the role of transnational NGOs in environmental cooperation in Northeast Asia is still weak."¹⁰ The disjuncture between regional needs and regional capacity for constructing cooperative mechanisms is glaring, and is changing only very slowly, even as there are sustained attempts to build regional networks on a distinctively Northeast Asian basis.¹¹

Persistent efforts to promote regional economic cooperation constitute the third kind of multilateral project. The biggest and most protracted of these has been the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)–sponsored Tumen River Area Development Program. There have been others, some championed,

for example, by the East-West Center in Honolulu, and others supported by the Economic Research Institute for Northeast Asia (ERINA) in Niigata, Japan, to bring together economists, businesspeople, and officials from central and local governments to chart new areas of cooperation.

Advocates of Northeast Asian regionalism face a recurring conundrum. In a region where the security situation remains turbulent, it makes sense to build the foundations of cooperation on economic and environmental issues. However, the abiding presence of political and security differences makes this functional cooperation tortuous. In the context of the North Korean nuclear program, the dilemma is even more acute, because significant investment by the United States and Japan is being withheld, and sanctions are being applied, pending a solution to the nuclear crisis. Those who advocate waiting for a solution to the political security problem before addressing the functional issues face a long wait. And those who advocate pushing ahead on the economic and environmental fronts as a way to loosen the security knot face severe constraints and frustration.

Enter the Six Party Talks

It is in this context, of the search for an institution to break the vicious cycle of Northeast Asian international relations, that the 6PT loom so large. They represent an historic attempt to build an explicitly multinational, track one, Northeast Asian forum to address an immediate crisis without recourse to coercive diplomacy or military action. They are the embodiment of a “2 + 4” logic, which involves the two Koreas meeting jointly with the four major powers (China, Japan, Russia, and the United States). While there have been several other proposals for alternative configurations that add other states and international organizations to the mix, or that exclude Japan and Russia, the “2 + 4” formula dates back to Roh Tae Woo’s address to the UN General Assembly on October 21, 1988, and convenes the states with the most immediate stake in peninsular issues.

The immediate logic is explicitly realist in character. Bring together the key states that have the resources to establish a solution. Next, use a multilateral forum to coordinate the various aspects of a package solution. Finally, leverage the multilateral forum to ensure that the commitments that are made are monitored and honored.

Circumstances have never been more fortuitous for the “2 + 4” logic. Despite recurring tensions in Sino-Japanese relations and uncertainties between the United States and China, interactions among the major powers are generally positive. The relationship between North and South Korea, while wobbly, continues to have at least episodic momentum and contacts on multiple levels. The Bush administration remains committed to a multilateral process for dealing with the North Korean nuclear problem. China is playing a constructive and assertive diplomatic role. Trade and investment in Northeast Asia is soaring. Diplomatic interactions are at unprecedented levels on a bilateral basis and in the context of regional processes, including Asia-Pacific Economic

Cooperation (APEC), the Asian Regional Forum (ARF), and the Association of Southeast Asian States Plus Three (ASEAN Plus Three). No less significant is the unprecedented convergence—save for North Korea—around the principles and practices of open markets and economic liberalization. Further, there is a thin but growing layer of nongovernmental processes and networks involving research institutes, universities, and civic associations that now operate across Northeast Asia.

The North Korean missile tests in July 2006 and the nuclear detonation three months later made the 6PT more desirable and more difficult. The breakthroughs in the United States—North Korean bilateral talks in Berlin in January 2007 and then in the 6PT in Beijing a few weeks later—have opened the door to a step-by-step package and for the creation of five working groups to deal with specific issues. In due course all the agreements put into place will demand a complex set of bilateral and multilateral instruments for monitoring, surveillance, verification, and possibly enforcement.¹²

If a negotiated settlement proves impossible, a different form of multilateral cooperation will be necessary for purposes of coercive diplomacy. The active support—or at least tacit consent—of South Korea and the four great powers will be necessary for sanctions or military action to work. Already the Proliferation Security Initiative (a coalition of the willing rather than an inclusive regional approach) and the UN sanctions put into place after the nuclear test have laid the normative and operational foundations for coordinated action against North Korean proliferation.

If all paths to a resolution appear to demand a multilateral dimension, and if great power cooperation is flourishing, has not the journey to a functioning multilateral security framework begun? Could this take the form of a multilateral cooperative security arrangement to address other security and economic issues in Northeast Asia? Or, pursuing Realist logic, could a functioning Six Party framework be the instrument of a new Concert of Powers in the region? The answers depend in large part on what we mean by “multilateral” and “multilateralism,” and what is in the minds of the principal players.

Multilateralism: Two Kinds and Three Forms

Bêtes noire for some and mantras for others, the words *multilateral* and *multilateralism* contain within them a variety of possibilities and perspectives. In its simplest form, *multilateral* refers to interaction among more than two parties, usually defined as states. It can take a variety of institutional forms, and can vary in its level of institutionalization from ad hoc and loose (such as the Proliferation Security Initiative) to more permanent and formal (such as the Five Power Defense Agreement). The basic philosophy of these small *m* approaches to multilateralism is that these processes are conceived as instruments for achieving specific national goals.

Another kind of multilateralism can be classified as the capital *M* approach. Here multilateral institutions are a way to transform—and not just to implement—state policies, through a process of creating generalized principles of conduct that include indivisibility, nondiscrimination, and diffuse responsibility. With capital *M* multilateralism comes a belief in law, rules, transparency, and binding obligations, and often a commitment to strong organizational structures. States may be the most visible actors, but effective multilateralism here involves the support and engagement of multiple layers of nonstate actors, including epistemic communities of experts, NGOs, civil society organizations, business, business associations, and social movements.¹³

In its most robust form, capital *M* multilateralism aims to create new institutions beyond the sovereign nation state. In economic terms, this can be a sequence that moves from a free trade area to a customs union to a monetary union to a single market. In political terms, this can be a sequence that moves from state-based institutions (such as the UN) to regional federations, supra-national authorities, political integration, or even world government.

It is more accurate to conceive of these two views of multilateralism as ideal types at two ends of a spectrum. Most forms of multilateral cooperation and multilateral institutions contain elements of both. In the context of contemporary Northeast Asia, the spectrum of small *m* to large *M* multilateralism in the security realm has three general possibilities:

- Ad hoc cooperation, focused exclusively on the North Korean nuclear issue, either to negotiate and implement the specific terms of a negotiated agreement, or to coordinate measures for coercive diplomacy (the Proliferation Security Initiative) or military action against North Korea.
- The extension of the 6PT into a more permanent process, constructed on the basis of a Concert of Powers, for dealing with other security issues pertaining to the Korean peninsula or the broader region. By a Concert of Powers, I have in mind a small group of major powers regulating relations among themselves in order to promote norms of cooperation, and to prevent conflicts between smaller states from provoking a larger war. The system demands extensive consultation and common norms but does not need a complex institutional or bureaucratic mechanism.¹⁴
- The extension of the 6PT into a functioning, inclusive, cooperative security system in Northeast Asia that seeks to integrate North Korea into the global system and to address a host of traditional and nontraditional security issues in the region.¹⁵

Leadership: Who and How?

Establishing multilateral frameworks depends on three factors: fear, opportunity, and leadership. The dynamics of fear and the presence of opportunity are easy to see in contemporary international relations in Northeast Asia. Where is the leadership?

Considering that the Bush administration has insisted upon a multilateral approach to the nuclear issue, and resisted North Korea's request for bilateral negotiations, it seems logical to look first to Washington. Republican Washington is committed, at best, to the narrowest form of multilateralism. As a general approach, the Bush administration has been skeptical of established multilateral institutions on a regional or global basis, instead preferring ad hoc coalitions where the mission defines the coalition rather than the coalition defines the mission. It has supported multilateral dialogue mechanisms such as APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum. But it has looked to moving on its own or through bilateral arrangements—including both its alliances and new free trade agreements, and ad hoc coalitions—when action is needed.

On capital *M* multilateralism, the Bush administration's antipathy is even stronger, as seen in its criticisms of the UN system, and its opposition to the Kyoto Accords, the International Criminal Court, and the Ottawa Treaty on Landmines. American exceptionalism runs at least as deep as unilateralism, and may be more durable. The antipathy to Multilateralism shows signs of weakening in Bush's second term, as the operation in Iraq becomes longer and more costly. Until September 19, 2005, official statements on the purposes of the 6PT were instrumental, short-term, and focused on the single problem of rolling back North Korea's nuclear weapons program. The September 19 statement at least implied that there might be sufficient common ground among the parties to construct a more permanent security organization in Northeast Asia, along with separate forums for moving beyond the armistice to a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula.

The Bush administration's insistence on a multi-party framework and a comprehensive package—as compared to the Clinton administration's approach of taking the issues one at a time, starting with the nuclear threat—means that a multilateral framework is unavoidable even if consultation and coordination remain minimal. The Bush administration thus seems to be a leading advocate of ad hoc or inadvertent multilateralism. But it takes a leap of imagination to characterize the administration as having the credibility, vision, and capacity to be the kind of driving force behind a new Northeast Asian security organization that Fukuyama and others¹⁶ imagine.

Both Japan and Russia are committed to a multilateral approach and are playing constructive roles in supporting the 6PT. Tokyo's involvement will be critical in dealing with the economic aspects of any package solution, including food, energy, and economic assistance. But Japan cannot lead the process because of unresolved bilateral issues with North Korea, especially the unresolved

problem of the abductees, and a variety of other domestic constraints. Russia can be a spoiler but does not have the resources or influence to play more than a supporting role.

For a host of reasons, South Korea has the deepest and most immediate stake in the outcome of the North Korea issue, and has been the strongest champion of a multilateral framework for dealing with both the immediate nuclear problem and a range of other unresolved problems in the region. South Korea can facilitate, and probably veto, any deal, but does not have a domestic consensus or the influence or legitimacy in Pyongyang's eye to be at the center of the process. In a Concert system, even in the context of a unified Korea, the South would be a second-tier player.

What can we expect of China? It is certainly playing the role of catalyst, broker, and host in the first phase of the process. This role underscores China's growing diplomatic sophistication and authority on the global scene, and especially in East Asia. It also raises interesting questions about China's longer-term vision of regional order, the role of multilateral institutions, and its leadership capacity. Some years ago, a Chinese colleague remarked to me that in Northeast Asia "multilateralism is impossible but inevitable." The issue of the day is whether Beijing is positioned to make multilateralism happen, and what kind of multilateralism it has in mind.

Reading Chinese intentions and strategy is a tricky business. In part, this is because there are no formal statements of long-term strategic intentions, such as the United States' National Security Strategy. An additional reason is the growing pluralization of policymaking and policy discourse in China, which makes it possible to find Chinese adherents to virtually every possible policy outlook. Finally, as Wang Jisi observes, senior Chinese leaders have not yet enunciated a specific strategy for Northeast Asia, preferring instead to address *zhoubian guojia* (surrounding countries), as laid out at the 16th Party Congress. As a continental Asian power, China has overlapping regional concerns in Northeast Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and the Asia-Pacific.¹⁷

Chinese rhetoric supported the general idea of rule-based multilateralism. Some have detected what Jim Lobe called a "curious role reversal from the 1990s, when the administration of U.S. president Bill Clinton defended its engagement with China by citing the importance of integrating the nation into an international system that would constrain any destabilizing behavior . . . Beijing now appears determined to use multilateral forums to restrain the unilateralist impulses of the Bush administration."¹⁸ Michael Vatikiotis and Murray Hiebert add a sharper edge when they argue that "[i]ronically, China was once suspicious of multilateralism when the U.S. championed multi-pronged anti-communist alliances during the Cold War. Today, it's the other way around with Washington favoring bilateral trade and security agreements with those it considers 'friends and allies.'"¹⁹

In a regional context, the shift in China in the past decade—from reluctant and defensive participation to self-confident and assertive leadership—has

been striking. This is evident in APEC, ARF, and the ASEAN Plus Three process. Perhaps most instructive is China's role in creating and leading the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Starting as an informal process in 1996 for confidence-building and border demarcation, it has evolved into a more regularized mechanism that involves five states and deals with a range of nontraditional security issues including terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism, and certain economic and trade issues. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has coordinated joint military exercises, developed a set of guiding principles, and established a formal secretariat housed in Beijing.

Looking specifically at Northeast Asia, while there are no formal statements on Chinese approaches, bilateral relations with other neighbors are obviously an important concern. On a multilateral basis, China had supported, often awkwardly, some of the earlier projects in the 1990s for regional economic development, especially the Tumen River Area Development Program (TRADP). China was not a member of KEDO but supported its activities. In the contemporary period, a 2003 essay in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* tried to decipher an emerging Chinese roadmap that involves creating new forms of cooperation, first with Southeast Asia, and then with "the thornier, more militarized environment in Northeast Asia."²⁰ A natural next step will be championing a **Northeast Asia Free Trade Agreement**. This underscores the view of Wang Yi, then Chinese Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, who is quoted in the article as saying that economic cooperation "will serve as a helpful trial and practice of China's new security concept featuring comprehensive, common and cooperative security."²¹

The 6PT represents China's debut in Northeast Asian multilateralism in security affairs. One Korean analyst sees China using the 6PT not just as a means for seeking a peaceful resolution to the immediate crisis, but also as an instrument for governing its implementation and, further, for transforming the talks into a "multilateral security regime or system" that would reduce the dominance of any single state and could resolve key issues such as Ballistic Missile Defense, Korean unification, and reduction of tensions across the Taiwan Straits. "With ever-rising confidence in multilateral cooperative organization, China may have perceived the viability and feasibility of such measures in solving the current North Korean nuclear standoff."²²

While this is plausible, and while Chinese officials seem engaged in an internal debate on the matter, it is not yet enunciated as a policy. Senior Chinese leaders have avoided commenting on the potential transformation of the 6PT into a more permanent framework in Northeast Asia. In a 2003 survey of Chinese approaches, Fu Ying, then director-general of the Department of Asian Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, observed that "[i]n China's foreign affairs, Asia is definitely a focal point," but she only mentions the ASEAN Plus Three and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as the priority institutional instruments for establishing a "regional cooperation framework" within Asia.²³ It remains unclear whether Chinese officials see "Northeast Asia" and a Northeast Asia

that includes the United States as a permanent member, as the best instrument for dealing with issues beyond the specific context of the Korean peninsula.

Reading North Korea

North Korea (DPRK) is not unique in viewing multilateral cooperation through the lens of immediate national interests. But it is difficult to think of a country more hostile to any form of multilateral institutions and less capable of contributing to them. In the global forums in which it participates, North Korea has taken a narrow and defensive posture. Its leaders hold to a strong, often xenophobic nationalism, take a nineteenth-century view of sovereignty as authority, resist vehemently any interference in domestic affairs, and believe they are frequently targeted by multilateral processes that date back to the UN operation during the Korean War.

Unlike its neighbors, which have embarked on far-reaching economic reforms and are globally integrated, North Korea sees Northeast Asian regionalism exclusively through the prism of security, survival, and geopolitics. Eliot Kang notes that North Korea is “glaringly out of synch with regional trends”²⁴ in an era of market integration and interdependence. It continues to play a zero-sum game, has been unable to redefine its national interests and *juche* identity, and is thus “trapped in a zero-sum security dilemma of its own making.”²⁵

North Korea has been very reluctant to join the 6PT or the Four Party talks that preceded them, and has participated only intermittently in regional track-two dialogues focused on Northeast Asia and the North Pacific. The refrain for the past fifteen years is that conditions are not right in Northeast Asia for cooperation on security matters, nor will they improve until bilateral problems stemming from the Cold War are resolved. In the ARF, the single regional security forum in which North Korea participates, its pattern of participation is defensive and reactive. In Track 2 settings including CSCAP, DPRK representatives may be amiable, but they come with prepared scripts, treat these nongovernmental processes as nothing more than shadow diplomacy, and are incapable of acting in what is frequently labeled “personal and private” capacities.

If learning and socialization are essential agents of multilateralism, North Korea is the multilateralist’s nightmare, though the pattern in regional economic organizations is slightly more complex. In the TRADP, North Korean representatives are reported to have been narrow, short-term, and zero-sum in outlook, but informed and consistent in their articulation of interests and positions.²⁶ In KEDO, the familiar tactics of crisis diplomacy, brinkmanship, and leverage were less frequent and less effective in technical negotiations than in the political ones that preceded them.²⁷

There is no evidence that North Korea is on the learning curve that China entered in the mid-1990s. North Korea’s isolation, its political system, and its limited technical capacity make it incapable of being a creative player in regional or global institutions. Looking to the future, if the 6PT succeed in

producing any kind of package solution, North Korea will become enmeshed in a variety of new diplomatic and technical arrangements. There are already signs that changes in the North Korean economy are moving it closer to the first steps in capacity-building, which may eventually prepare it to participate in the regional and international financial institutions including the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank.²⁸ It is plausible that North Korea will want to treat these as a series of discrete bilateral arrangements (as it did with KEDO) or as participation in a global institution (such as the UN), rather than bundling them together into some kind of Northeast Asian configuration.

The Path Ahead

The 6PT are not guaranteed to succeed. Six months from now, coercive diplomacy, sanctions, interdictions, and military action are just as likely as a negotiated settlement or as regional acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear power.

A Six Party (or, omitting North Korea, even Five Party) institution for addressing the hard security issues in Northeast Asia is an appealing idea. If realized for a day, it might indeed live a long and productive life. The difficulty is that few of the governments in the region have this in mind, and at least one is structurally and ideologically incapable of participating in it. For a deeper form of multilateral cooperation to take root, does North Korea simply need to be removed as an obstacle? Is its active participation required?

Save for a few academics in South Korea and the United States, there is little sustained intellectual debate about the prospects or form of a regional multilateral framework. Likewise, few have considered what might lie beyond the current alliance system. Northeast Asia is not just bereft of institutions; it is bereft of thinking and visions about its future.

There is little prospect for capital *M* multilateralism or large *R* regionalism in Northeast Asia's foreseeable future. Even projecting out a generation, the constituencies, leadership, social foundations, and blueprints for any kind of Northeast Asian community—much less federation, confederation, commonwealth, or common market for Northeast Asia—are all weak or entirely missing. Even if the most optimistic scenarios for democratization in China and North Korea take shape, and ideological barriers dissolve, there is still not the slightest hint that political destinies would begin to converge.

This limited prognosis may be cold comfort for the generous and creative persons imagining a new Northeast Asian home. It would be churlish to pour cold water on laudable ideas, but it takes an imaginative leap to think that the conditions are ripe or a formula is in hand for a great leap to a transformative multilateral framework.

The prospects for a Concert of Powers system are not much brighter. There may be agreement on specific issues among the major powers, thought that

agreement is being sorely tested in the 6PT context. But a Concert would only be possible if the bilateral alliances were eliminated and China embraced a form of hierarchical international relations that, at least for the moment, it is unwilling to countenance. There is even less chance for any kind of collective defense or collective security system that would include China.

An active and inclusive multilateral structure for cooperative or comprehensive security in Northeast Asia, ASEAN-style, is also a long way off. Mutual images remain too negative, and there is no indication that China and Japan can work in tandem as the necessary leadership team. Curiously, Chinese and Japanese diplomats seem to be working together effectively in the context of the East Asian community-building project, even as they are unable to resolve a series of emotional bilateral issues closer to home. What does seem feasible is a deeper form of cooperation on economic and environmental issues in Northeast Asia, more market openness, and even some kind of free trade arrangement involving China, Japan, and South Korea in various bilateral combinations, or on a trilateral basis. A landscape of pipelines and power lines, highways, and railroads may appear before any substantial regional organization.

In the security domain, deeper multilateral cooperation is both feasible and likely. However, this deeper cooperation will not take place *within* Northeast Asia, but rather will involve Northeast Asian states more deeply in various kinds of ad hoc and extraregional arrangements. These could take at least three forms.

First, a series of arrangements with North Korea could develop to dismantle the nuclear program and to provide security assurances and various forms of economic assistance. The countries involved in the 6PT would lead the arrangements, which might even be coordinated on a Six Party basis. Other “second circle” participants—along the lines of the EU’s role in KEDO—would likely be involved.

Second, all the countries of Northeast Asia are involved in many different regional institutions. It may be that discussion of confidence-building measures works better in the context of the ARF than in any specifically Northeast Asia forum. It may also be that the United Nations will play an essential role in resolving future conflicts.

Third, China, Japan, and South Korea are principal participants in the emerging East Asian institutional identity embodied in the ASEAN Plus Three process, its supporting track-two networks, and the East Asia Summit. It is striking that China and Japan have both acceded to ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), a set of principles focused on peaceful resolution of disputes. It may be productive to encourage Russia, Mongolia, South Korea, and even North Korea to approve the principles as well. Whether through an expanded TAC or a new East Asian concord, these principles will not resolve Northeast Asia’s fundamental problems, but they do benefit from ASEAN-style discussion and leadership. Particularly promising are joint actions on a range

of nontraditional security issues, including transnational crime, piracy, illegal migration, and possibly disaster relief.

It may seem devious to conclude that the path to Northeast Asian multilateralism must include a detour through Southeast Asia, and involve other non-Northeast Asian players, in addition to the United States. But it may be that Northeast Asia, the “cockpit of conflicts” and the “anti-region,” is better replaced than transformed. For at least a generation in Northeast Asia, the most important objective is simply to open markets and societies. The best path may be to cooperate regionally, but build institutions bilaterally and extraregionally.

Notes

1. See Young-jin Choi, “The North Korean Nuclear Issue,” speech delivered at a conference on “North Korea, Multilateralism, and the Future of the Peninsula,” Seoul, November 20–21, 2003.

2. Roh Moo-hyun, “Opening Remarks at the Special Conference of the International Federation of Journalists,” March 12, 2007, <http://english.president.go.kr/cwd/en/archive/archive_view.php?m_def=2&ss_def=1&meta_id=en_speeches&id=419ea7e9a4500812cc4a38b3> Accessed April 4, 2007.

3. Francis Fukuyama, “Re-Envisioning Asia,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 1 (January/February 2005), 77.

4. Lowell Dittmer, “The Emerging Northeast Asian Regional Order,” in *The International Relations of Northeast Asia*, ed. Samuel S. Kim (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 304.

5. See Tsueneo Akaha, ed., *Politics and Economics in Northeast Asia: Nationalism and Regionalism in Contention* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999); Yoshinobu Yamamoto, ed., *Globalism, Regionalism and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); and Samuel S. Kim, ed., *The International Relations of Northeast Asia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

6. Peter Hayes, “Seven Step Policy to Solve the North Korean Nuclear Problem,” November 18, 2003, <<http://www.nautilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/multilateralTalks/PHsevensteps.html>> Accessed April 2007.

7. Peter Van Ness, “The North Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four-Plus-Two—An Idea Whose Time Has Come,” *Keynotes #4* (Canberra, Australia: Department of International Relations, 2003), p. 15 <<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/ir/pubs/keynotes/documents/Keynotes-4.pdf>> Accessed April 4, 2007.

8. There are some lively contrarians. Su-Hoon Lee, a professor at Kyungnam University and now the chairman of the Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation, heralds the twenty-first century as the “age of Northeast Asia” (see Lee, “Community-building in Northeast Asia: A Korean Perspective”). Robert Ross, a professor at Boston College, concludes that since the end of the Cold War, Northeast Asia is “the world’s most peaceful region” (see Ross, “The U.S.-China Peace: Great Power Politics, Spheres of Influence, and the Peace of

East Asia,” paper presented at the “International Conference on East Asia, Latin America and the ‘New’ Pax Americana,” Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, February 14–15, 2003).

9. The term *North Pacific* suggests a slightly different set of actors, and includes Canada and the United States in addition to the Northeast Asian six. The NPCSD, and the other efforts using the “North Pacific” designation, have focused not on issues in North America but instead on those on the Asian side of the Pacific. The change in terminology was deliberate, and intended not only to broaden the number of actors but also to change the frame of reference from Cold War problems to post–Cold War opportunities.

10. Lee Shin-wha, “Environmental Regime Building in Northeast Asia: A Catalyst for Sustainable Regional Cooperation,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 2 (August 2001), 45.

11. Hyun In-Taek and Miranda Schreuers, eds., *The Environmental Dimension of Asian Security: Conflict and Cooperation over Energy, Resources, and Pollution* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006).

12. The two best attempts by nongovernmental actors to design a roadmap for negotiations and implementation remain those of the International Crisis Group and Peter Hayes. They vary in several respects, but both outline interconnected unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral actions that will demand a high level of consultation. See International Crisis Group, “North Korea: A Phased Negotiation Strategy” (Washington, DC and Brussels: ICG Asia Report #61, August 1, 2003), <<http://www.nautilus.org/DPRKbriefingbook/multilateralTalks/negotiationStrategy.html>> Accessed April 4, 2007, and Hayes, “Seven Step Policy to Solve the North Korean Nuclear Problem.”

13. David Capie and Paul Evans, *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 165–69.

14. Capie and Evans, *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon*, 77–81.

15. Capie and Evans, *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon*, 98–107.

16. James Goodby, “Changing Course in Northeast Asia,” PacNet 56A, December 27, 2005, <<http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/pac0556a.pdf>> Accessed April 4, 2007.

17. Wang Jisi, “China’s Changing Role in Asia,” *Internationale Politik* 4, no. 3 (Fall 2003), 69.

18. Jim Lobe, “U.S. Split on China, But Realists Hold the Reins,” *Asia Times* (November 6, 2003), 1.

19. Michael Vatikiotis and Murray Hiebert, “How China Is Building an Empire,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (November 20, 2003), 31.

20. Vatikiotis and Hiebert, “How China Is Building an Empire,” 32.

21. Quoted in Vatikiotis and Hiebert, “How China Is Building an Empire,” 33.

22. Jaewoo Choo, “China’s Plan for a Regional Security Forum,” *Asia Times* (October 17, 2003), 1.

23. Fu Ying, "China and Asia in a New Era," *China: An International Journal* 1, no. 2 (September 2003), 304, 311.

24. C.S. Eliot Kang, "North Korea's International Relations: The Successful Failure," in *The International Relations of Northeast Asia*, edited by Kim, 282.

25. Kang, "China and Asia in a New Era," 295.

26. Ian Davies, "Regional Cooperation in Northeast Asia—The Tumen River Area Development Program, 1990–2000," North Pacific Policy Papers #4 (Vancouver: Institute of Asian Research, 2000), 31–37 <<http://www.iar.ubc.ca/programs/PCAPS/pubs/nppp4.pdf>> Accessed April 1, 2007.

27. Scott Snyder, *Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999), 139.

28. See Bradley Babson, "Implications of a 'Bold Switchover' in Security Policy for Involving the International Financial Institutions in Financing North Korean Economic Development," in *The Regional Economic Implications of North Korean Security Behavior—The "Bold Switchover" Concept*, report by the National Bureau of Asian Research (March 2006), 41–67.

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