Northeast Asia Security Cooperation:

International Relations Theory and Embedded Regionalism

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Overall security environment in Northeast Asia cannot be characterized as peace and stable, though the region has made significant economic progress after the end of the Cold War. Unlike Southeast Asia, where the specter of military war has declined and multilateral security mechanism has begun to take hold, a number of prominent security issues, especially traditional security questions, such as nuclear proliferation, territorial disputes, changing regional balance of power, history and memory, and rise of nationalism, could devastate Northeast Asia peace and security. If any traditional security crises come to a head in the years to come, all Northeast Asian countries may get involved in the ensuing military hostilities.

Several developments have led to some fundamental changes in the Northeast Asia security equation. First, the rise of China is the major reason that causes a structural transform in the region. Second, bilateral competition between China and Japan, both in escalating territorial disputes and changing bilateral relations and military alliances, also catch much attention and remain to be major dynamism that might shape regional development in the near future. Third, strategic calculation by the North Korea has already caused nuclear and arms proliferation in the region. The U.S. remains the most powerful nation in Northeast Asia, and all states desire good relations with it. US policy largely remains unchanged, some new adjustments and strategies complicate but does not fundamentally change the above regional dynamics.

So far, closer economic integration and interdependence allow countries to bypass differences so that regional stability can be maintained. It seems that regional countries have reach consensus that to maintain the momentum of the economic
development in the Northeast Asia, maintenance of security is a prerequisite. Accordingly, dialogue and cooperation rather than confrontation and conflict are more favorably considered among neighboring countries.

There are therefore some new developments of regional multilateral efforts among Northeast Asian countries to address regional security issues, though these efforts are different from traditional ones, and that they take the form of bilateral or mini-lateral talks and informal meetings. These efforts cannot yet be labeled as the development of Northeast Asia regionalism, because current security institutions in Northeast Asia are still the extension of post-World War II San Francisco system, which established asymmetrical bilateral relationships in the region. In other words, bilateralism still prevailed over multilateralism. Only in the 1990s did the United States, Japan, and South Korea forge multilateral coordination with respect to their approaches to North Korea, but the trilateral consultations were not designed to facilitate broad multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia. The six-party talks that emerged in 2003 in response to the North Korean nuclear crisis has the potential of developing into a lasting multilateral framework for regional security cooperation, but this is far from certain.

The paper tries to examine the current and future developments of Northeast Asia security cooperation through two approaches: international relations theory and embedded regionalism. International relations theory often reflects evolving trends in world order. By applying international relations theory to Northeast Asia, it can provide a better understanding of the principles that would affect the perceptions and responses of the region with respect to challenges to peace and stability. Various international relations theories can offer very different propositions about multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia. At the risk of oversimplification, one can
group these theories according to three broad perspectives: realism, liberalism, and constructivism.

As to the idea of embedded regionalism, the author argues that Northeast Asia should expand its linkage and embedment with the larger region of East Asia, so that the process of legalization in the East Asian regionalism can provide an incentive and habit of cooperation for Northeast Asian countries to maintain regional peace and security. In East Asia, with the rise of the so-called new regionalism, which refers to the increasing establishment of free-trade agreements (FTAs), countries in the region have decided to move forward to accept legalization of bilateral and regional institutions. By enhancing its connectness and embedment with the emerging East Asia regionalism, Northeast Asia can bypass problems of historical memory and power structure and concentrate on maintaining peaceful status quo. As Northeast Asia security cooperation becomes a larger and more embedded aspect of East Asia regionalism, a sustained commitment to multilateralism can help to contain the potential outbreak of hostility or military conflict in Northeast Asia.

I. International Relations Theory and Northeast Asia Security Cooperation

Realism

Classical realism, political support of legal positivism and with its focus on state sovereignty, military power and national interest, argues that international power politics is rooted in a permanent and universal human nature. Classical realism
therefore support a foreign policy based on national interests, self-help and prudence.¹

Neo-realism focuses on the distribution of power in anarchic international system structure, therefore neo-realism is also known as structural realism. Neo-realism does not think domestic politics could influence the structure of regional or international system. However, both classical realism and neo-realism emphasize on anarchic structure and balance of power politics.

The concept of power and power politics are core ideas in realism. States are bound to increase their power and power position, especially relative power comparing with other states. Power, which most of the time is defined as military capabilities and economic strength, is viewed as an indicator of the status and influence of states. For realism, relative gains are much more important for security than the absolute gains. Interdependence might benefit all states in absolute economic terms, but the distribution of these benefits across states is often unequal.

For realism, the rise of a major regional power is inherently destabilizing.² Since international system is an anarchical world, states are under constant threat of other states. Therefore, only by increasing military and economic powers or by forming alliance with stronger states that security can be maintained.

As to the role of international institutions, most realists do not believe international organizations and mechanisms can restrict or regulate state behavior. For realism, international institutions are created by strong states to protect and promote their own interests, international institutions in fact reflect power distribution among states.\textsuperscript{3}

From the realist perspective Northeast Asia appears trapped in a security dilemma that has resulted in a regional arms race. Northeast Asian countries pursue robust military modernization programs, both offensive and defensive, and arms build-ups to protect their national security and to secure their expanding national interests.

Facing current Northeast Asia security environments and given the likely long-term differentials in power capabilities among regional states, realists will suggest that the U.S.-led bilateralism and hegemonic management are the key mechanism of maintaining regional peace and stability. For instance, Barry Buzan argues that regional security cooperation in East Asia could not go anywhere without the leadership of a great power, and the leader was more likely to be the U.S. rather than China in the foreseeable future.\textsuperscript{4}

However, there was intrinsic contradiction in Buzan’s argument because according to pure realist theory, hegemonic power (so it could assume leadership) had no incentives to fortify regional security cooperation regime that would constrain the hegemon’s freedom of action. It seems that, paradoxically, security cooperation


regime in East Asia is most likely when the U.S. is descending from its hegemonic position while regional rising power China remains not powerful enough to substitute the U.S. role. Under the condition, both may find it beneficial to utilize regional cooperation regime to balance the other.

In fact, the motivations behind several East Asian countries in creating an East Asian community is essentially still based on a realist thinking of balance of power. It is about balance of power between competing regions. The state-centric approach and the staunchly inter-governmental framework of all key meetings with clear reluctance to create any “supranational” body underlie also such realist thinking.

Take ASEAN + 3 for example, scholars observe that ASEAN + 3 put too much focus on some traditional and realist principles of sovereignty, such as autonomy, security, balance of power and national interests. ASEAN +3 does not create any new norms or institutions, and of course not interested in constructing a collective regional identity. Simple realist calculations and purely reactive measures will not lead to a positive Northeast Asian security cooperation. Without the historical rapprochement and reconciliation of major countries in the region, a Northeast Asia security cooperation institution remains a dream in the distant future.

Liberalism

Liberal theory of international relations develops its arguments based on principles of individualism, democracy, the market, and liberalism believes these are presented as universal truths that are applicable to, and whose application would be beneficial to, all human beings. Liberalism provides a forward-looking perspective of

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how to improve the system and maintain peaceful development through some better institutional arrangements.⁶

Liberalism in international relations is closely related to concepts of interdependence and liberal institutionalism. Liberalism believes that economic interdependence creates peace by increasing the costs of war.⁷ Deepening interdependence has greatly increased the opportunity cost of conducting war for most of the countries in the region, and military options have become a much less attractive tool to resolve disputes. Any regional war would be so severely damaging to every regional countries; and therefore the cost of economic disruptions would be effectively deterred any use of force in the region. Furthermore, increasing economic interdependence can also transform national attitudes, preferences, and the definition of interests so that international accommodation and cooperation become more likely in the security realm.⁸

In recent years, regional economic interaction and cooperation in Northeast Asia has shown remarkable progress. Cross-border exchanges of money, technology and people have been made increasingly frequently. Human networks in Northeast Asia are slowly emerging through growing numbers of border-crossing migrants, professionals, and laborers. Regional economic interdependence continues to deepen at an accelerating pace, as demonstrated by increasing mutual trade in goods and

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services and mutual direct investment. Growing intra-regional trade and cross-border investment linkages between private sector firms compel policymakers and trade negotiators to "catch up" with what is already occurring in the marketplace. These economic interests push the governments to negotiate international agreements that help them better manage trade and investment relations.

Although we have witnessed some political frictions and bargaining happened among regional governments resulted from the process of trade liberalization and economic integration in Northeast Asia, the process in fact has also enhanced bilateral and multilateral cooperation. In Northeast Asia, however, further cooperation is hampered by mutual distrust derived from different political systems, ideologies, and gaps in historical perception. Many critics argue that rising economic interdependence is superseded by political mistrust. The question is whether economic interdependence in the region can spill over into the security realm. Liberalism believes the answer is positive.

For the sake of securing current economic interdependence and promoting future economic prospectity, liberalism argues that regional countries should be able to promote regional cooperation in Northeast Asia towards the next stage through common efforts. The recent increasing trend of economic interdependence in Northeast Asia contributes to reduction of dependence on a military resort in dealing with conflict of national interests between countries. Furthermore, liberalism also views regional rising power’s increased economic interdependence with Northeast
Asian countries as constraining its actions and goals.\(^9\)

Liberalism also assumes that rule-based institutions can mitigate power politics. The question is that how much influence could such international institutions exert on regional countries and how often do states bow to such external pressures? Even if such institutions can exert considerable influence on states, realists could still raise the question of where the real power comes from. If the Western powers dominate these institutions, realists could make the case that it is power that matters.\(^10\) However, it is true that the pressures to manage impact of globalization and limit exposure to the negative effects of military conflicts are resulting in possible closer security cooperation.

Comparing to the ASEAN countries, countries in Northeast Asia did not make a visible progress in leading the institution-building effort. A few multilateral inter-governmental organizations and processes that do exist but their future remain uncertain. Multilateral linkages in the traditional security field are of an ad hoc nature and limited to crisis in the Korean Peninsula. The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) among the U.S., the ROK and Japan failed to develop into effective mechanism of solving regional security problems. The Six-Party Talk is also facing uncertain future with its framework mainly focus on negotiation or talks of single issue.


So far, multilateralism in whatever form is not the core foundation of Northeast Asia security issues. Alliances, bilateral arrangements, and self-help are the key underpinnings of regional security and peace. The U.S. remains skeptical about the value of multilateralism, preferring to its reliance on bilateral security and defense arrangements to deal with regional problems. 11 This, undoubtedly, discourages the effort to strengthen institutions and build a regional institution.12

Constructivism

Constructivism is more of a methodological approach than of carrying any necessary normative content of its own. For Constructivists, state interests are not pre-given or a constant, but subject to modification and redefinition as a result of mutual constitution between agents (states) and structures (norms). Just as anarchy mitigates other-regarding systems, cultural innovations and intersubjective meanings can influence structure.13

Constructivism explains the causes of war partly, if not exclusively, in terms of the conflicting identities (self-perceptions) of states. Constructivists see cooperation as a process of social learning in which interactions produce shared understandings of

reality, redefine interests and may even lead to the development of collective identities that could ameliorate the security dilemma. Constructivists have argued that socialisation in the Asia Pacific region through multilateral institutions such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) would gradually lead to the development of norms of peaceful conduct that would reorient the regional actors from resorting to war as a means of problem-solving.

Constructivism believes that the lack of regional multilateral institutions is due to the lack of a shared regional identity among Northeast Asian actors. On the contrary, the identities of the Northeast Asian states have been constructed in a pattern of mutual insecurity that still appears highly polarized. This can be reversed, but Katzenstein and Okawara admit, “the redefinition of collective identities... is a process measured in decades, not years” Fundamentally, Northeast Asia has very limited experience with regional governance. The establishment of a regional framework to solve security problems that have their causes in territorial, sovereignty, and other political conflicts between states in the region would require the level of trust that simply does not exist today between the region’s governments and peoples of the countries.

According to Amitav Acharya’s observation, the Southeast Asian countries'
experience with multilateralism is becoming very helpful in addressing the intrastate tensions and disputes. He also believes that the Asian states are capable of developing their own form of multilateral institutions and identity, though the approach may be addressed as the "Asia Way."\(^{16}\) Especially after the ASEAN Plus Three cooperation began in December 1997, political and security cooperation among the ASEAN and Plus Three countries are progressing well. ASEAN and Plus Three countries hold regular dialogue and consultations at the summit, ministerial, senior officials and working groups/expert levels to strengthen and deepen cooperation.\(^{17}\)

It’s still premature to expect that regimes such as the Northeast Asia Treaty Organization (NEATO) or Northeast Asia Peace Zone can be established and play meaningful role in solving regional security problems.\(^{18}\) It is also possible for the regional countries to work together in low-politics or non-traditional security issue areas such as humanitarian relief, encompassing environmental, resource, migration, arms and drug trafficking, HIV/AIDS, SARS, economic globalization, and anti-terrorism issues to build collective identity and as measures of confidence-building since interstate conflict is no longer the only source of insecurity.\(^{19}\) Furthermore, the process of seeking cooperation on non-traditional security issues is not likely to threaten the regional powers’ pursuit of traditional security goals, namely the protection of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and


political independence.

II. Embedded Regionalism and Northeast Asia Security Cooperation

In the Summer 2000, *International Organization* devoted one volume on the subject of “legalization and world politics,” with several major articles discussing from the concept of legalization20 to the Asia-Pacific case21. The term legalization refers to “a particular set of characteristics that institutions may (or may not) possess.”22 These characteristics are defined by three components: obligation, precision, and delegation. “Obligation means that states or other actors are bound by a rule or commitment or by a set of rules or commitments. Specifically, it means that they are legally bound by a rule or commitment in the sense that their behavior thereunder is subject to scrutiny under the general rules, procedures, ad discourse of international law, and often of domestic law as well. *Precision* means that rules unambiguously define the conduct they require, authorize, or proscribe. *Delegation* means that third parties have been granted authority to implement, interpret, and apply the rules; to resolve disputes; and (possible) to make further rules.”23 In West Europe and North America, for instance, have developed high concentration of legalization in institutions that display rules with high levels of obligation and precision and the delegate rule interpretation and enforcement to third parties. As to the application of

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23 Ibid.
legalization to Asia-Pacific regional institutions, Miles Kahler states that, since institution building has often explicitly excluded legalization, there is an “apparent failure of legalization to take hold in Pacific regional institutions.”

Kahler discusses three regional institutions, ASEAN, ARF and APEC, and argues that the ASEAN Way is characterized by collaboration without legalization, the ARF is a security initiative the ASEAN way, and the APEC rejects any legalization in its institutional design.

Many leaders and scholars suggested that East Asia should establish its own economic and political infrastructure to put the region on an equal footing with Europe and North America. A direct impetus that led the development of regionalism was the Asian financial crisis in 1997. East Asian countries realized that their economics were truly interconnected and that at least some form of institutionalized regionalism and legalization was needed. Since then, East Asia has rapidly begun to create this infrastructure. With China’s entry into the WTO, East Asia is taking more concrete steps toward regional regionalism and legalization.

The paper points out that the process of East Asia integration can be divided into three stages: Asia-Pacific collaboration, East Asia collaboration, and East Asia regionalism. The first two stages refer to the changes of geographic scope of regional economic collaboration; the last one refers to the development of institutionalization and legalization of East Asia regional grouping. East Asia has, until fairly recently at least, been marked primarily by a process of regionalization in which external economic forces have played a major role in encouraging integration. Although traditional East Asia integration model was described as “regionalization without regionalism,” recent establishment of free trade areas (FTA) has give new life to the

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25 Ibid.
development of new East Asian regionalism. This wave of “new regionalism” reflects a growing awareness of regional interdependency and a rising sense of East Asian community.

First, the forming of the first stage of East Asian regionalism was the phase of Asia-Pacific collaboration. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Asia Pacific collaboration is that it has a relatively low level of institutionalization and legalization. However, this "informal" style of integration has provided a rationale for a more explicit political corollary as the countries of Southeast and Northeast Asia come to recognize that their economic interests may be advanced through enhanced regional cooperation. Although ASEAN has a long history as a regional organization in the Southeast Asia and it has been very actively participated in the APEC and ARF process, it can be regarded as an influential, single actor in the Asia Pacific collaboration.

Second, the establishment of ASEAN Plus Three meeting and East Asia Summit can be viewed as the second stage of East Asian integration and cooperation, which still function as forums and platform for East Asia collaboration. The idea of forming an East Asian grouping was first explicitly proposed by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in 1990 when he called for the formation of the East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG). On Nov. 4 and 5, 2004, the 8th summit of the

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Regionalism is seen as “a process-oriented concept that encompasses different phenomena happening at the various stages of its formation. These include regionalization which is often market-driven, follow by emergence of regional consciousness, and then deliberate regional inter-state cooperation leading to regional integration. Regionalism is therefore not only a geographical concept but a dynamic process encompassing a concentration of economic, political and sociocultural linkages.” See Yeo Lay Hwee, “Realism and Reactive Regionalism: Where Is East Asian Regionalism Heading?” UNISCI Discussion Papers, May 2005.
Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the 6th ASEAN Plus Three summit among leaders of ASEAN countries, the leaders of ASEAN, Japan, China and South Korea formally acknowledged an East Asian FTA vision. The East Asia Study Group, which had been commissioned to study recommendations put forward by the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) in November 2001, completed a report and the leaders agreed that economic ministers should begin study on an East Asian FTA. The annual East Asia Summit may help regional countries construct an architecture for the peaceful development of Asia. As Peter Drysdale argues that East Asian new regionalism is to provide a regional framework for cooperation revolve around the growth of economic and political interaction among the East Asian countries themselves.27

Third, recent trend of building bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements among East Asian countries can be viewed as a new wave of moving toward legalization of East Asian regionalism. FTA arrangements have come to be seen by most East Asian leaders as the necessary precursor to closer regional integration. Therefore, institutionalized regional economic cooperation in East Asia has been the major proposal in recent years, especially in the wake of the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98. From the perspective of Southeast Asian governments, two major developments were made to form closer economic grouping which attracted regional and global attention. The first is the proposal for an East Asian regional free trade area (FTA) to be constructed on the basis of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) framework. The second proposal calls for the ASEAN to establish FTAs with China, Japan, and South Korea respectively.

East Asian countries have relatively liberal trade policies and are reasonably well integrated into the global economy. That, however, masks huge differences. Hong Kong and Singapore are free ports. South Korea and Taiwan have liberalized substantially in recent years. Malaysia is fairly open but with significant protection, especially in services. Thai protectionism remains quite high. Indonesia and the Philippines are stuck in political and economic instability post-Asian crisis. Myanmar and Indochina, all much poorer, have higher levels of protection. Throughout the region, countries have engaged in many bilateral FTA and RTA (regional free trade agreements) negotiations. Besides China, Japan, and Korea, Singapore has concluded three FTA since 2000. Thailand is moving forward to investigate an FTA with Japan. Taiwan also has expressed its interest in negotiating with the US, Japan, Singapore, and New Zealand.

Until recently, East Asian governments pursued trade liberalization through unilateral policies and measures, under the APEC open regionalism and the WTO regulations. Now bilateral and regional free-trade initiatives are spreading like wildfire. According to this strategy, free trade agreements (FTA) with other Asian economies will be used to create the political and diplomatic environment needed to set up a regional community. With the proliferation of regional FTA, East Asia is quickly becoming a distinctive region for economic integration and interdependence. Moving from Asia Pacific collaboration, East Asia collaboration, to East Asia regionalism, countries recognize that the region need to institutionalize and legalize their bilateral and multilateral cooperation to consolidate economic and trade relationship.

All major Northeast Asian countries actively participate in the process of all three stages of Asia Pacific collaboration, East Asia collaboration, to East Asia
regionalism. So the development of Northeast Asian economic or security institutions has very close relationship with the development of East Asian regionalism. As Northeast Asia security cooperation becomes a larger and more embedded aspect of East Asia regionalism, a sustained commitment to multilateralism can help to contain the potential outbreak of hostility or military conflict in Northeast Asia.

**Conclusion**

Northeast Asia has emerged as one of the major geopolitical and geoeconomics centers of the world. A security regime does not imply that relations amongst its members are harmonious and without conflict. There has to be some agreement on the status quo amongst the great powers, a desire to avoid war, and an expectation that states will act with restraint when disputes arise.

From a realist point of view, due to the historical and structural characteristics of Northeast Asia, a multilateral institution to solve all security problems will be difficult to build in the near future. It is difficult to imagine Northeast Asia developing into a meaningful mode of multilateral cooperation under current situation. For liberalism, the expansion of transnational market linkages is deepening the interdependence of regional economies, and social integration proceeds through the network of corporate and human linkages. For the sake of securing current economic interdependence and promoting future economic prospectity, liberalism argues that regional countries should be able to promote regional cooperation in Northeast Asia towards the next stage through common efforts. For constructivists, the lack of regional multilateral institutions is due to the lack of a shared regional identity among Northeast Asian actors. Northeast Asia countries, however, can explore cooperation over
non-traditional security issues as a means of building confidence and forming an identity for cooperation.

The examination of Northeast Asia security cooperation from different perspective of international relations theories may not be that optimistic due to current historical and power structure in the region. However, consensus also building among regional countries to maintain peaceful status quo for the sake of protecting regional interdependence and prosperity, regional identity can also be cultivated through increasing regional interaction and integration. Northeast Asia can develop some form of problem-solving and peace-maintaining cooperation in the region.

As to the idea of embedded regionalism, the author argues that Northeast Asia should expand its linkage and embedment with the larger region of East Asia, so that the process of legalization in the East Asian regionalism can provide an incentive and habit of cooperation for Northeast Asian countries to maintain regional peace and security. All major Northeast Asian countries actively participate in the process of all three stages of Asia Pacific collaboration, East Asia collaboration, to East Asia regionalism. So the development of Northeast Asian economic or security institutions has very close relationship with the development of East Asian regionalism. As Northeast Asia security cooperation becomes a larger and more embedded aspect of East Asia regionalism, a sustained commitment to multilateralism can help to contain the potential outbreak of hostility or military conflict in Northeast Asia.