



Northeast Asia Security Forum: Is Such a Gathering Possible?

By Ralph A. Cossa

In recent months, South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi have separately called for the creation of a formal, governmental Northeast Asia Security Forum, to bring key regional states together to discuss common security interests and concerns. President Yeltsin has echoed these calls — Moscow has long been offended at being left out of the Four-Party Talks (among the two Koreas, U.S., and China), believing that Russia should also have a seat at this table. Canadians and Mongolians also periodically call for a broader-based dialogue including their nations as well.

Nonetheless, the chances of a Northeast Asian Security Forum being established any time soon appear slim. The U.S., while occasionally offering token support, has displayed little real enthusiasm. The Chinese have been even less supportive, dismissing such proposals as "premature." Beijing cites North Korean reluctance to participate as a primary reason, although one also suspects a lack of Chinese eagerness to involve Japan more intimately in regional security affairs. For its part, North Korea continues to reject all such proposals out of hand.

As a result, the only venue for official dialogue on Northeast Asia security issues, beyond the narrowly-focused (and largely unsuccessful) Four-Party Talks, remains the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which brings the foreign ministers of 21 Asia-Pacific nations (plus the European Union) together for one day of security discussions each summer. The ARF agenda is driven by its Southeast Asian hosts, however, and Northeast Asian issues receive scant attention.

Despite the lack of enthusiasm on the part of several key actors, the need for greater cooperation, dialogue, and understanding on security matters among the nations of Northeast Asia remains clear. The Korean Peninsula remains one of the world's most potentially volatile hot spots. In addition, historic animosities and suspicions about future intentions are widespread throughout Northeast Asia, flamed in many instances by unresolved territorial disputes. Although many of the issues are bilateral in nature, most have broader regional implications and events affecting one set of bilateral relationships invariably impact the others.

It would seem that there are two ways, aside from doing nothing, of approaching the problem. One is to pursue proposals such as those by President Kim and Prime Minister Obuchi to create a new organization from scratch. The other, and I would argue potentially more fruitful approach, is by creating a sub-regional Northeast Asian dialogue mechanism within the ARF.

This sub-regional approach has already been tried, successfully, at the non-governmental level. The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) — which links member committees comprised of independent scholars, security analysts, and both former and current government officials (the latter in their private capacities) from 18 Asia-Pacific nations — has established, among its various international working groups, a North Pacific Working Group that focuses on Northeast Asia security issues. Security specialists from all eight above-mentioned states [North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, the U.S., Canada, and Mongolia], many from government-sponsored institutes, regularly meet to discuss security issues of common concern. While North Korea opts not to participate in more narrowly-based, Peninsula-oriented forums, Pyongyang security analysts continue to participate in the more broad-based, all-inclusive CSCAP.

The foreign ministers from seven of the eight Northeast Asia/North Pacific states (less North Korea) are already among those who gather annually for the ARF ministerial meeting. This provides an ideal opportunity to take the first step toward creating a Northeast Asian dialogue mechanism, using the "ASEAN way" as a model.

In 1993, following calls from some members and dialogue partners of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for the inclusion of security discussions in their annual ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference talks, all the foreign ministers were invited to gather together informally over lunch to discuss security issues. This luncheon session evolved a year later into the ARF.

Senior foreign ministry officials from all the ARF states will be meeting in Singapore on May 19-21 to prepare the agenda for July's ARF ministerial gathering. Might I suggest that they also arrange for the seven Northeast Asia foreign ministers to sit together at lunch or dinner or, better yet, to have a separate breakfast meeting the day after the ARF session, to informally discuss Northeast Asian issues. The ASEAN states would no doubt encourage such an effort since it is in their collective interest to see more harmonious relations among their northern neighbors — not to mention their being able to share in the credit for bringing them together.

North Korea remains the missing link in this equation. However, Pyongyang has previously expressed interest in joining the ARF and President Kim Dae-Jung personally supports such a move. Clearly specifying the terms of North Korea's membership should be another agenda item at the preparatory meeting, along with assurances to Pyongyang that consensus support for its entry exists if it meets the same entrance qualifications that any prospective applicant must meet.

The hardest part — getting all the foreign ministers to agree to come together at the same time in the same place — has

already been accomplished. All that remains now is the political foresight to put them around the same table to let the long-overdue Northeast Asia security dialogue begin.

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