



Building a Regional Security Mechanism

by Pang Zhongying

It's time to promote the establishment of a Northeast Asian regional security mechanism.

The nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula is of increasing concern to Northeast Asian countries. The two rounds of six-party talks brought together key regional governments: China, Russia, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Japan – as well as the United States. And they have kindled a gleam of hope for the establishment of a multilateral security system in the region.

Many people feel that the six-party talks, a special multilateral arrangement aimed at defusing the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, could develop into a general system to ensure security in Northeast Asia if they become a systematic and regular event.

The progress already made in the talks demonstrates that a permanent multilateral regional security system could help solve even the most sensitive security problems.

Northeast Asia should not base its security measures on bilateral frameworks any longer. A multilateral security arrangement will offer a more effective and complementary guarantee of regional peace and stability. The regional security arrangement can co-exist with alliance-oriented bilateral security relations.

Constructing a multilateral security framework in Northeast Asia is not a new idea. Countries like Russia and Japan suggested setting up a Northeast Asian security mechanism following the end of the Cold War. Countries in the region have also conducted security dialogues at various levels with their neighbors. But a systematized regional security arrangement has remained a distant prospect.

The threat of instability in Northeast Asia is very real. The Korean nuclear issue and the Taiwan question remain unresolved, and these two serious issues, if not properly handled, could cause region-wide instability. The ROK and even Japan are exhibiting strong wishes to explore more self-reliant foreign policies while the influence of the “peaceful rise” of China is being increasingly felt. On the other hand, the U.S. has never veiled its worries about the alleged intention of China to recover its traditional centrality in the region.

With regional security issues unresolved and no long-term development plans established, peaceful development in Northeast Asia cannot be brought about through the wishes of any individual country. Regional peace and stability can only be achieved through the collective and objective actions of countries in the region. In other words, neither self-help (China is a good example) nor military alliances are enough to face a changing security environment in the region.

In the beginning, a Northeast Asian security framework can serve as a multilateral mechanism that is based upon the common security interests of member states. Although there

are huge differences, regional governments still have many common security concerns that make a regional multilateral security framework worth working for.

However, a multilateral security framework built on common interests cannot be easily achieved since the interests of all countries involved are continuously changing.

Any regional security arrangement in Northeast Asia that does not have U.S. involvement would be impossible.

Although many people criticized the Bush administration's unilateralism, America will try multilateralism to deal with regional security challenges, as the six party talks showed. I don't know if the U.S. has any interest in establishing a Northeast Asian security mechanism. I would say that an all-inclusive and permanent arrangement for dealing with Northeast Asia security issues is in all countries' – including the United States' – interests. Some Americans support the idea of this type of security mechanism. Others worry that it would contravene its regional bilateral security arrangements.

From a Chinese perspective, a Northeast Asian security mechanism would have the following characteristics:

- It would include China and even a de-nuclearized North Korea.
- It would co-exist with U.S.-led bilateral security relations.
- It is justified or legitimized by ongoing cooperative and constructive China-U.S. relations.
- It can help solve other regional security problems, including the Taiwan problem.
- It would lay the foundation for a future-oriented regional security community.

The prospect of regularized six party talks has provided an opportunity to re-visit the idea of building a regional security mechanism. Thus, we must do our utmost to ensure that the talks succeed. A regional security mechanism should embrace the concept of mutual security. If North Korea is to participate, its reasonable security concerns should be assured and considered. The transformation of the regional security environment in Northeast Asia needs a successful conclusion of the six party talks.

As China increasingly shows interest in having a six-party-talks-based regional security arrangement, it is not impossible that some China-related security problems, such as the Taiwan issue, can be discussed at the regional level rather than just bilaterally. Proper discussions on such most sensitive issues may be not only helpful for the solution of the issue but can help promote the building of the regional security mechanism.

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