



Time for a Northeast Asian Security Institution

by Michael Schiffer

With the Six-Party Talks appearing to be back on and the international community settling down to the long, tough slog of managing the consequences of North Korea's nuclear test, one of the clear lessons learned from the past few years is the need for an enduring institutional structure for Northeast Asian political and security issues.

The idea for turning the Six-Party Talks into a permanent security institution is not a new one. But the shortcomings of the six-party process thus far – starting with its “on-again, off-again” nature – illustrate the need for a stable multilateral security framework for the region, regardless of whether the six-party process meets with success any time soon. In fact, the creation of a permanent security mechanism in the region could be a key step toward resolving the impasse over North Korea and providing a means to address other potentially destabilizing issues.

While the Bush administration is right that direct bilateral talks between the United States and North Korea, by themselves, won't get the job done, ad hoc multilateralism isn't enough either. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill deserves much credit for his efforts over the past year, but a genuine approach to multilateral problem solving that really tests the willingness of the North Koreans to deal – not to mention the U.S. commitment to real multilateral problem solving – has yet to be fully tested.

It will take the cooperation of all nations in the region to manage the consequences of North Korea's nuclear test and ongoing nuclear program – be it the maintenance of effective sanctions; containing the spread of the regime's nuclear material or technology; or inducing North Korea to moderate its behavior by rolling back its nuclear program, ending its self-imposed isolation and integrating with the regional and global economy.

A permanent multilateral institution offers the best chance for the high level of policy coordination, close communication, and diplomatic synchronization that will be needed over an extended period of time, and offers the capacity and flexibility needed to cope with the full range of possible outcomes arising from the current crisis.

Moreover, a permanent multilateral organization might provide an important signal of goodwill in breaking the current impasse, especially given the implied security guarantees in the willingness of the parties to enter into such an institutionalized arrangement.

An enduring structure could also provide the space for the creative diplomacy and the additional flexibility needed at the bi- and trilateral levels to move the diplomatic process

forward. The success of the recent round of talks in Beijing in getting the six-party process back on track notwithstanding, reliance on seat-of-the-pants diplomacy entails a high level of risk and invites failure out of proportion to the stakes involved. And, should the talks be successful, an enduring regional institution will be critical in providing the multilateral buy-in and leverage needed to make any potential deal that can lead to a peaceful and denuclearized Korean Peninsula a reality.

Moreover, holding out the possibility that North Korea will be able to join a regional security mechanism could in itself serve as an incentive for Pyongyang to change its behavior.

Indeed, to be effective any such institution needs to be open and inclusive. But given the immediate challenge of gaining traction in addressing the DPRK nuclear program, a functioning institution with a pragmatic problem-solving orientation should peg full membership to a commitment to basic international norms and standards, including adherence to at least minimal standards of responsible nuclear behavior such as International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards.

If North Korea is unwilling to meet the requirements for full membership out of the box, but is willing to make a credible commitment to the larger undertaking, a “partnership for peace” style arrangement that benchmarks both the criteria of and actions necessary for full membership might offer a good model. Such an approach would also safeguard against dilution of the immediate functional goals of any fledgling mechanism.

As an outgrowth of the six-party process, the initial footprint of the organization would, for functional purposes, be limited to the six-party participants. But there is no reason why, if and as the institution gains traction and proves its worth, other states in the region could not join as well.

The initial institutional focus would thus be on the immediate requirements involved with managing North Korea's nuclear program, building on the agenda of the Six-Party Talks. In fact, a strong argument for seeking to embed the six-party process in a permanent institution is the simple fact that if the six-party process is successful – still a big if, to be sure – there are structural imperatives that will arise out of the implementation of the September 2005 Joint Statement or any additional diplomatic agreements.

For example, if North Korea agrees to work with the international community to constrain or roll back its nuclear weapons and verifiably adhere to international standards in the management of any civilian program, a revived or reconstituted Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization – or something new very much like it – will be needed. An institutional mechanism capable of day-to-day

implementation will likewise be needed if the international community is able to encourage North Korea to end its self-imposed isolation and integrate with the regional and international economy. Getting ahead of the curve and providing an effective multilateral mechanism that can manage these functions will help mitigate against the sorts of friction in implementation that, although far from the sole cause, have helped contribute to the undoing of previous agreements.

And should diplomatic efforts fail, an already-existing institutional structure will provide the framework for the international community to manage the consequences of a nuclear North Korea that remains unintegrated with, and potentially hostile toward, its neighbors.

Looking beyond the Korean Peninsula, a pragmatically focused East Asian security institution could also help defuse and solve other issues on the regional agenda.

A host of diplomatic efforts in the region have been frustrated by the challenges and stresses created by the rise of China, Japan's quest for "normal nation" status, unsettled territorial disputes, booming populations, economic dynamism, increasing competition over resources, disputes over history, and concerns in Southeast Asia about a possible strategic contest between the United States, China, and Japan.

A permanent security mechanism that creates the space for the development of a regional security community with shared strategic values can help ease tensions and ameliorate potential regional flashpoints. And given that the most likely pathway to a destabilizing crisis or war in the region would be as the result of miscommunication or misunderstanding during a crisis – be it on the Korean Peninsula, across the Taiwan Strait, or elsewhere – an institution that can contribute to greater understanding and transparency and offer a mechanism, now lacking, for crisis and communication management could well prove to be crucial.

It is unlikely that Northeast Asia will develop anytime soon the sort of highly articulated institutional structures that have been developed in Europe. But the time has long since passed for a concerted effort to create a permanent multilateral mechanism to help maintain security and stability in the region.

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