



## Northeast Asia Regionalism and Linkages with Southeast Asia

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The tempo of discussion has increased over future political and security architecture for Northeast Asia as nuclear and other issues involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) become more malleable. The current visit of Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte to Japan, South Korea, and China hopefully will advance this dynamic.

The six-party process has yielded a range of options for the eventual incorporation of North Korea into a web of relationships designed to encourage its positive behavior, build trust (or at least a measure of predictability), and integrate the once-hermit kingdom into the regional economy. But the overwhelming focus on the DPRK may miss the mark in two important respects: an opportunity to craft a bolder vision of Northeast Asian integration on its own merits; and forging linkages for a "greater Asia" with Southeast Asia, primarily the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the emergent ASEAN Plus Three and East Asia Summit processes.

Six-party experts seem to expect greater definition of regionalism for the northeastern tier to be revealed in late 2008 or 2009. Russia has been charged to "mother-hen" this aspect of the six-party process and a senior U.S. official is to visit Moscow soon to continue the official conversation on regional architecture. Some Asian regionalists would argue that the effort should be more expansive – though not greatly more ambitious – and somewhat less tuned to the narrower objectives of DPRK integration and controlling Pyongyang's behavior.

### Expanded Guidelines

The current goals of transforming the six-party process into a security and peace mechanism are to reduce North Korea's economic isolation and provide a basis for progressive trade, financial and multilateral cooperation. Planning for a Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism (NAPSM) led by Russia also incorporates objectives for military confidence-building, energy cooperation and environmental protection.

A broader set of guidelines would more accurately reflect the overarching regional opportunities and challenges, as well as anchor NAPSM in the larger Asian context. Such considerations should include:

- Moving soon to define the new regional architecture rather than waiting for North Korean denuclearization and detailed normalization with the United States, Japan, and South Korea to be tied up in a neat bundle. It would be easier to incorporate North Korea into an agreed Northeast Asia framework than negotiate the new regional structure with the DPRK. Consequently the timetable for NAPSM should be accelerated to position a set of diplomatic initiatives for early in the next U.S. administration.
- Decoupling the economic market basket of issues from the political and security framework so that economic incentives for the DPRK can be embedded in a larger scheme of Northeast Asia cooperation. Trust-building among China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea is no less worthy an objective than managing future economic relations with the DPRK. Transcendent Northeast Asia issues, especially energy, finance, trade, and transportation, should be locked into a gradualistic consultative framework sooner than later.
- Incorporating Canada and Mongolia into the "new Northeast Asia" should be decided now, once and for all. A two-track mechanism, allowing the economic consultative forum to stand on its own could also accommodate Taiwan and Hong Kong when political conditions permit.
- Envisioning Northeast Asia's structural relationships with ASEAN and broader Asian fora, including APEC and other summitry, should occur now to avoid overlaps and confusion in mandates, memberships, and approaches. For example, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) could transition into a political-security consultative forum in parallel with the Northeast Asia body. Likewise, a revamped APEC – so cherished by the U.S. – could become the counterpart of the East Asia Summit as many writers have proposed.

### Getting There From Here

Northeast Asianists will argue that the preeminent goal of the six-party process should not be diluted or pre-conditioned by other regional considerations. Two rejoinders are in order: the countries with the most at stake in defining the new regional order – the U.S. and China – have done little to advance Northeast Asia economic cooperation, thus broader and bolder moves are overdue; and a Northeast Asia structure based solely on the six parties not only omits significant pieces of the regional mosaic, but also fails to "connect the dots" with essential regional actors ASEAN and India.

Some deconstruction of the regional interests of Tokyo and Seoul is also relevant. Japan, tentatively recovering from a period of economic stasis, is seeking revived trade, energy, and financial relationships with ASEAN and bilaterally with its traditional southern partners, Thailand and Indonesia, through new closer economic cooperation agreements. Japan

also wants to tie Australia more closely to regional affairs on a trilateral basis with the United States. Broader Northeast Asia regionalism, therefore, should appeal to Tokyo's more expansive view and better position to manage relations with Russia, the ROK, and, of course China.

For South Korea, it is opportune for the new government of Lee Myung-bak to demonstrate leadership in Asia by expanding approaches to Southeast Asia, as well as develop a new relationship with China (a "strategic relationship" reportedly has already been mooted by Beijing). Beyond its customary preoccupation with *entrepot* manufacturing and energy supply, Seoul can play an active role in regional maritime security, trade integration (perhaps stimulated by the KORUS trade negotiations), and promoting North-South defense relations. Seoul, in short, has many opportunities.

With regard to Southeast Asia, some voices have questioned whether a separate Northeast Asian peace and security forum would upstage ASEAN and the ARF. Realists, however, cannot see how the ARF, consensus-driven and remote as it may be, could possibly engage North Korea. Translating the ARF's potential into an effective body to deal concretely with denuclearization, the normalization of relations of the DPRK with six-party participants, and economic harmonization is difficult to imagine. At the same time, clear linkages are needed between the Northeast Asia structures and the institutions having ASEAN at their core.

#### **A Reformulated Vision**

Lacking perfect knowledge of the inner NAPSM process, it is perhaps presumptuous to articulate a model to respond to broader regional considerations. However, there are some modalities that should be considered.

Flexibility will be needed to integrate the DPRK and other interests. Therefore the creation of two inter-governmental councils is recommended: a Peace and Security Council (PSC) and an Economic Cooperation Council (ECC). There should be scope in the ECC, in particular, to include representation from specialized ministries as well as diplomats. Canada and Mongolia should be added to the PSC and ECC, while Taiwan (benefiting from the prospect of better cross-Strait relations) and Hong Kong could be added as adjunct members of the ECC. The deliberative nature of these bodies should make this possible.

Annual plenaries of the PSC and ECC should be synchronized with the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Consultations (PMC) and the East Asia and APEC summits. Inter-sessional

work could be conducted in a limited number of sub-councils, thus avoiding the "APEC disease" of spawning a large number of narrow and unsustainable working groups. A small secretariat, perhaps sited in Seoul, would have seconded staff and minimal overhead. One major responsibility of the head of the secretariat would be to manage relations with other Asian and some outside bodies, including the United Nations, European Union, NATO, and the SCO, but the most important of these relationships would be with ASEAN.

#### **United States Backstopping**

Washington is already working to upgrade relations with ASEAN, but bureaucratic resources, as well as the time and attention of top Washington officials, are thin. Upgrading Asian relations in the next administration will be necessary, among other things by designating a deputy national security advisor for Asia and expanding NSC regional office staffing. The president should appoint a Special Representative for Asian Regional Affairs, not to upstage State's assistant secretary as Washington's chief policy officer, but to augment the core policy effort. A well-known public servant could be drafted for the Asian Regional Affairs post, serving as *alter ego* to the assistant secretary when necessary in representing the United States in regional bodies and assuring higher level attention for pressing issues that Cabinet and sub-Cabinet officials are unable to provide.

#### **Into the Future**

The concluding chapters of the six-party process are hardly ready to be written. The timetable for resolving nuclear, normalization, and other issues with the DPRK is uncertain, compounded by the flux of the electoral process in the United States and headline issues involving China.

Advancing consideration of Northeast Asia regional architecture could create an incentive in negotiations with North Korea. If regionalism is moving ahead, then the North has reason to join. But if NAPSM is simply allowed to run its course, without definition of a broader integrative process, then no regional actor – most especially China – will have a stake in seeing it to fruition.

For the United States, a more purposeful approach would provide serious policy recommendations for action early in the next administration. Broadening regional architecture options, especially to include the key relationship with ASEAN, will create a foundation for consensus-building and underscore the vital stake of the United States in Asia.