

Regional Cooperation and Civil Society in Northeast Asia

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I Introduction

Today, the Northeast Asia is regarded as one of the most unstable areas in the world and possible cradles for an armed conflict. In addition, the Northeast Asia is also recognized as an area of a residue of the cold war, namely nuclear hostility and possible nuclear proliferation. In order to change the situation and reverse the tide, a proposal of comprehensive approach for the Northeast Nuclear Weapons Free Zone is quite attractive, but there are still many difficult problems to overcome to materialize the proposal. In this short presentation, I would like to examine some basic obstacles of the Northeast Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone with emphasis on the difficulties of regional cooperation in the area.

II External reasons of instability

When we talk about the international environment of the Northeast Asia, we often mention the following countries and areas, Japan, China, Republic of Korea, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Taiwan, the United States and possibly Russia, as key players. No one dares to say that the relations among those countries are good and desirable now. There is no prospect, at least in a foreseeable future, for reducing tension between China and Taiwan as well as between two Koreas. The border disputes among Japan, China, Republic of Korea are most likely at the worst situation since the end of the second world war. The potential military and nuclear rivalry between China and the United States is getting more and more actual. In addition, DPRK is still pursuing its nuclear program. In short, we must admit the fact that there are rather many potential reasons of international conflicts in the Northeast Asia.

On the other hand, unlike many other regions in the world, there is not yet any really working international arrangement for regional cooperation. There are several legal and de facto bilateral security arrangements, such as US-Japan Security Treaty, US-Korea Security Treaty or China-DPRK security cooperation but they are, so to speak, rather legacies of the cold war than the result of regional cooperation. Of course, there have been some attempts to establish a kind of stable and permanent framework for regional cooperation or better atmosphere for mutual cooperation in the region in the

past, but there is no more such atmosphere or ongoing attempt now.

However, in spite of some adverse effects of political troubles, economic relations in the region are much better, aside from the exceptional case of DPRK. The trade in the region, including the United States, is growing rather steadily, even though there has been some problems of imbalance and occasional trouble. In terms of economic or financial cooperation, at first, the United States granted large sum of economic assistance to Japan, Republic of Korea and Taiwan to assist the recovery from war damage and to keep them in the Western bloc under the cold war. Then, Japan followed the United States and started economic assistance to Republic of Korea and Taiwan, and later, to China. Japan's economic assistance in the region originally started as a part of its war reparation and, as a result, it did not develop into a base for regional economic organizations. Consequently, until now, there is no permanent regional framework for economic or financial cooperation in the Northeast Asia.

This lack of any stable arrangement for regional cooperation is a great disadvantage of the Northeast Asia because when we think about any particular problem to solve, there is no reliable place to start any negotiations.

III Internal Problems

When we think about the situation in the Northeast Asia, internal situations of relevant countries are also, or sometimes, more important. Regarding recent border disputes among Japan, China and Republic of Korea, some people have already pointed out that the true reasons behind the scene been domestic political and social problems rather than international. I personally almost agree with these opinions. Exaggerating external threats and trying to stir up nationalism are common techniques for politicians in any countries. Especially during the time of economic or social difficulties, or intense political conflicts, some politicians tend to resort to this technique in order to strengthen their political leadership without paying much consideration to its grave consequences.

Unfortunately, this might be true in countries of the Northeast Asia. I do not want to go into details but, in Japan, long stagnation of economy and political disorder have given many people big frustration. In China, social tension from economic gap between rich and poor as well as the problem of corruption is getting more and more serious. The economy of DPRK is practically collapsing and without fundamental economic and social reform, which means the end of current regime, it is impossible to recover even with substantive external assistance. The people of Republic of Korea, might be suffering from the gap between their high expectation and reality, and a kind

of instability.

For each country, it is very easy and convenient to find some enemies and blame the troubles on them. If they blame other countries, they may avoid domestic turmoil but, instead, it may deteriorate the international relations, which, I am afraid, might happen now in the Northeast Asia. Furthermore, it is quite difficult to solve these problems from outside. Domestic problems may affect the international environment and make it worse, and deteriorating international atmosphere would make more stress to the people in the region. This is a typical vicious cycle and we must stop this cycle to happen, or reverse this cycle. But how is the problem.

IV Approach to Overcome the Difficulty

It is quite difficult to improve the situation in the Northeast Asia and I do not have any clear idea about where to start the process. There are some suggestions for improving crucial bilateral relations by solving outstanding problems like border disputes. However, the true reason behind the prolonged disputes is, in my opinion, domestic rather than external. I believe that most of relevant countries do understand the cost of continuing the disputes. But, the governments of the relevant countries have been reluctant to make any compromise because it may give an impression of weak leadership before their people.

It may be possible for the relevant governments to avoid escalation and, some country, most likely the United States, may try to mediate the disputing countries. This approach may improve the situation and will contribute to the confidence building in the region, but it will not solve the problems without solving domestic troubles in respective country. This is the most important and most difficult part. If the people in the region would seek for more conflict, there would be no hope anyway. But I do not think majority of the ordinary people in the region are willing to be involved in international conflict. The biggest problem is that majority of the people may still believe that there is no alternative than continuing deterrence toward their supposed enemy in order to protect themselves and their vital interest.

We must overcome these futile disputes among the governments. In other words, we must find ways to go through the boundaries and foster mutual understanding among the peoples of the relevant countries. This is also a formidable task. Especially, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, for Japanese people to establish some substantive communications with the ordinary people in DPRK. Maybe, the only possibility is trying to establish some channel through appropriate organizations in China. Well, I know it is also difficult for Japanese people to approach Chinese people

now. However, I still believe that, fundamentally, it is easier for Japanese, Chinese and South Korean people to share their concerns about the situation in DPRK. We may start from this, sharing humanitarian concerns about the people in DPRK though it may look like too far from nuclear matters. Assisting the people in DPRK in order to avoid rapid and total collapse of the society of DPRK, particularly with nuclear capability, can be regarded as a common interest of all relevant countries, yet it may be quite difficult to implement at governmental level. But it must be easier at citizens' level and through such citizens' cooperation, we may nourish mutual understanding and trust among the people in the region.

V Conclusion: Toward the stable peace

Frankly speaking, I do not think it is possible to push through any international arrangements in the Northeast Asia or promote confidence building measures at governmental level now. But it does not mean that we have to give up. As I mentioned, we may start with establishing multinational cooperation to assist the people in DPRK and that kind of attempt will inevitably involve cooperation among the people in China, since it is almost impossible to establish a direct channel from Japan or Republic of Korea. It may look like a detour and I am sure that it will take time to establish reliable solidarity among the people in the region especially when the relations at government level are worsening. However, as many people have already pointed out, power of civil society, regrettably which is absolutely lacking in the Northeast Asia now, is indispensable in the process of nuclear disarmament. I believe we should start building up the civil society in the region through the assistance to DPRK with hope that it will open a path to regional cooperation and confidence building in the long run.