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Supporting NAPCI and Trilateral Cooperation: Prospects for Korea-EU Relations

by Michael Reiterer

ABSTRACT

The EU Global Strategy commits the EU to work towards cooperative regional orders and to pursue an integrated approach to conflicts – two parameters that fit well with the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), in which the EU has participated as a dialogue partner since its inception in 2014. Although the Republic of Korea's Trustpolitik suffered a setback because of the intensification of nuclear and missile tests by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the ideas for which NAPCI stands – engagement and cooperation – remain valid. The narrative might have to change, however, as will the set-up of the NAPCI process: in the long term, a combination of elements from the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Six-Party Talks, trilateral cooperation and the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue could lead to a more promising functional approach, supported by track 2 activities such as a network of think tanks. Lessons learnt from the EU's successful mediation in the talks with Iran to settle that country's nuclear issue could also be useful. The EU Global Strategy clearly spells out that European security and Asian prosperity are intertwined, a guarantee for further mutual engagement.

European Union | EU Global Strategy | South Korea | North Korea | Summit

keywords

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1. The EU's commitment to Asia in the light of the security landscape in Northeast Asia

In order to avoid any misconceptions from the outset, the most recent policy paper from the European Union, its 2016 Global Strategy, spells out clearly that

[t]here is a direct connection between European prosperity and Asian security. In light of the economic weight that Asia represents for the EU – and vice versa – peace and stability in Asia are a prerequisite for our prosperity. We will deepen economic diplomacy and scale up our security role in Asia.¹

Like any other political player, the EU has to focus on internal problems and those in its “near abroad.” However, that does not mean that it will become entirely Eurocentric and neglect the “far abroad” – especially Asia. Therefore, it was a conscious decision to publish the Global Strategy at virtually the same time as the UK's vote to leave the EU (Brexit). An institution of the size and nature of the EU – the largest economy, trader, investor and donor of development aid worldwide – must, and is able to, handle more than one problem, and meet more than one challenge, at the same time. This was reinforced by a recent policy speech by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security

¹ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, 28 June 2016, p. 37, <http://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/node/2>. See also Michael Reiterer, “Regional Security Architecture in the Asia-Pacific: What Role for the European Union?”, in *The Asan Forum*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (May-June 2016), <http://www.theasanforum.org/?p=7427>.

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· Paper presented at the international conference “Trust Building in North East Asia and the Role of the EU” organized in Rome on 21 October 2016 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) with the kind support of the Korea Foundation (KF).

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Policy/Vice-President of the Commission (HRVP) Federica Mogherini on the role of the EU as a global actor,² as well as the decision to hold the EU-ASEAN foreign ministers meeting in Bangkok in October 2016.³

The unprecedented economic growth of East Asia in general, and of China in particular, has produced rapid power shifts within the region, and, as a consequence, among regions. Newcomers demand their share of the economic “cake” – a claim to which others have to yield, either in absolute or in relative terms. This creates a temptation to fall back on the zero-sum politics that characterized the Cold War of the mid-twentieth century.

The Obama Administration’s “Pivot to Asia” appears to have been more a move to preserve the US position in the Asia-Pacific region than to conquer new ground, while China has to carve out new territory in order to re-establish itself as a regional power with a global vocation.

China has sought a new Asian security architecture since President Xi Jinping’s 2014 speech at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA).⁴ The People’s Republic regards such a new system as a potential security guarantee for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). However, the DPRK rejects any third-party guarantees and has continued the development of its nuclear arsenal through the testing of missiles and other weapons; it has even failed to rule out the pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons. This leads to spiralling tensions, which have the potential to get out of hand. Existing sanctions reaching the limits of their effectiveness could also embolden other powers to test alternative counter-measures – a scenario that carries with it an inherent escalatory potential. The decision by the Republic of Korea (ROK) to allow the stationing of the US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system,⁵ while purporting to target the DPRK, has also become an irritant to China and Russia – not least because of a lack of trust regarding its intended objectives. This led to the cancellation of these two countries’ participation in the third High-level Intergovernmental Meeting on the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI).

² Federica Mogherini, *Speech at the public seminar “EU as a Global Actor”*, Stockholm, 10 October 2016, <http://europa.eu/!GW36Dw>.

³ Bangkok Declaration on Promoting an ASEAN-EU Global Partnership for Shared Strategic Goals, Endorsed at the 21st ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting held in Bangkok on 13-14 October 2016, <http://europa.eu/!FM46jX>.

⁴ Zhang Yu, “Xi Defines New Asian Security Vision at CICA”, in *Global Times*, 22 May 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/861573.shtml>.

⁵ If the deployment of effective North Korean IRBMs and SLBMs is seen as inevitable, it would only make sense for the US-ROK alliance to deploy the US-made THAAD missile system on South Korean soil in order to intercept any missiles that the DPRK might launch in any future crisis. However, the range of the THAAD radars could also mean this system could detect missiles fired from China, thereby eroding the efficacy of the PRC’s strategic nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis the US.

East Asia has more contested boundaries than any other part of the world. Although attention has focused recently on disputed maritime delimitation in the East and South China Seas, many competing claims over land borders also remain unresolved. The recently rekindled conflict between India and Pakistan, two nuclear powers, serves as a sobering reminder of the risks involved.

While arbitration has worked in some cases (Malaysia/Indonesia in 2002, Malaysia/Singapore in 2008, the Philippines/Indonesia in 2014 and India/Bangladesh in 2014), China sticks with its four “NOs” in the case of the South China Sea Arbitration with the Philippines: no participation, acceptance, recognition or implementation. This is a problem for the rule of law in the region, and contributes to latent nationalism; the latter can be exploited or instrumentalized easily at any time.

Accidental escalation through encounters in the East and South China Sea are aggravated by the growing size and increased frequency of patrols by and encounters with coastguard vessels of the parties involved.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), military expenditure in East Asia is growing more rapidly than in any other region of the world apart from Africa:

Military spending in Asia and Oceania rose by 5.4 per cent in 2015 and by 64 per cent between 2006 and 2015, reaching \$436 billion in 2015 at current prices and exchange rates. China had by far the highest military expenditure in the region: an estimated \$215 billion, or 49 per cent of regional spending. This was more than four times that of India, which was the region’s second-largest spender. Almost all countries in the region increased their spending between 2006 and 2015.⁶

Among the 15 biggest military spenders worldwide are four Asian countries: China, at no. 2; India, at no. 6; Japan, at no. 8; and the ROK, at no. 10. Factoring in the US (the no. 1 spender), Russia (no. 3) and Australia (no. 13), all of whom have a strong security stake in the area, seven out of 15 top spenders are in the Asia Pacific region, a statistic that serves to underline heightened tensions:

Heightened tensions with China over the South China Sea are reflected in substantial growth in military expenditure in 2015 by Indonesia (16 per cent), the Philippines (25 per cent) and Viet Nam (7.6 per cent). Japan also began to increase spending in 2015 after years of decline, signalling rising threat perceptions from both China and North Korea.⁷

⁶ Sam Perlo-Freeman et al., “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2015”, in *SIPRI Fact Sheets*, April 2016, p. 3, <https://www.sipri.org/node/3187>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The rising potential for conflict escalation and the need to protect existing economic stakes suggest that the time may now be ripe for a more active discussion of arms-control measures and their application in Asia.

Nuclear threat potential is high: six out of nine nuclear powers are active in Asia, three of them are outside Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) frameworks, and “[m]eanwhile, the North Korean threat grows.”⁸

These developments are taking place against the backdrop of a lack of a regional security system that is able to deal with the challenges; all the while, the East Asia Summit (EAS) has potential, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) a history and NAPCI⁹ is searching for a genuine role.

At the same time, non-traditional security threats – e.g. earthquakes; hurricanes; and pandemics, such as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) – remain risks that necessitate preparatory, capacity building and training measures. They are prime examples of actions requiring close regional cooperation.

2. A review of NAPCI

The EU has a long tradition of engagement on the Korean Peninsula, as evidenced by its participation in the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) in the 1990s.¹⁰ Therefore, the EU has also honoured the Korean invitation to join NAPCI as a dialogue partner and has remained supportive, as evidenced by the joint press statement of the 8th Republic of Korea-EU Summit, which took place in Seoul on 15 September 2015:

The Leaders discussed the security situation in East Asia and highlighted that regional cooperation needs to be strengthened in order to build trust, which would serve as the foundation for prosperity and stability in the region and beyond. In this regard, the EU reaffirmed its continued support for the multilateral process promoted by the ROK’s Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI). [ROK] President Park appreciated that the EU has made indispensable contributions to developing NAPCI by sharing its experience on regional multilateral cooperation in particular during the ROK-EU Joint Seminars in Seoul in 2014 and in Brussels in

⁸ “A Shrimp among Whales”, in *The Economist*, Vol. 421, No. 9013 (29 October 2016), p. 28, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21709317-threat-north-grows-south-korea-finds-itself-lonely-place-shrimp-among-whales>.

⁹ Michael Reiterer, “The NAPCI in the Volatile Security Environment of North-East Asia: Which Role for the European Union?”, in *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2015), p. 573-589. This paper provides an overview of the European experience in trust building and offers some concrete examples in the area of energy, education, joint management of shared resources (fisheries), environment, volunteer services, etc.

¹⁰ See the 1997 agreement available in KEDO official website: http://www.kedo.org/ap_main.asp.

2015. The EU Leader expressed support for the active role of the ROK as the chair country in leading the trilateral cooperation among the ROK, Japan and China and welcomed the ROK's hosting of the 6th ROK-Japan-China Trilateral Summit in the near future.¹¹

However, the deteriorating relationship with the DPRK casts serious doubt on these examples of *Trustpolitik* – particularly, the series of nuclear and missile tests and the adoption of policy measures such as the closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the deployment of THAAD, which China and Russia perceive as threats to their own security. ROK President Park Geun-hye stated before the National Assembly, in February 2016:

It has become clear that we cannot break North Korea's will to develop nuclear weapons through existing means and goodwill [...] It's time to find a fundamental solution for bringing practical change in North Korea and to show courage in putting that into action. [...] The government will take stronger and more effective measures to make North Korea bitterly realise that it cannot survive with nuclear development and that it will only speed up regime collapse.¹²

In addition, President Park has openly invited defectors from the DPRK to come to the ROK, and has instructed ministries to prepare for an increasing influx.¹³

There is obviously a need for either a new narrative or a new policy. As for NAPCI, there is a need to enhance public awareness domestically as well as internationally, which will only be successful if

- there is a clear message – e.g. terms of reference and an accompanying strategy, "road map" plus communication strategy based on content (not words);
- it is clear that NAPCI works only long-term and not short-term or for ad hoc problem solving;
- "hard" security issues can profit from the transfer of confidence from non-traditional and "soft" security measures;
- soft institutionalization following the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) example e.g. a dialogue structure without institutionalization can be achieved: best done in close cooperation with the Trilateral Secretariat/process in order to assure life beyond the current ROK administration;
- buy-in by participants and dialogue partners can be achieved; and
- a review process confirms its additionality, complementarity and usefulness.

¹¹ Joint Press Statement, 8th Republic of Korea-EU Summit, Seoul, 15 September 2015, point 17, <http://europa.eu/!pD73QR>.

¹² AFP, "South Korea's Park Says Time to Play Hardball with North", in *The Express Tribune*, 16 February 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/?p=1047820>.

¹³ Arirang News, "President Park Calls for Resettlement Plan for Defectors, Stronger Sanctions on N. Korea", in *YouTube*, 10 October 2016, <https://youtu.be/wKgKzZNeI6s>.

3. NAPCI: progress achieved

In the run-up to the third meeting,¹⁴ which took place in Washington on 6 October 2016 – the first time that the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting had been held outside the Republic of Korea (in principle, a strong sign of “buy-in” by partners) – some progress could be registered:

- the designation of national Focal Points (in 2015);
- customized cooperation in some of the areas covered by NAPCI such as: (a) nuclear safety, whereby meetings of the Top Regulators (TRM) were held along with the enlarged format (TRM+) – e.g. the Northeast Asia Nuclear Safety Consultative Body; (b) disaster management – an ROK-Japan-China Trilateral Table Top Exercise (TTX) with Russia, the US and Mongolia as observers; and (c) energy security – a meeting of the Northeast Asia Energy Security Forum.

The third NAPCI meeting was overshadowed by boycotts by China and Russia, primarily to express displeasure about the THAAD deployment decision. In its reaction, Russia seemed to playing a supportive role to China. This diminished the ROK’s success in its policy of achieving co-ownership of the process by another NAPCI participant.

Despite the boycott, the co-hosts decided to proceed with the meeting in order to demonstrate continuity, patience and the will to provide a platform for meetings and discussions to underline the continued need for *Trustpolitik*.

In contrast to the official event, Russian and Chinese representatives participated actively in the NAPCI Forum, an experts’ meeting that is held in parallel with the officials’ meeting.

4. The way forward

Participants agreed that NAPCI can best contribute to the necessary trust building in Northeast Asia as a long-term, inclusive and open process while continuing to focus on functional cooperation in “soft” security areas in order to create common ground. There is a need to continue to actively engage in, support or complement regional and multilateral frameworks of dialogue and cooperation, to create synergies as part of a networking diplomacy. Various formats are possible:

- Making better use of the ASEAN Regional Forum, in which the DPRK participates but has not, thus far, played a decisive role.
- Revival of the stalled Six-Party Talks (SPT) – supported by many as the (past) forum for talks, although rather unlikely at this stage. Interesting to note in this context that the participants in the NAPCI process are the parties of the

¹⁴ South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), *Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative Forum 2016 Takes Place*, 8 October 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hzlf8ok>.

SPT minus the DPRK plus Mongolia and the dialogue partners (EU, OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] and the UN). The last-named, as a group or individually, could play a more active role as facilitator for a reconvening of the talks if judged helpful by the parties.

- Building on and eventually enlarging the Trilateral Cooperation between China, the ROK and Japan, which has gained momentum again in 2016 with 18 functional ministerial or high-level meetings (finance, culture, education, and environment) plus a foreign ministers' meeting.
- Seeking synergies and alignment with the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue, managed by Mongolia, in which the DPRK participates.
- Drawing on the KEDO experience and eventually making use of its still-existing legal shell – a functional approach to the talks on energy could be re-attempted, bearing in mind that energy was one of the founding trust- and confidence-building elements at the beginning of European integration (Europe's founding Coal and Steel Community – the ECSC).

In addition, a network of think tanks supporting NAPCI, drawing on work done by the OSCE and supported by the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), could contribute as a platform for exchanges in addition to the valuable contributions by the meetings of the Northeast Asia Cooperation Forum. While this could increase the visibility and acceptance of NAPCI, rendering it relevant through concrete benefits for the peoples concerned, track 2 or 1.5 platforms ease the DPRK's participation – as demonstrated by the Zermatt Dialogue, organized by Switzerland.

Last but not least, lessons learnt in the negotiations with Iran could play a role. Despite considerable differences between the two cases, there could be some lessons learnt concerning format and negotiating technique, the role of facilitators and a more flexible format for talks. In the end, persistence, as well as multilevel and multitasked cooperation, allowed the EU, in cooperation with its partners, to make use of a geometry variable in order to broker a nuclear deal with Iran.

Conclusions

The impeachment of President Park has further endangered that NAPCI will outlive her presidency. However, striving to build trust and confidence will remain a crucial task for any future ROK government. As in the past, the name of the project might change but the policy might remain valid, despite – or, rather, because of – mounting tensions.

Greater continuity across various administrations would facilitate trust building and eventually preparing for meaningful talks. Cooperating more closely, or even merging, with other formats in order to achieve synergies in the interest of establishing/maintaining lines of communication is a possibility worth considering. Thus, participants in the third meeting recognized "the need to build on the discussion of the Meeting and continue their efforts to actively engage in

multilateral dialogues and cooperation as a long-term investment for the peace and prosperity in the region."¹⁵ Assigning a greater role to civil society is another requirement: intertwining the NAPCI Forum with the intergovernmental meeting and supporting this with a think-tank forum would be useful first steps in this regard.

Two of the five priorities in the Global Strategy commit the EU to follow through in its external action, namely to build "cooperative regional orders" and an integrated approach to conflicts¹⁶ – both priorities of particular relevance for NAPCI.

Therefore, and based on the EU's experience of voluntary regional governance (which is a fundamental rationale for the EU's own peace and development in the twenty-first century, the Global Strategy commits the EU to "promote and support cooperative regional orders worldwide, including in the most divided areas."¹⁷ The latter qualifier certainly applies to the Korean Peninsula, which is also the forum for simultaneously promoting non-proliferation. Thus, critical engagement in order to spin the thin thread of communication leading to talks forms part of an integrated approach to this conflict, which has a global dimension and which challenges global governance.

Updated 10 January 2017

¹⁵ Ibid., Chair's Summary.

¹⁶ The other three are security for the Union, state and societal resilience, global governance for the 21st century. European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, cit., p. 9-10.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

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