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Northeast Asia's Evolving Security Order: Power Politics, Trust Building and the Role of the EU

by Elena Atanassova-Cornelis

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamics of competition and cooperation in Northeast Asia, and how they shape the evolving security order. It also pays close attention to what these current trends mean for the interests and role of the European Union in this region. The paper argues that strategic uncertainties and geopolitical tensions, exacerbated by unresolved historical issues and mutual distrust, underpin the power-based competitive approaches to the security order in Northeast Asia. At the same time, the growing economic interdependence and common concerns in the area of non-traditional security continue to drive trilateral cooperation between South Korea, Japan and China. Importantly, the three neighbours share an understanding that trust is a prerequisite for a stable regional order. From this perspective, the EU's know-how of confidence and institution building can stimulate the, still nascent, community-building efforts in Northeast Asia.

*South Korea | North Korea | Japan | China | Regional integration | Economy
| Security | United States | European Union*

keywords

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by Elena Atanassova-Cornelis*

Introduction

Northeast Asia¹ is a region characterized by tremendous economic dynamism and growing socio-economic interconnectedness. At the same time, regional tensions and conflicts remain a defining feature of Northeast Asia's strategic landscape. The 11th President of the Republic of Korea (South Korea, the ROK), Park Geun-hye, has aptly described these regional dynamics as the "Asian paradox" – the growing disparity between deepening economic interdependence and a lack of progress in politico-security cooperation.² Against this backdrop, this paper examines the dynamics of competition and cooperation in Northeast Asia, and how they shape security order. The paper also pays close attention to what these current trends mean for the interests and role of the European Union (EU)³ in this region.

1. Northeast Asia's strategic uncertainties

Countries in Northeast Asia, and more broadly in the Asia-Pacific region, face two major uncertainties, which are directly related to the changing geopolitical environment in Asia.⁴ The first uncertainty is associated with the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and concerns the PRC's mid- to long-term regional

¹ The region is defined as including South Korea, North Korea, Japan and China, as well as the US as the main extra-territorial power.

² Yun Byung-se, "Park Geun-hye's Trustpolitik: A New Framework for South Korea's Foreign Policy", in *Global Asia*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Fall 2013), p. 12, <https://www.globalasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/462.pdf>.

³ In this paper, Europe refers to the European Union as a regional entity and the two references are used interchangeably.

⁴ Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Frans Paul van der Putten, "Strategic Uncertainty and the Regional Security Order in East Asia", in *E-International Relations*, 24 November 2015, <http://www.e-ir.info/?p=59783>.

* Elena Atanassova-Cornelis is Senior Lecturer in East Asian Politics at the University of Antwerp and the Catholic University of Louvain.

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strategic objectives and behaviour. The second uncertainty is about the future role of the US, notably the sustainability of its regional security commitments and engagement in Asia, as well as the future course of Sino-American relations. These two fundamental uncertainties underlie the more specific short-term anxieties of Northeast Asia's regional players.

At present, China-associated worries in the Asia-Pacific region are largely driven by the PRC's advances in the maritime security sphere – especially its perceived assertiveness since 2010 in pressing its territorial claims in the East China Sea (ECS) and South China Sea (SCS), as well as its naval modernization. Geopolitical and power considerations in Northeast Asia are major sources of tensions in the ECS disputes. These considerations fuel Sino-Japanese rivalry and exacerbate these nations' mutual strategic distrust, which is underpinned by historically based animosities and competing nationalisms. Explicit or implicit concerns about possible Chinese aspirations for regional maritime domination and hegemony have been expressed by the US, Japan and South East Asian countries, especially by some of the claimants in the SCS disputes. Notably, the United States' own uncertainties about its ability to defend allies and friends in Asia have become more explicit as Chinese power has grown. China-associated anxieties in the US are now increasingly focused on the PRC's naval power and, in particular, its behaviour in regional maritime disputes.

Seoul, however, does not share Tokyo's and Washington's "China threat" perceptions, and is wary of antagonizing Beijing by joining a US-Japanese anti-China coalition.⁵ To be sure, the normally cordial Korean-Chinese relations do experience their own jolts due to competing sovereignty claims over the Ieodo Rock, and the ROK's repeated complains about illegal fishing by Chinese trawlers in South Korea's waters off the Korean Peninsula's west coast. Yet, it is Japan (rather than China) that South Korea perceives as a threat to its security, despite its shared concerns with Tokyo about missile and nuclear developments by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea, the DPRK).⁶ Japan's sovereignty claims to Dokdo Islands (known as Takeshima in Japan) and its expanded security role under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, especially in the maritime domain, have largely driven the ROK's recent naval modernization beyond peninsular defence. Additionally, persistent historical grievances feed mutual antagonism between South Korea and Japan, hampering their bilateral security cooperation.

Questions about Washington's willingness and ability to sustain its Asian-Pacific engagement in the context of China's growing regional influence, and amid economic and fiscal constraints in the US (especially cuts in defence spending),

⁵ Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, Ramon Pacheco Pardo and Eva Pejsova, "Pride and Prejudice: Maritime Disputes in Northeast Asia", in *EUISS Reports*, No. 23 (April 2015), <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/pride-and-prejudice-maritime-disputes-in-northeast-asia>.

⁶ Christian Wirth, "'Power' and 'stability' in the China-Japan-South Korea Regional Security Complex", in *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2015), p. 553-575.

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have increasingly been raised in various Asian capitals. For the US allies in Northeast Asia – Japan and South Korea – the future course of US-China relations is an even more critical question. On the one hand, they are worried about a more pronounced US-China power struggle and its outcome. Indeed, both Japan and South Korea are economically interdependent with the PRC, but reliant on the US for security protection against the DPRK's military threat (and Japan, additionally, against the prospect of a more hostile China). On the other hand, Tokyo and Seoul each fear a reduction of US presence in the region. This could result from the discontinuation of Barack Obama's "rebalance" under the new Donald J. Trump Administration and/or the US' inability to maintain its Asian commitments, or from Washington's decision to accommodate Beijing in the long term. The latter aspect reflects regional uncertainties associated with the ongoing transition towards a post-US regional security order (that may or may not be dominated by China).⁷ To be sure, both South Korea and Japan favour positive Sino-US relations for the maintenance of regional stability in Northeast Asia. Yet, they are wary of a joint US-China regional leadership that might disregard their respective security interests: in the case of Japan, in the ECS territorial disputes, while for the ROK, on the issue of Korean unification.

China's short- to medium-term concerns about the US have primarily been related to that country's perceived "strategic encirclement" of the PRC as part of its rebalance. Beijing has also strongly objected to Washington's greater involvement in the ECS and SCS issues under the Obama Administration. In the long run, China also fears possible regional exclusion as a result of the US' strengthened role in various multilateral arrangements (e.g. the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, TPP). However, this particular Chinese concern might subside under the incoming Trump Administration, which is likely to scale down US engagement in the multilateral arena.

Although geographically located far from the region and uninvolved in Northeast Asia's geopolitics, Europe does have direct stakes in Asian security. Indeed, the EU has extensive economic interests in the region and seeks stability of the maritime commons, which are critical for European exports and imports. The PRC, Japan and the ROK are the Union's second, seventh and eighth largest trading partners respectively. A more pronounced US-China or Japan-China power competition in the region, or a major escalation of the maritime territorial disputes, would adversely affect international trade and jeopardize the safety of Asia's shipping lanes. Additionally, North Korea's policies not only destabilize Northeast Asia, but the DPRK's potential proliferation of nuclear weapons, technology and materials may also have direct security implications for Europe's own neighbourhood.

⁷ Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Frans Paul van der Putten, "Strategic Uncertainty and the Regional Security Order in East Asia", cit.

2. Competitive security dynamics

One of the implications of Northeast Asia's strategic uncertainties for the security behaviour of its regional players is the intensification (albeit to varying degrees) of power-based and competitive security practices in the region.

A common response to such uncertainties by Japan and the ROK – in particular, to ensure the continuity of US defence commitments – has been a reinforcement of their respective bilateral security ties with the United States. In the case of the US-Japan alliance, the most notable development was the adoption in 2015 of the Revised Defense Guidelines for Cooperation. These guidelines expanded the substantive and geographical scope of joint missions, including those involving maritime security, seeking to make the alliance a major contributor to peace and stability both in the Asia-Pacific region and globally.⁸ The bilateral agreement was in line with Prime Minister Abe's policy of "proactive pacifism." This policy has been largely a response to uncertainties associated with the rise of China and has promoted a more active security role for Japan, pursued both jointly with the US and alone.

South Korea, too, has sought a strengthening of its military alliance with the US in order to reduce the risks of possible US "abandonment." Unlike Japan, Seoul's primary concern has been the DPRK's military threat. North Korea under Kim Jong-un has continued to escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and has conducted several missile tests and three nuclear tests that violate UN resolutions. As a result, the ROK and the US have decided to deploy in South Korea, in 2017, the US-made Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system. While this advanced defence system is said to be intended only for countering threats from the DPRK, for China this decision has been controversial. Beijing has strongly opposed the deployment of THAAD, fearing that the system's radars would be able to detect and track the PRC's own strategic missiles. A perception of US containment of China and distrust of American regional strategic objectives have underpinned these Chinese concerns.

The issue of THAAD, and the resulting security dilemma in which South Korea finds itself as a result of Sino-US rivalry, complicates Seoul's delicate balancing act between maintaining a strong alliance with Washington and developing a cordial relationship with Beijing. While South Korea seeks to deepen its security ties with the US in order to deter the DPRK, it also needs China's cooperation in addressing the denuclearization of the North.⁹ Equally important, the PRC is the ROK's largest trading partner and the two have a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that entered into force in 2015 – the first FTA in Northeast Asia, in fact. The hallmark of South

⁸ Japan Ministry of Defence, *Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation*, 27 April 2015, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/shishin_20150427e.html.

⁹ Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, Ramon Pacheco Pardo and Eva Pejsova, "Pride and Prejudice: Maritime Disputes in Northeast Asia", cit.

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Korea's approach towards China has been economic and diplomatic engagement. This approach has also formed the basis of Seoul's multilateral initiative designed to engage the other regional stakeholders – such as Japan, the US and the DPRK – as part of President Park's Trustpolitik in Northeast Asia (discussed later in this paper).

Unlike South Korea, Japan has placed a strong emphasis on strategic diversification away from China (and, by extension, from Northeast Asia) as a way of reducing the risks of possible Chinese domination in Asia. Defined as a "strategic pivot South,"¹⁰ Tokyo's policy has focused on enhancing its bilateral economic, diplomatic and defence ties with nations geographically located south of Japan's primary sphere of geostrategic interests. These have included some of the claimants in the SCS disputes, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as Indonesia, Australia and India. Japan's difficult political relations with South Korea, and the two countries' strategic divergence on China, have additionally contributed to Tokyo's shift away from Northeast Asia and towards the broader Asia-Pacific region – the latter move being manifested in Japan's embrace of ASEAN-led multilateral frameworks as a means of constraining the PRC's regional influence through "institutional balancing."¹¹

As far as China is concerned, in order to avoid isolation in Northeast Asia amid fears of US containment it has paid a great deal of attention to maintaining a stable and positive relationship with South Korea. This has included regular high-level summits, economic engagement and seeking a common stance with Seoul on Japan-related historical grievances. Beijing has also sought to reinforce the image of China as a "responsible" major power seeking the DPRK's denuclearization by supporting the various UNSC resolutions on North Korea. The THAAD issue now appears to be a major challenge to these PRC-ROK relations.

Finally, regional geopolitics is further complicated by the ambivalent attitudes of China, Japan and the US towards Korean unification, which stems from their diverging strategic interests and competition for influence on the Korean Peninsula. This competition has now sharpened due to the uncertainties associated with the region's transitional security order. As a result, Seoul often feels alienated and suspicious of the strategic motivations of Northeast Asia's major powers.

¹⁰ Corey J. Wallace, "Japan's Strategic Pivot South: Diversifying the Dual Hedge", in *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2013), p. 479-517.

¹¹ On the concept of "institutional balancing", see, Kai He, "Contested Regional Orders and Institutional Balancing in the Asia Pacific", in *International Politics*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (February 2015), p. 208-222.

3. Cooperation and trust building

Despite the geopolitical tensions and lingering mutual distrust, South Korea, Japan and China simply cannot ignore the powerful forces of regional integration. Indeed, a critical driver of trilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia has been the high level of economic interdependence between the three neighbours, as well as the shared objectives of achieving economic growth and prosperity. Furthermore, the uncertain strategic environment in the region also acts as a strong force for cooperation. A number of security challenges in Northeast Asia – notably in the realm of non-traditional security (NTS) – require a joint response, and one undertaken by the regional players themselves rather than their relying on external powers. Trilateralism reflects this shared understanding, which means moving beyond bilateralism and the US-led alliance system.¹²

Indeed, South Korea, Japan and China share many common concerns that fall outside the divisive area of “high politics.” Importantly, by focusing on the issues that unite the three players, NTS cooperation provides opportunities for trust building, and thereby for jointly addressing regional strategic uncertainties. In this regard, such an approach to regional cooperation, which utilizes institutions as drivers of mutual confidence and trust, has been defined as a “uniquely Northeast Asian” way of creating institutions.¹³ Additionally, common NTS concerns include security challenges not confined to national borders; hence, their successful management requires strong regional cooperation. The US-led alliance system is not suitable for tackling such issues.

Trilateral NTS cooperation – for example, in the areas of environmental protection, disaster prevention and the tackling of infectious diseases – has gradually evolved alongside the power-based and bilateral security practices discussed earlier. Focusing on economic, financial and NTS concerns, three-way summits have been institutionalized in the region since 2008. The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat was established in Seoul in 2011.¹⁴ This trilateralism is underpinned by the region's high level of economic interdependence, which has, since 2013, driven the South Korea-Japan-China FTA talks. The sixth trilateral summit, in 2015, was particularly significant as it took place after a two-year period of interruption due to diplomatic tensions. The resulting 2015 Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia stressed the leaders' joint commitment to stabilizing regional relations, pursuing economic integration and institutionalizing further trilateral collaboration.¹⁵

¹² Jaewoo Choo, “Non-Traditional Security Cooperation and Northeast Asian Regional Order”, in Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Frans Paul van der Putten, eds., *Changing Security Dynamics in East Asia. A Post-US Regional Order in the Making?*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 171-190.

¹³ Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁴ For more information, see the official website: <http://www.tcs-asia.org>.

¹⁵ Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia, Seoul, 1 November 2015, http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page1e_000058.html.

Building upon the already existing practices of trilateralism, President Park's Trustpolitik seeks to both deepen and expand their scope, in terms of issues, participants and objectives. The concept itself represents a vision and a foreign-policy tool of the Park Administration, and promotes a new order of long-lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia centred on increased cooperation built on trust.¹⁶ In this context, the administration has proposed the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) as "a roadmap for implementing Trustpolitik at the regional level."¹⁷ Emphasizing informality and dialogue, NAPCI seeks a reinforcement of functional cooperation on NTS issues and the socialization of regional players through interaction; it is hoped that this process will foster mutual trust and, ultimately, lead to collaboration on "high politics" issues.¹⁸ Based on the principles of engagement, inclusiveness and multilateralism, NAPCI has been welcomed by Japan and China as well as being endorsed by the US and the EU.

Europe's own policies towards Northeast Asia reflect the main features of the evolving trilateral cooperation between South Korea, Japan and China. The EU has pursued an engagement strategy towards each of these three players through extensive economic ties and bilateral strategic partnerships. Europe has a political dialogue with the PRC at various levels; has institutionalized its cooperation with the ROK by concluding, in 2010, an FTA and a political agreement; and is currently negotiating similar agreements with Japan. Brussels has extensive cooperation experience with Tokyo, and is enhancing its collaboration with Seoul on NTS issues, including climate change, energy security and non-proliferation. Building trust through functional cooperation, and gradually expanding the scope of engagement, has been the hallmark of the EU's approach towards each of the three players. NAPCI is reminiscent of this approach.

4. Approaches to regional order

As this paper illustrates, the dominant approaches to regional security order in Northeast Asia remain very much power based and bilateral. Japan and South Korea are each responding to strategic uncertainties in ways that facilitate a strong and enduring regional role for the US centred on bilateralism. For China, the strengthening of American-led alliances is perceived as a threat to its own interests and as a symptom of US-led containment. Beijing seeks to maintain a favourable balance of power by reinforcing its own deterrence capabilities, as well as by trying to court South Korea with economic incentives and convergent policies on North Korea. The competitive dynamics associated with Northeast Asia's geopolitics reinforce the role of bilateral alliances, strategic alignments and

¹⁶ Yun Byung-se, "Park Geun-hye's Trustpolitik", cit.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁸ 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.

military capabilities for maintaining a stable regional order.

At the same time, these power-based security practices have been accompanied by approaches to regional order building that underscore economic cooperation, common security interests and multilateralism. Both Tokyo and Seoul seek to include China in (economic) order building and to jointly tackle NTS challenges, while continuing to support US engagement in Asia's "hard" security issues. Beijing, too, promotes trilateral cooperation with its neighbours and encourages multilateral approaches for addressing the North Korean issue. Despite the continuing geopolitical tensions, the trilateral summit (resuscitated in 2015) and the ROK's NAPCI are subtle indicators that the logic of community building is "at work" – which, in itself, is a critical factor for generating trust.

The EU has major economic stakes in Asia. Therefore, it has a strong interest in promoting regional cooperation and a stable regional order in Northeast Asia, conceptualized along the lines of community-building logic. Its support for institution-building activities in other parts of the world has been an important policy objective for Brussels, for strong institutions are regarded as the primary means for achieving sustainable peace. Being concerned about potential instability in Asia, the EU is wary of the dominance of power-based approaches to regional order.

In Northeast Asia – a region with a high concentration of material power and a high trust deficit – the EU does enjoy a certain advantage. It lacks "hard" power and its involvement in the region's traditional security issues is minimal. The Union is thus not party to regional geopolitical rivalries, nor does its involvement exacerbate regional security dilemmas. On the contrary, it is perceived by South Korea, Japan and China as a model of regional reconciliation and integration. The EU also enjoys positive relations with each of these three players.

Sharing a great deal with the European experience and emphasizing inclusiveness, NAPCI, by its very nature, is conducive to an expanded EU role in regional order building in Asia. In this context, Brussels can really make a difference by bringing its own experience to bear. It should seek to reinforce Northeast Asia's existing functional cooperation on NTS by providing concrete examples of European cross-border policies – for example, in the areas of energy, nuclear security and environmental protection.¹⁹ Indeed, the EU already has extensive bilateral cooperation with South Korea, Japan and China on a number of NTS issues. This places it in a favourable position to share its knowledge, acquired in the European context, and thereby foster regional trilateralism in the region's less sensitive areas. At the same time, promoting historical reconciliation in Northeast Asia may prove to be a more challenging task for Brussels. The main reason for this is that historical disputes in the region are intertwined with its competitive power dynamics and the unresolved North Korean issue. Yet, even in this more sensitive area, the EU's

¹⁹ Ibid.

expertise in confidence and institution building could be used to stimulate the, still nascent, community-building approaches to regional order in Northeast Asia. The resuscitation of the trilateral summit and the advancing economic and NTS cooperation between South Korea, Japan and China suggest that some of the critical aspects of the European experience are indeed relevant in the Asian context. These include, notably, the understanding that political leadership plays a major role in regional reconciliation, while the pursuit of common security approaches is indispensable for regional peace and prosperity. It is in these areas that the EU can, and should, be a source of inspiration for Northeast Asia's players.

Conclusion

Strategic uncertainties and geopolitical tensions, exacerbated by unresolved historical issues and mutual distrust, underpin the power-based and competitive approaches to regional security order in Northeast Asia. The region still lacks institutions that can alleviate tensions and security dilemmas. At the same time, the growing economic interdependence and common concerns in the area of NTS continue to drive trilateral cooperation between South Korea, Japan and China. Importantly, these three neighbours share an understanding that trust is a prerequisite for a stable regional order. The path to community building in Northeast Asia, while still uncertain, remains open – and this is good news for the EU. Ultimately, however, it is up to the regional stakeholders themselves to choose which path to follow.

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

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