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

by Si Hong Kim

ABSTRACT

Scholars and policymakers often speak of an “Asian paradox” to describe Northeast Asia, as the region simultaneously displays increasing levels of economic interdependence in parallel with hegemonic struggles. To overcome this paradox, the Park Geun-hye Administration in South Korea adopted a strategy known as the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) whose aim was not the immediate establishment of multilateral solutions; rather, it placed more emphasis on the long-term process of fostering small yet meaningful forms of cooperation. Nonetheless, it has thus far achieved no significant breakthroughs and, if anything, conflicts in the region have become more pronounced. This paper makes a comparison between NAPCI and the process of trilateral cooperation between China, Japan and Korea. In fact, there are many similarities between the two approaches – and they can be complementary. It is argued here that in order to build a norm-based East Asian regime, cooperation between South Korea and Japan is indispensable. Simultaneously, it is essential to demonstrate to China that such rules-based systems can be effective for managing security in the region. As the EU has been a relevant model for the NAPCI initiative, there are implications for South Korea-EU relations, including their cooperation in non-traditional security issues.

*Northeast Asia | Regional integration | China | Japan | South Korea |
European Union | CFSP | Multilateralism*

keywords

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Introduction

Security in East Asia is experiencing critical and turbulent times. Stakeholders in the region are looking for interest-driven solutions rather than the idealistic and constructive norms of international relations. This means that there might be a new kind of "Cold War", with consequent intense escalation of disputes between Japan, the two Koreas, China and the US. The highest chances for confrontation arise from Sino-American relations, which most sharply manifest the aforementioned paradox of increasing economic relations alongside hegemonic struggle.

From the very beginning of her term in office, Park Geun-hye promoted a policy of so-called *Trustpolitik*, which entails a threefold mechanism. Modelled after the Helsinki Process, this strategy seemed a realistic prescription given that there had been no multilateral fora in East Asia thus far.¹ Following the typical features of middle-power diplomacy,² South Korea eagerly participated in diverse international organizations such as the UN, ASEAN + 3 (ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea) and the G20 forum.

¹ Ki Joon Hong, "Institutional Multilateralism in Northeast Asia: A Path Emergence Theory Perspective" (in Korean), in *North Korean Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2015).

² Despite of conceptual ambiguity, middle powers are defined by their global orientation, which tends to pursue multilateral solutions and to embrace compromise positions in international disputes. As to the middle power Korea, see: Sung Mi-Kim, "South Korea's Middle-Power Diplomacy: Changes and Challenges", in *Chatham House Research Papers*, June 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/23415>; Scott A. Snyder (ed.), *Middle-Power Korea. Contributions to the Global Agenda*, New York, Council on Foreign Relations Press, June 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/middle-power-korea/p36623>.

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However, it appears that this forum cannot progress any further as planned because of the intensification of superpower competition and North Korea's incessant nuclear provocations. Recently, President Park even mooted, albeit cautiously, a possible regime change in Pyongyang that might lead to the eventual collapse of North Korea itself. However, a series of scandals at home have resulted in her own impeachment, and there is a strong possibility that "regime change" might actually be imminent in the South. This means that the next administration should prepare an alternative to the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) in order to address security concerns in Northeast Asia.

Against this backdrop, this paper intends to analyse the achievements of NAPCI and draw comparisons with China, Japan and Korea (hereafter, CJK) trilateral cooperation. It will then discuss how the EU and European countries, as well as ASEAN, can contribute to confidence building in the East Asian region in general, and the Korean Peninsula in particular. The final section presents prospects for South Korea-EU relations, with the aim of finding some feasible solutions to the current difficult situation.

1. NAPCI: Past achievements and future prospects

In 2013, when President Park took office, her team studied the Helsinki Process in order to draw lessons for its possible application to Northeast Asia. The basic lineaments of South Korea's foreign and security policy are threefold. The first is the Korean Peninsula Trust-building Process, which starts from securing peace, proceeds through economic integration and finally reaches political integration in inter-Korean relations. The second is NAPCI, a process that seeks to build an order of multilateral cooperation in the Northeast Asian region. The third approach is the Eurasia Initiative, which aims for continental-scale cooperation between East Asia and Europe.³

In Northeast Asia, there is a growing need for cooperation. Asian economies are surging ahead and assuming a central place in world affairs. This region accounts for around 20 percent of the global economy. However, this situation only exacerbates the so-called "Asian paradox" in Northeast Asia, with its increasing economic interdependence but underdeveloped political and security cooperation. For instance, the region lacks mechanisms for effective multilateral cooperation to deal with inter-state disputes in territorial and maritime issues.⁴

³ Sang-hyun Lee, "Challenges and Strategies for Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative", in *Current Issues and Policies*, No. 2013-12 (December 2013).

⁴ Choi Jong Kun, "A Critical View of the Park Geun-hye's Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative and Suggestions for Success" (in Korean), in *Unification Strategy Forum*, No. 54 (February 2014), p. 28-29, http://ifes.kyungnam.ac.kr/kor/PUB/PUB_0106V.aspx?code=PRI140219_0001.

NAPCI was a key element of the *Trustpolitik* pursued by the Park Administration in order to solve the Asian paradox. It is a future-oriented effort, intended to replace the environment of conflict and discord in the region with one of dialogue and cooperation. The Initiative does not focus on the immediate establishment of a body for multilateral cooperation; rather, it places more emphasis on the long-term process of constantly fostering small yet meaningful forms of cooperation. It aims to gradually encourage a change in the perceptions and attitudes of countries in the region, with the ultimate goal of developing a shared understanding and a form of multilateral security cooperation.⁵

The Initiative takes a primarily “bottom-up” approach. It attempts to consolidate political will and foster dialogue and cooperation on “soft” security issues – such as the environment, cyberspace, energy security, disaster management, nuclear safety, drugs and health. These are relatively less sensitive than their “hard” security counterparts, and do not represent a significant burden for the participating governments. Simultaneously, it also adopts a “top-down” approach, seeking to ensure that once political will is created through regular high-level meetings between governments, this will facilitate functional cooperation on specific issues.⁶

Since NAPCI was one of the main foreign-policy initiatives of the Park Administration, it was advertised through initiatives in the public and private sector. Firstly, South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has been eager to promote the Initiative to regional stakeholders – in particular, to the countries participating in the Six-Party Talks, including the US and China. NAPCI fora were also held, under the auspices of South Korea’s Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) and MOFA. These fora gathered Seoul-based ambassadors and representatives of international organizations such as the UN, NATO and the EU, in order to promote an enhanced and deeper understanding. The 2014 forum discussed matters of nuclear safety, energy security, cyberspace and the environment.⁷ The following year, together with the aforementioned “soft” security issues, some “hard” ones were introduced, such as confidence building measures (CBM).⁸ Given the currently strained relations between political leaders in Northeast Asia, it is difficult to further develop the top-down approach; NAPCI could therefore be an alternative to unlock this “frozen” situation.

Despite the lack of a major breakthrough overall, NAPCI’s achievements in fostering international consensus and inter-governmental consultation, and in advancing cooperation on specific issues, have been notable. To secure the support of the

⁵ Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *NAPCI. Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative 2016*, March 2016, p. 4, http://napci.net/eng/images/sub/eng_book.pdf.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 5.

⁷ Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *ROK Holds a High-level Meeting on Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation*, Seoul, 28 October 2014, <http://www.mofat.go.kr/webmodule/htsboard/template/read/engreadboard.jsp?typeID=12&boardid=302&seqno=314469>.

⁸ Sejong Institute, *2015 NAPCI Forum Report*, December 2015, <http://napci.net/eng/news/article.php?st=&idx=259>.

international community, the South Korean Government has held NAPCI briefing sessions in many countries in the region, actively pursuing high-level and summit diplomacy. Such efforts have also served to further deepen understanding in remote countries such as Germany, France, the UK, Canada, Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam. Furthermore, international and regional organizations such as the UN, the EU, ASEAN, NATO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) have expressed their willingness to actively take part in the Initiative. The holding of Track 1.5 diplomacy meetings, inviting experts from diverse international organizations, was also helpful. Seven key “soft” security agendas that represent common threats in the Northeast Asian region were also identified: nuclear safety, energy security, the environment, cyberspace, health, drugs and disaster management.⁹

However, thus far, meaningful achievements have not been reached despite the diverse efforts made by this Initiative. Nor have tensions lessened – if anything, conflicts in the region have escalated. For instance, North Korea’s nuclear-development programme has been the major obstacle with which the Initiative has had to try and deal. Since President Park is now in the process of impeachment, there is no clear sign of an arena to which NAPCI could contribute. Recently, the South Korean Government proposed a Five-Party Cooperation exercise, which excluded North Korea, with a view to drawing concrete results. There has been some objection from the Chinese side, but the South Korean Government continues to hold dialogues with concerned parties in order to put pressure on the North Korean regime.

2. NAPCI and trilateral cooperation

While the South Korean Government proposed NAPCI, the trilateral-cooperation process has developed via the ASEAN + 3 scheme. Trilateral cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea (CJK) is an important pillar of cooperation in the Northeast Asian region.¹⁰ Officially started at the leaders’ breakfast meeting on the sidelines of the 1999 ASEAN + 3 Summit, this cooperation gradually proved itself a worthwhile vehicle until it gained new momentum by holding its first independent summit in 2008.

As of now, China, Japan and South Korea have staged more than 20 ministerial meetings, over 60 governmental consultative mechanisms and numerous cooperative projects. Despite current political and security frictions, the three

⁹ Scott Snyder and Woo Jung-yeop, “The U.S. Rebalance and the Seoul Process. How to Align U.S. and ROK Visions for Cooperation in East Asia”, in *CFR Working Papers*, January 2015, p. 3-4, <http://on.cfr.org/2lrpWUW>.

¹⁰ Andrew Yeo, “China, Japan, South Korea Trilateral Cooperation: Implications for Northeast Asian Politics and Order”, in *EAI Issue Briefings*, NO. MASI 2012-07 (6 November 2012), http://m.eai.or.kr/eng/sub03_04_02.asp?code=eng_report&idx=11660.

leaders have continued to express their unwavering support for cooperation in order to build permanent peace, stability and prosperity in Northeast Asia. At the 6th Trilateral Summit, held on 1 November 2015 in Seoul, they agreed to further develop cooperation by supporting CJK's established mechanisms as well as developing and implementing new projects.¹¹ The leaders also recognized that the deepening of trilateral cooperation contributes to enhancing bilateral relations, and agreed to make joint efforts to achieve the common goal of building regional trust and cooperation.¹²

The three nations have, in fact, been deepening their economic and trade cooperation for a considerable period, after a Trilateral Joint Research on a CJK free-trade agreement (FTA) from 2003 to 2009 and the Joint Study for a CJK FTA in 2010-11. These efforts led to the launching of the CJK FTA Negotiation in November 2012.¹³ Recently, in June 2016, the 10th round of CJK FTA negotiations was held in Seoul. The three countries play a central role in the various mega-FTAs, and the CJK FTA will further accelerate regional economic and trade cooperation.

The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) has been a major achievement as an institutional base. This intergovernmental organization was established to contribute to the further promotion of cooperative relations between the CJK countries. Upon signature and ratification of the joint agreement, the TCS was inaugurated in Seoul in September 2011. The Secretariat General has a two-year term, and the post is filled by rotation.

There are similarities and differences between NAPCI and trilateral cooperation. The two processes have objectives and values in common, in that they are seeking peace and cooperation in the Northeast Asia region. Irrespective of political vicissitudes between the three countries, trilateral cooperation has been able to play a leading role in consultations between their governments and in efforts to identify prospects for cooperation. In this regard, NAPCI and the trilateral-cooperation process can be complementary.

Both are in the initial phase of dealing with issues of "soft" and non-traditional security in order to mitigate the disruptive effects of excessive nationalism in East Asia. The main difference between the two structures is that while NAPCI was proposed by South Korea alone, trilateral cooperation has developed (through long years of meetings and consultations) via the ASEAN + 3 framework. If the two other countries – i.e. China and Japan - were to show no great interest in the South Korean initiative, NAPCI would lack meaningful resonance. This is all the

¹¹ Bai Shi, "Trilateral Cooperation Reboot: China-Japan-South Korea dialogue resumes after freeze thaws", in *Beijing Review*, No. 46 (12 November 2015), http://www.bjreview.com/World/201511/t20151109_800042129.html.

¹² Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia, Seoul, 1 November 2015, http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page1e_000058.html.

¹³ Min-Hua Chiang, "The Potential of China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Agreement", in *East Asia*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (September 2013), p. 199-200.

more so when we consider the state of current inter-Korean relations, which show escalating conflicts and tensions rather than dialogue, cooperation or confidence building. Nonetheless, multilateral cooperation in the region is certainly helpful in lessening tensions and highlighting some possibility of future regional-identity formation. Historical and territorial disputes occasionally hinder meaningful development in CJK cooperation, but the TCS' institution building should be regarded as decisive for the development of better relations between the parties.¹⁴

3. The EU and ASEAN as reference for NAPCI

As previously stated, European integration has been an important reference for the formation of NAPCI. President Park expressed the idea of NAPCI on the 69th anniversary of South Korea's liberation, in 2014, in the following terms: "just as Europe pioneered a framework for multilateral cooperation through the European Coal and Steel Community, later going on to establish the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM), I propose that we create a consultative body for nuclear safety in Northeast Asia. Korea, China and Japan would spearhead the effort, with participation open not only to the United States and Russia but also North Korea and Mongolia."¹⁵ Multilateral security cooperation in Europe also began with economic affairs and later expanded incrementally to encompass a wide range of issues – even including disarmament, one of the most sensitive of all "hard security" matters. That process was the result of concerted efforts by regional countries to resolve political tension and military conflict, and to take the path of coexistence. The fact that the Helsinki Process, which has contributed to detente in Europe, was launched in the depths of the Cold War, when hostility and distrust among countries were at their most prevalent, offers an extremely valuable lesson for Northeast Asia today.

As far as ASEAN is concerned, there are more differences than similarities with NAPCI. NAPCI shares the same goal of promoting regional peace and security as other multilateral mechanisms in the region. In terms of membership, agenda and the proposed way forward, the Initiative takes into consideration the particular characteristics of Northeast Asia, seeking to foster a mechanism for multilateral cooperation tailored to the region.¹⁶ In fact, NAPCI focuses on dialogue and cooperation between China, Japan and Korea, as opposed to such initiatives as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the EAS, in which the countries of South East Asia take the lead in discussions.

¹⁴ See Shin Bong-kil remarks on NAPCI, in: Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), *International Forum for Trilateral Cooperation 2015. Final Outcome Report, Challenges and Opportunities – Ushering into a New Era*, Tokyo, 3 April 2015, p. 9, http://en.tcs-asia.org/bbs/link.php?bo_table=publication&wr_id=34&no=1.

¹⁵ Korean Presidency, *Address by President Park Geun-hye on the 69th Anniversary of Liberation*, 18 August 2014, <https://shar.es/1U1NhQ>.

¹⁶ Bae Ki-hyun, "ASEAN Regional Forum as a Reference Point: Progress and Limitations of NAPCI's Institutional Designs", in *Korea Observer*, Vol. 47 No. 2 (Summer 2016), p. 388.

NAPCI seeks to initially address “soft” security issues, discussions on which entail less of a political burden than their “harder” counterparts. There are therefore differences in the scope of its agenda compared with that of the ARF, which deals with both “hard” and “soft” security issues,¹⁷ or the EAS, which encompasses a comprehensive range of issues including political and economic ones. Since the region encompasses significant differences in social and political systems as well as cultural agendas, the emphasis is on cultivating a habit of dialogue and cooperation rather than adopting specific norms and regulations. Through networks of diverse non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and experts from academia, the Initiative promotes collective efforts to nurture a culture of cooperation in the Northeast Asian region.

4. Implications for South Korea-EU relations

Bilateral relations between South Korea and the EU have been remarkable in every sense during the past decade or so. Both parties agreed to a major FTA, which later became a model for other FTA deals. South Korea and the EU also rewrote the Framework of Agreement (FA), which had originally been signed in 1996 and was considered outdated in various respects. The new FA entails not only economic and trade relations but also political and global cooperation. The FTA and FA together made possible the upgrading of bilateral relations to the level of Strategic Partnership.¹⁸ Besides this, the two sides also reached consensus on the signing of a Framework Participation Agreement (FPA), which deals with cooperation on the global stage. In fact, South Korea is unique in having signed the aforementioned three major agreements with the EU, and in this sense the two parties regard each other as like-minded and natural partners.

The EU’s approach to Asia has been described in the following reports: *Towards a New Asia Strategy* (1994);¹⁹ *Europe and Asia: a Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnership* (2001);²⁰ *European Security Strategy* (2003);²¹ the *Guidelines on the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy in East Asia* (2012);²² and, more recently, the

¹⁷ Chairman’s Statement of the 23rd ASEAN Regional Forum, “Turning Vision into Reality for a Dynamic ASEAN Community”, Vientiane, Laos, 26 July 2016, <http://asean.org/chairmans-statement-of-the-23rd-asean-regional-forum>.

¹⁸ Si Hong Kim, “Korea’s Strategy towards the EU: From a Strategic Partner to a Privileged Partner”, in Hungdah Su (ed.), *Asian Countries’ Strategies towards the European Union in an Inter-regionalist Context*, Taipei, National Taiwan University Press, 2015, p. 70-71.

¹⁹ European Commission, *Towards a New Asia Strategy* (COM/94/314), 13 July 1994, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:51994DC0314>.

²⁰ European Commission, *Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships* (COM/2001/469), 4 September 2001, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52001DC0469>.

²¹ European Council, *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy*, 12 December 2003, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>.

²² Council of the European Union, *Guidelines on the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy in East Asia*,

Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS, 2016).²³ In fact, growing concern over East Asia is underlined year after year. EUGS, which is imbued with concepts of resilience and a principled multilateralism, also confirms that a connected Asia is needed in order to deepen economic diplomacy and scale up the EU's security role in the region. The EU wants to develop a more politically rounded approach to Asia, seeking to make greater contributions to Asian security. It also wishes to expand partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and others; promote non-proliferation on the Korean Peninsula; and, finally, uphold freedom of navigation by standing firm on respect for international law, including the Law of the Sea and its arbitration procedures. The EU also supports an ASEAN-led regional-security architecture.

What could the EU do for East Asia in general, and South Korea in particular? The EU seems to prefer multilateral cooperation in the region, and respects ASEAN's centrality to this end. Although NAPCI is a South Korean initiative, if its efforts contribute to peace and stability in the region there is no reason why the EU would not support it.²⁴ CJK trilateral cooperation, which is a mini-lateral endeavour in Northeast Asia, is still in its infancy. But the political "weight" of these countries within the East Asia region cannot be neglected. If the EU adheres to traditional EU-ASEAN relations in terms of multilateralism in East Asia, there might be some friction with regional hegemons, in particular China and the United States, in the longer term.

Conclusion

There are limits and possibilities to South Korea-EU relations set against the backdrop of security issues in the Northeast Asia region. Above all, both parties have, over the past decade, upgraded their ties with a free-trade agreement, Framework of Agreement and Framework Participation Agreement. In the 1990s, the EU engaged in inter-Korean issues, participating in the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) projects, but with unsatisfactory results. Thereafter, the Union supported the Six-Party Talks although it did not have membership itself. A policy of critical engagement has been a guiding light in its stance on North Korea. Considering the geographical distances involved, any direct military intervention in the region would hardly be possible. Instead, non-traditional security issues – such as maritime, energy and environmental ones – are best suited for both parties to develop in the coming years.

15 June 2012, <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&f=ST 11492 2012 INIT>.

²³ 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, <http://europa.eu/pr79yu>.

²⁴ 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. 587-589.

The EU has traditionally preferred multilateralism as an approach to international relations, including in region-to-region dialogue. East Asia, however, does not offer much room for the Union to pursue such a goal, given the region's ongoing hegemonic struggle – in particular, between China and the United States. Previous South Korean governments have proposed diverse forms of multilateral or mini-lateral solutions aimed at regional peace and prosperity. However, territorial and historical disputes embedded in the region hindered those initiatives, and the Asian paradox has not yet been resolved.

The EU advocates economic interdependence and supports confidence-building measures in Northeast Asia through a multilateral approach. The challenge today lies in how to construct such a reality despite the numerous obstacles present in the region. In 2017, there will be presidential elections in South Korea. If the progressive opposition party wins, it will likely reopen doors to North Korea, adopting some version of the South's previous "Sunshine Policy". This would eventually lead to a necessary revision of the traditional engagement policy. If the conservative party currently in government wins, the new administration should still need to find ways to engage with the North in order to solve the deadlock in inter-Korean relations. The more pressing issues revolve around the Kaesong Industrial Complex, Mount Kumgang Tourism and the Rason Special Economic Zone. This means that whichever side takes power, they will need to reassess their position and converge on a more centrist and realistic policy. The EU's critical engagement towards North Korea could facilitate dialogue and cooperation – which, in turn, would enhance peace and confidence-building measures.

In conclusion, multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia on functional issues such as nuclear safety and energy security are to be welcomed. South Korea needs to expand the geographical scope of its cooperation beyond Northeast and towards East Asia in general. ASEAN members might welcome South Korea's contribution in non-traditional security areas – in particular in the sphere of maritime security. To realize the goals of NAPCI – or any forthcoming, transformed version of the regional-security dialogue – it will be necessary to implement a step-by-step process and a rules-based approach. In order to build a norm-based East Asian order, cooperation between South Korea and Japan will be indispensable. At the same time, it is essential to demonstrate to China that such rules-based system can be effective for managing security relations in the region.

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