Whither Our Region?
Comparative Analysis on the Asia-Pacific and East Asia

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1. Introduction

Recently region building is one of the topics on which increasing academic interests and discussions have been focused in the study of international relations in general, and that of East Asian affairs in particular. As the main research topic for its 2004 annual convention, for example, Japan Association for International Relations adopted "Regional Integration and Alliance Politics," implying that the recent rise of international regional networks in East Asia may transform the long-established US alliance system in the region in one way or another.1 The time is over when the study of region building in East Asia was dismissed as an unrealistic dream.2 In the last fifteen years, both South Korea and Japan joined major regional institutions, such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 1989, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, and ASEAN plus Three in 1997. The two countries also became important members in the rapidly expanded ASEAN Post Ministerial Meeting (PMC). In the wider ASEAN umbrella, South Korea and Japan have been developing a Northeast Asian sub-regional group joined by China. The Six Party Talk on the North Korean nuclear development, though showing a stagnant progress,
can lead to a multilateral security institution in the region once the current threat is successfully settled.

As a number of regional frameworks emerged in the regions surrounding South Korea and Japan, students of the international relations in East Asia are now asked to answer what kinds of changes the new regional frameworks would bring about. As a modest first step toward the comprehensive analysis of this bold question, this paper tries to distinguish the concept of the Asia-Pacific and that of East Asia as different policy goals, emphasizing that the Asia-Pacific concept was essentially the product of the Cold War period whereas region-building in East Asia has been promoted in the post Cold War situation.

When we talk of multilateral institutions in the regions surrounding Korea and Japan, we tend to use the Asia-Pacific and East Asia interchangeably. In fact, regional institutions with the Asia-Pacific prefix, such as APEC, often include East Asian countries as their core members. Moreover, some important institutional arrangements among East Asian countries, such as the annual summit meeting among China, Korea, and Japan, was developed as a semi-regional group in the wider Asia-Pacific organizations. In the academic discussions on international region-building as well, the Asia-Pacific and East Asia have been used to indicate a similar region or a group of similar states with no clear distinction. At best, it is assumed that the Asia-Pacific is a wider umbrella concept which includes East Asia as a part.

In the study of international relations, however, regions are the products of international politics, rather than those of natural geography.
In other words, as the term "region-building" implies, regions in the international politics are to be built by state policies. As the rise and fall of nation states are observed in the history of international politics, so should be the rise and fall of international regions. When there are two different regional concepts emerging from a group of similar member states, therefore, respectively different international contexts exist behind the two concepts.

2. The Asia-Pacific concept

(1) Developments of the Asia-Pacific Ideas and Institutions

The origin of the ideas of the Asia Pacific region can go back to the mid 1960s when so-called export-led development strategy began to accelerate economic growth in some countries in the region. After the postwar US attempt to build multilateral security alliance in Asia was quickly abandoned in the 1950s, there were no significant efforts to build regional networks there. In the security field, the United States chose to introduce a series of bilateral defense treaties in Asia, in contrast with its preference for the multilateral arrangement in Europe. In the economic sphere, most East Asian economies in the 1950s were either destructed or underdeveloped with few interdependent networks among them. Consequently, in terms of both international politics and economy, there was virtually no region in today's Asia-Pacific or East Asia in the 1950s and the early 1960s.

In the mid 1960s, the Japanese economic recovery from its war destruction, as well as the US policy change to cut its financial assistance to its Northeast Asian allies in order to concentrate more resources on its war efforts in Vietnam, provided an important turning point in terms of region building in today's Asia-Pacific region. Stimulated
by the development of the European Economic Community in the 1960s, and the simultaneous rise of regional integration study in the field of international political economy, some Japanese scholars drafted an idea of the Pacific Free Trade Area under the auspices of the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry. While most discussions on the multilateral arrangements in the Asia-Pacific were related with economic (specifically trade) issues, the US Johnson administration showed an interest in multilateral security organizations to contain the expansion of communism in the region.

The 1970s saw the rapid development of East Asian economies, and simultaneous rise of interdependent relations among them. At the same time, a series of shocks in the international financial system and the international energy markets in the 1970s had East Asian economies and their trade partners alike recognize the necessity of introducing regional devices to maintain stability in their economic relations. Consequently, the ideas on multilateral economic institutions in the Asia Pacific acquired a strategic significance. While the discussion on region building in the Asia Pacific focused on economic, specifically trade, institutions, their expected functions were not only limited in the economic sphere, but also in the strategic one. In 1980, for example, the study group organized by the Ohira administration of Japan drafted a policy proposal, emphasizing that the introduction of Asia-Pacific economic institution should be promoted to realize the comprehensive security of Japan.

The strategic and security significance of economic institutions were increasingly added to the discussions on region-building in the Asia-Pacific in the 1980s when the new Cold War situation intensified
the US-Soviet rivalry in the region. However, the idea of multilateral security institutions in the region continued to be rejected because the realization of such an idea seemed to have little possibility. Moreover, in the new Cold War situation of the 1980s, the introduction of multilateral security arrangements in the Asia-Pacific would have been inevitably regarded as an attempt to build the anti-Soviet alliance only to intensify geopolitical tensions in the region. From a viewpoint of the security situation in the Asia Pacific in the 1980s, the promotion of economic regional institutions was one of the limited policy choices that potentially promote stability in the region while avoiding unnecessarily aggravated tensions with the Soviet Union.

In the sphere of international political economy, the 1980s would be called the age of the Asia Pacific. While many developing countries in the world failed to develop, those in the Asia Pacific showed continued successes by adopting export-led strategies, which then expanded economic interdependencies in the region. In order to maintain stability while experiencing rapid trade and economic growths in the region, the Asia Pacific economic institution was discussed as an urgent necessity. In 1980, for example, the Pacific Economic Community Conference (PECC) was established to promote the exchange of ideas and information regarding the regional economy among business people, academics, and government officials although the officials joined PECC in their private capacity.

While discussions on the idea of the Asia-Pacific regional institution started 40 years ago, the real development of such regional institutions had not begun until the 1990s. In late 1989, foreign and economic ministers of the twelve Asia Pacific countries gathered in Canberra, Australia to launch the first Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
(APEC) forum. Despite many pessimistic views on its future, APEC quickly developed in terms of its membership, functions, and institutional structure, to become the symbolic institution of region-building in the Asia-Pacific region. Specifically since 1993 when the summit-level meeting was added, APEC increased its strategic significance for regional diplomatic relations while its main functions continued to focus on economic issues. As of 2004, APEC has 21 members, which is currently fixed up to 2006. Currently, APEC is holding ministerial meetings in thirteen functional areas.

In addition to the developments of APEC, the 1990s also saw other region-building efforts in the Asia Pacific. In 1994, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was introduced as the first regional institution to deal with diplomatic and security issues in the Asia Pacific region. Its main functions are to provide opportunities of confidence building and preventive diplomacy for its member states. For its future goal, ARF is to provide conflict resolution mechanisms for its members.

(2) The Concept of the Asia-Pacific

The historical description of the Asia Pacific institutions indicates two characteristics of the Asia-Pacific concept. First of all, the Asia Pacific concept is essentially a product of the Cold War. Although the Asia Pacific region was originally conceptualized as a regional trade promoting institution in the 1960s, it soon became expected to promote stability in the region.

The strategic significance of economic institutions was not a unique phenomenon in the Asia Pacific alone. European region building efforts in the 1950s and 1960s were also regarded as an attempt
to reduce the global Cold War tensions in Europe. By promoting stability in Western Europe with the introduction and development of EEC and other regional institutions, Western European countries tried to decrease the risk of inviting the US-Soviet military confrontation in the European theater. For West European countries which then seemed relatively powerless to have an influence on the superpower rivalry, the maintenance of regional stability by introducing regional institutions was one of the few possible policy choices to control their own security and fate.

Although similar in its strategic significance, however, the idea of the Asia Pacific regional institution took much more time than the European theater to realize concrete institutional forms. It is a quite ironic fact that the Asia Pacific concept began to take real institutional forms almost at the same time when the end of the Cold War was declared in 1989.

Second, the Asia Pacific concept is assuming the fixed US security presence in its region. Although region building in the Asia Pacific was a strategic effort to increase stability in the region, it was never an attempt to provide an alternative to the US alliance networks in the region. Quite contrarily, the Asia Pacific concept is expected to provide complementary functions for the US security presence in the region, by increasing the economic strength and stability of the US and its allies in the region.

3. The Concept of East Asia

(1) Why was there no East Asia?

Compared with the Asia Pacific, the geographical vastness and
cultural diversity of which requires many diplomatic efforts for its own building, East Asia can said to be a more natural candidate for region-building because of its relatively larger degree of geographical proximity and cultural identity. Such a first-sight image, however, did not lead to the relative easiness of region-building in East Asia. Quite contrarily and ironically, only after the wider Asia Pacific had taken concrete institutional forms such as APEC and ARF, did the process of region-building in East Asia begin. East Asia kept failing to introduce a regional institution while most other internationally recognized regions succeeded in founding symbolic regional organizations in the latter half of the 20th century, such as EC and NATO in Western Europe, COMECON and Warsaw Treaty Organization in the former Eastern Europe, Organization of the American States in North and South America, Organization of African Unity in Africa, and the Arab League in the Middle East.

The reason for the anarchic nature of East Asia is said to be found in the relatively little historical experiences and memories shared by regional states in East Asia. Most regional organizations after World War II were founded either in the contexts of the East-West confrontation or the North-South division. Regional organizations in Western and Eastern Europe were driven by the security confrontation between them. The existence of the common enemy promoted region building in respective sides of Europe after 1945. On the other hand, regional organizations in the former colonized areas such as Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, were promoted by the commonly perceived threats from the North. Those newly independent countries which barely achieved political independence in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, introduced regional organizations to collectively deal with the continued
influence and control from their former colonizers.

In East Asia, however, neither the East-West rivalry nor the North-South contradiction worked to get the regional states together to form a regional organization. Quite contrarily, each of the two tensions negatively worked for the unity of the region. The post war East-West rivalry did not stay cold in East Asia, breaking out in the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. The prewar Japanese imperial expansion in its neighboring countries made it impossible to share the South sentiment among the East Asian states. Consequently, the formation of the East Asian identity had to wait for the end of the Cold War sentiments and the ease of the North-South confrontations.

In the early 1970s when the Sino-US rapprochement was achieved, the Cold War in East Asia showed a structural change from its early clear cut confrontation between the US-centered alliances and the Sino-Soviet bloc to the more classic power politics style diplomacy among the great powers in the region. Although the new Cold War situation in the early 1980s temporally divided East Asia into the anti-Soviet camp and the Soviet bloc, the Cold War in East Asia was over when the Sino-Soviet geopolitical confrontations were settled in 1989. Then, South Korea opened diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1990, and with China in 1992. The ideological confrontation in Southeast Asia was also eased by the resolution of the Cambodian civil war and the beginning of economic reforms in Vietnam.

In the economic sphere too, the North-South division in East Asia increasingly lost its ideological color as developing countries in the region, one after another, achieved rapid economic growth through
export-led development strategy. As South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore became recognized economically successful four dragons in East Asia in the 1970s, and other Southeast Asian countries and China followed the similar development patterns in the 1980s, the East Asian countries increasingly came to share an interest in maintaining the stable and open market system in the world.

(2) Obstacles toward region-building in East Asia

However, the ease of the East-West rivalry and the North-South contradiction in East Asia did not automatically lead to the promotion of region-building in East Asia. One reason can be found in the unresolved historical legacy of the Cold War in the region. Even after the end of the Cold War, for example, the Korean Peninsula continues to be divided on the 38th parallel. Taiwan continues to be a symbolic lost land for the Chinese territorial integrality. Compared with the European theater where the competing territorial demands were agreed to be frozen by the Helsinki declaration of 1975, East Asia is still a full of classic territorial disputes which potentially trigger conflicts between the regional states.

However, the more formidable obstacle for region building in East Asia came from the United States. In late 1990 when the GATT Uruguay round failed to meet its supposed deadline for the new trade agreements due to the uncompromising clash between EU and the US on the agricultural trade, then the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir proposed an East Asian group to practice already agreed parts of the new GATT rules at the regional level. According to Mahathir, the group was called the East Asian Economic Group (EAEG), or East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), consisting of then six ASEAN countries plus
South Korea, Japan, and China. Mahathir said that his proposed EAEC would share the spirits of GATT and APEC, which embraces the principle of a non-discrimination between members and non-members. Mahathir insisted that, rather than waiting for the ultimate conclusion of the whole Uruguay Round agreements, the group of East Asian countries should go ahead to maintain and promote the open trade system on which the prosperity of them depend.

Although the EAEC proposal by Mahathir seemed a modest and reasonable idea under the stalemate situation of the global trade negotiations, the United States vehemently opposed his idea, with no hesitation to show a deep doubt on "any attempt to exclude the United States from the Asia Pacific." While Mahathir repeatedly claimed that his idea of EAEC had no intention at all to exclude the United States, the US government was never convinced. In retrospect, the US reaction to the EAEC proposal was so emotional that it would have been difficult to give a logical answer to Mahathir's critical question, "why East Asian countries are not allowed to form their own group to discuss regional economic issues while there are many such groups in other regions?" Emotional and probably illogical as it may have seemed, no other East Asian states, except for Mahathir's Malaysia, dared to challenge the US strong opposition. Specifically, Japan, which Mahathir expected to take a lead to realize EAEC, kept a very cautious stance. After all, the idea of EAEC, the first concrete proposal for region building in East Asia, was once dead in the early 1990s.

The idea of EAEC was suddenly revived in late 1997 when the Asian financial crisis shook the myth of ever-lasting economic growth in East Asia. Different from the issues of the open trade system in 1990, the
financial crises in 1997 required very quick and resolute actions. In December 1997, the leaders of China, South Korea, and Japan were invited to the ASEAN summit meeting in Malaysia to discuss necessary collective actions to deal with the crises, hence the virtual realization of the first EAEC meeting. The meeting was called ASEAN plus Three, and it became an annual regional gathering since then. While the United States refused the idea of introducing the Asian Monetary Fund by insisting that the International Monetary Fund should be consulted and used to deal with the Asian financial crisis, it did not oppose to the gathering of the East Asian countries.

In 1999, the ASEAN plus Three Summit meeting for the first time adopted a joint statement, declaring that the East Asian countries (including both Northeast and Southeast Asian countries) will strengthen regional cooperation in the field of politics, economy, and cultural exchange. At that time, the summit meeting among China, Korea, and Japan was held separately. The three leaders, Zhu Rongji, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, President Kim Dae Jung of South Korea, Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi of Japan were reported to talk of various issues such as the common cultural and historical backgrounds among the three countries, economic issues specifically those related with WTO, and the necessity of cooperation among the three countries to promote the security and prosperity of the world as a whole.

As of 2004, ASEAN plus Three has showed a similar pattern of developments to that of APEC, holding ministerial meetings in various functional areas in addition to the annual summit meetings. As an important sub-group, ASEAN plus Three has also developed the
annual summit meetings of China, South Korea, and Japan. While the three Northeast Asian countries seem to carefully keep their meetings under the ASEAN umbrella, rather than demonstrating their gatherings as an independent regional group, the Northeast Asian sub-group is gradually but steadily taking its own shape.

(3) The concept of East Asia

The brief description of region-building in East Asia indicates two important characteristics of the concept of East Asia. First of all, East Asia became a meaningful group of states only in the post Cold War period. The Cold War situation so severely divided the East Asian countries into the two camps that there was no point in pursuing a common identity based on geographical proximity. Second, as a concept emerging out of the post Cold War international politics, the concept of East Asia does not assume the US security presence in the region as a natural precondition. Rather, region building in East Asia includes an attempt to figure out the appropriate role of the United States toward the region.

Conclusions: Implications for Japan and Korea

The most distinctive difference between the concept of the Asia-Pacific and that of East Asia derives from the fact that the former is a product of the Cold War while the latter is essentially an emerging region in the post Cold War era. In the 1960s and 70s, the Asia Pacific region was conceptualized as a way to promote stability and development among countries of the US camp under the Cold War. The Asia Pacific concept very carefully and intentionally avoided to get involved in security and military issues by emphasizing the "open" nature of the concept and focusing on trade issues primarily. Nonetheless, the Asia
Pacific concept did carry strategic implications. With limited policy choices under the Cold War structure, the building of the Asia Pacific was a regional-level effort to reduce the likelihood of military outbreaks in the region. In other words, the Asia Pacific concept had no intention to challenge the Cold War structure or to transform the US security presence in the region. Sharing such an image on the Asia Pacific, therefore, the United States vehemently opposed the formation of an East Asian sub-group as an attempt to exclude the United States from the Asia Pacific.

The end of the Cold War transformed strategic significance and implications of the Asia Pacific concept. Simultaneously, the concept of East Asia emerged as those countries geographically situated in East Asia have tried to shape new regional orders in the post Cold War strategic circumstances. The East Asia concept, therefore, assumes no fixed US military presence in the region. It is a collective attempt to figure out the appropriate US security position in, and commitment to, the region. In this context, the recent Six Party Talks on the North Korean Nuclear Development can be regarded as a part of the collective process of building a new East Asia. If the new East Asia should ultimately include an answer to the new US role in the region, such a region will be realized only after the resolution of the Taiwan issue.

Therefore, region building in East Asia is a protracted and difficult process. It will not be done by the foundation of a symbolic regional institution alone although today's East Asian countries have yet to succeed in realizing such an organization. For major countries in East Asia such as South Korea and Japan, East Asia in the post Cold War ear
is not a fixed play ground. East Asia is something South Korea and Japan should create in one way or another. In this sense, building East Asia is an important strategic goal for the two countries. South Korea and Japan share various values and interests in their diplomacy. The two countries should work together to shape a new East Asia, the members of which also share our values and interests.

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(1) Japan Association for International Relations held its 2004 annual convention from October 15 to 17, at AWAJI YUMEBUTAI International Convention Center, Hyogo, Japan.


(4) Kiyoshi Kojima, Japan and a Pacific Free Trade Area (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).


(12) "From Confrontation to Cooperation: ASEAN Agenda for Productive
