The East Asian Community: Unattainable Dream?
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Introduction:

Compared with most internationally recognized regions in the world, East Asia has one distinct character. It has no regional organization with a broad mandate of maintaining peace and security in the region, comparable to those such as EU and NATO in Europe, OAS in America, OAU in Africa, the Arab League in the Middle East, ASEAN in Southeast Asia, and SAAC in South Asia. Why no community exists in East Asia, while most internationally recognized regions have succeeded in introducing an organizational framework among them?

The existence of regional security organizations does not necessarily guarantee either the effective maintenance of peace or the peaceful resolution of conflicts in the region. In fact, there have been many cases in which the regional organizations failed to perform their expected security or conflict-resolution functions.

The absence of regional security organization nonetheless cannot be taken as a positive sign for the maintenance of peace in the region. It shows that East Asian countries have collectively kept failing to realize the very basic scheme, on which most groups of the countries in the world found a way or another to agree. Indicating concerns on the general lack of regional cooperation in East Asia, many scholars have spent considerable time and energy on the study of an
East Asian community despite the continued lack of such existence.¹

Since the inauguration of APEC in 1989, however, the development of regional institutions in East Asia finally took a real momentum. Even after the East Asian economic crisis in 1997 posed a serious doubt on an ever optimistic view about the increasing interdependence among the regional economies, many states in the region still call for a strengthened regional network. At the ASEAN +3 summit meeting in November 2000, for example, the state leaders agreed on the idea of the East Asian Community, which is to institutionalize free trade and security dialogue among East and Southeast Asian countries.²

Will this movement finally lead to the founding of the East Asian Community in the near future? This paper points to two obstacles to be overcome to realize such a "dream." First, even after the end of the Cold War, East Asian countries still find difficulty in defining a common security interest, which is to be a minimum requirement for the introduction of a multilateral security organization in the region. Second, even if the East Asian countries somehow agree on a common security interest, the effective leadership would be necessary to realize the regional security mechanism. The leadership issue, in turn, may stimulate, rather than facilitate, the conflicts among major powers in the region.

There are still two positive scenarios which will possibly resolve the two obstacles for the realization of regional security organization in East Asia. First, in the process toward the peaceful settlement of the division of the Korean peninsula, major countries in East Asia should agree on a new security mechanism which is to guarantee the security of the Korean peninsula in an acceptable manner for all the concerned countries. Such a mechanism in turn offer a basis on which a new security organization will be built in East Asia. Second, the currently recognized ASEAN initiative in organizing the Asia Pacific region, may offer an effective middle-power authority in the process of introducing a new regional organization in East Asia, while avoiding the great power struggle over the leadership role.

This paper will conclude that the future of the East Asian Community is
currently subject to so many uncertainties that its realization would not be an independent policy goal for any governments in the region. The introduction of such an organization, however, can be an important policy issue once a dramatic change occurs in the security situation of the Korean peninsula happens. As ASEAN-led institutionalization of the Asia Pacific region provides a de-facto group identity to its East Asian partners, there is a possibility that the East Asian Community is rather quickly realized once major powers in the region recognize a common security interest. The East Asian Community will keep attracting the interests of many scholars although no one can exactly tell when it becomes a real policy choice.

Two Conditions for the Introduction of International Organization

In the study of international relations, there have been developed two approaches to the process of international institution building. One is called a utilitarian model, which essentially analyzes institution-building as a collective action among sovereign states. The other is called a power politics model, which emphasizes the role of leadership in the development of international institutions. As Mancur Olson argues in his *The Logic of Collective Action*, the two models do not necessarily contradict with each other3. The two models indicate two conditions for the successful introduction of international organization.

The utilitarian model emphasizes the existence of common interests when cooperation is realized among independent actors. As mutually independent actors who primarily care for the realization of their respective interests, nation-states cooperate with each other only when their respective interests are promoted by their collective action. According to this model, if the states recognize that they share an interest on a rather continuous basis, they would try to develop a permanent apparatus such as international treaty, periodical
meetings, or organization. The East Asian Community, therefore, is possible if many states in the region recognize that they share important security interests to be served by the organization.

The power politics model, on the other hand, looks at the role of the leadership as the important determiner for international cooperation. Emphasizing the anarchic nature of the state system, this model assumes that states rarely share interests, specifically those of security nature, on a continuous basis. Moreover, most states, if they are rational, try to avoid the costs of introducing an international organization. According to this model, even if there exist common security interests among East Asian countries, the East Asian Community is difficult to introduce unless there is a state, or a group of states, that willingly assume the costs of introducing and maintaining it.

East Asia during the Cold War: Not a Region

Since the end of World War II, many of the internationally recognized regions found common interests to develop regional organizations. Despite a wide variety in terms of purpose, organizational structure, authority, and function, the record of these regional institutions show that there are two historical contexts which helped the recognition of common interests among the regional states. They are the East-West rivalry under the Cold War, and the North-South division under the decolonization process.

The development of NATO and other regional organizations in Western Europe, for example, reflected the severe East-West tension after World War II. Those region-building efforts in Western Europe were also thought to be a peace-building attempt by the regional states. The Western European countries after 1945, for the first time in the modern history, experienced the situation in which their ultimate destiny depends not on themselves but on the outsiders, i.e. the United States and the Soviet Union. With few policy choices to control the
US-Soviet rivalry, the West Europeans tried to set up a regional devise to maintain stability among themselves, not to invite the US or Soviet intervention that would bring about heavy damage, if not total destruction, to the region⁴.

Many of the non-European regions, on the other hand, developed regional institutions primarily as their collective efforts to secure their political and economic independence from their former European colonizers. Regional organizations in the Third World, such as OAU in Africa, the Arab League in the Middle East, OAS in Americas, and ASEAN in Southeast Asia, stated in their respective founding documents that the regional cooperation to prevent intervention from the outside is a primary goal of their institutions.

For Northeast Asia, however, either the US-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War period, or the experience of the Western Imperialism in the 19th and early 20th century did not forge a common security interest among regional states. Contrarily, both the Cold War situation and the colonization experience have negative influences on institution-building efforts in East Asia. First of all, the four major powers in the region, i.e., the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan, geographically face to each other in East Asia. The global level rivalry during the Cold War period, therefore, was directly resulted in divisions in the region. Consequently, there was no region-level collective attempt to facilitate the global level tensions. The US-Soviet rivalry at the global level intensified regional conflicts, by intensifying the tension over the Taiwan straight, by fixing the division of the Korean peninsula, and by stalemating the Northern Territory Issue between Japan and the Soviet Union.

Moreover, the experience of the Japanese imperialism made it infeasible for East Asian countries to introduce a regional organization under the advocacy of anti-colonialism. Despite the increasing interdependence among the East Asian economies since the 1960s, they were quite cautious about any Japanese call for a regional framework because such a proposal reminded them of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere, the Japanese slogan to justify its invasion of East and Southeast Asia. In sum, suffering from the lack of a common security
interest, East Asia during the Cold War period could not meet even the first condition for the development of regional organization. Hence, no region in East Asia.

**East Asia since 1989: Positive Changes?**

The absence of a common security interest among East Asian countries has essentially continued in the post Cold War period. Even after the ideological conflicts between the US and the Soviet Union ended, and the Soviet empire collapsed to be succeeded by the Russian Republic, there has been no change in the geopolitical situation of East Asia where the four major powers face to each other. Moreover, the rise of the Chinese power through the final quarter of the last century potentially lead to the intensive Sino-US rivalry in the region. In addition, as the recent textbook issue indicates, even with the passage of more than a half century, the memory of the wartime Japanese atrocity in East Asia often complicates the Japanese relations with its neighbors. As a result, it is often argued that many problems in the Cold War period are still left over in today's East Asia.

Now that more than ten years have passed since the dramatic end of the Cold War, however, there can be observed two important changes which promotes the security dialogue among the regional states, and possibly leads to a regional security organization in East Asia. One change comes from the outside of East Asia, and the other from the region itself. From outside comes the development of the Asia-Pacific wide multilateral institutions, which includes East Asia as its part, in the 1990s. From inside comes the security dialogue among the major powers in East Asia on the Korean peninsula issue. Although these two changes have been promoted in different contexts, they are providing complimentary effects on the promotion of security dialogue, and possibly on the introduction of security organization, in East Asia.
The Development of the Asia-Pacific Wide Framework

Since the inauguration of APEC in 1989, the multilateral frameworks of the Asia Pacific wide have been developed both in economic and political fields. APEC began as an annual ministerial meeting in which economic and foreign ministers of the twelve Asia Pacific countries exchange their views on economic issues in the region. Despite often heard skepticism on its future, APEC quickly expanded its membership, set up its own back-up mechanism, and increased the importance of its existence as an intergovernmental institution in the Asia Pacific region. Specifically since 1993 when the unofficial summit meeting was added to the ministerial level ones, APEC gained a political significance as an intergovernmental dialogue mechanism. In contrast with APEC, the primary mandate of which is to deal with economic issues in the region, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was introduced in 1994, as a regional mechanism to promote security dialogue in the Asia Pacific. Although ARF has no authority to get involved in the resolution of any particular conflict in the region, it provides a useful opportunity for confidence building among the Asia Pacific countries. Throughout the 1990s, East Asian countries, such as China, South Korea, and Japan, played an important role in the promotion of multilateral mechanisms in the Asia Pacific region. The United States and Russia also actively sought their membership in these institutions.

The Asia Pacific wide institution-building process began to take a new form since 1997 when the ASEAN leaders, after its annual ministerial meeting, met the representatives of China, Korea, and Japan. The first meeting was primarily held to talk of a possible collective response to the Asian financial crisis which started from Bangkok in the summer of 1997, and quickly spread to other financial centers in Asia. In 1999, the ASEAN plus Three Summit meeting for the first time adopted a joint statement, declaring that the East Asian countries (including ASEAN) will strengthen regional cooperation in the field of politics, economy, and cultural exchange. At that time, moreover, the summit meeting
among China, Korea, and Japan was held separately after the ASEAN+3 summit. The three leaders, Zhu Rongji, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, President Kim Dae Jung of 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.\(^{11}\)

As the name of this process, ASEAN+3, already indicates, ASEAN played a pivotal role in the promotion of regional institutions in East Asia. Since 1976, ASEAN institutionalized its dialogue with the Asia Pacific countries through its Post Ministerial Meeting. Through the 1980s, the ASEAN process, in which participating countries are simply exchanging opinions but neither trying to make an agreement on dividing issues, nor intervening domestic issues of each member, gradually gained credibility and understanding of other states in the Asia Pacific. As the multilateral framework of the Asia Pacific wide was introduced and developed after the end of the Cold War, the ASEAN process quite effectively promoted institution building in the region. It would be even possible to say that the institutionalization of the Asia Pacific in the 1990s was brought about by the expansion of ASEAN\(^{12}\).

The ASEAN process has enabled the ASEAN countries to collectively take a leadership role in the institution-building process in the Asia Pacific. Recognizing the three northeast Asian countries as its dialogue "group", ASEAN is now promoting a regional framework among China, Korea, and Japan. The ASEAN process is rather unique because, in contrast to many regional institution building processes in which small countries get together to deal with larger partners, the ASEAN process sees the promotion of the cooperation among larger partners by smaller states.
The Security Dialogue on the Korean Peninsula

Having been colonized by Japan for 36 years up to 1945, the Korean peninsula was then divided on the 38th parallel, its northern half controlled by the Soviet Union and its southern part primarily by the United States. During the Korean War, the United States and China got involved in major military crashes. The division of the peninsula has been rather fixed between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Because of this complicating process that resulted in the division of the peninsula, the security of the Korean peninsula has always been a great concern for each of the major four powers in East Asia. The Korean issue, therefore, has been called as a major obstacle for the promotion of security dialogue and cooperation in East Asia.

As the Soviet military threat decreased since the end of the Cold War, the alleged development of nuclear capabilities and missile technologies in North Korea provided a major security challenge in the region. In addition, while ROK succeeded in opening diplomatic ties with both the Soviet Union (Russia after 1992) and China in the 1990s, DPRK failed to establish diplomatic relations with the United States and Japan. Meanwhile, DPRK often challenged international security regimes such as the NPT system in the 1990s. Even after the end of the Cold War, confidence building on the Korean peninsula saw little progress, and the classic balance of power system was maintained in Northeast Asia. The US-ROK-Japanese security dialogue and cooperation was promoted to deal with the North Korean threat. After all, as long as the security interests of the regional states are sharply divided on the Korean issue, it was thought unrealistic to see the rise of multilateral security dialogue among East Asian courtiers.

The Korean peninsula issue, however, can also be a catalyst for the security dialogue and confidence-building in East Asia. Although the future of the two Koreas should be primarily decided by the governments and the people on the
peninsula, any process toward the reunification of the peninsula would lead to a significant change in the regional security environments, which will then require policy adjustments of the four major powers surrounding the peninsula. Specifically, the North-South dialogue will require the improvement of relations between the United States and DPRK, and between Japan and DPRK. As these relations are complicatedly related to each other, there seemed little hope for the progress toward the tension easing on the peninsula. Rather than improving its relation with its southern brother, North Korea put a priority on its negotiation with the United States. The United States, on the other hand, cautiously coordinated its policies toward North Korea with those of South Korea and Japan.

In order to find an answer to this complicating power game, it has been suggested that either the four party talk (DPRK, ROK, China, and the United States) or the six party dialogue (the four party plus Japan and Russia) be necessary. As a functional approach to this direction, the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO) managed to keep contacts between North Korea, on one hand, and the United States, South Korea, and Japan, on the other. In addition, the so-called Track II approach such as the Council of Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific or the Northeast Asian Security Dialogue, offered an unofficial, but not less important, channel for confidence building among the four countries.

The dramatic realization of the North-South summit in June 2000 brought about an unprecedented euphoria between the two Koreas. It should also be noted that the North-South summit accompanied a series of top or ministerial level contacts among the six powers. Before Pyongyang welcomed President Kim Dae Jung, for example, the North Korean leader was reported to meet both Chinese and Russian leaders. Although the high expectation toward a dramatic change on the Korean peninsula has been a little cooled down as the Bush administration reviews the US policy toward North Korea, it is not an unrealistic scenario that the future security organization in East Asia will be
brought about through the security dialogue of the six countries on the Korean peninsula issue.

Conclusion:

There are two necessary conditions for the development of the East Asian Community. First, there should be a common security interest among the six major countries in the region. Second, there should be a state(s) which take the leadership role in the development of a regional organization.

In view of these conditions, the multilateral security framework in East Asia is likely to be promoted through the institutionalization of the Asia-Pacific region and the security dialogue on the Korean peninsula issue. The expansion of the ASEAN process to include East Asia would make it possible to avoid intensifying tensions among the regional states, specifically those between the United States and China. The ASEAN style institution is not feasible for the exercise of the strong leadership. Therefore, participating countries do not worry too much about which country will take a central role in the organization. Then, the multilateral talk on the Korean peninsula will make it clear that the peaceful change in the Korean peninsula is a prerequisite for the introduction of a multilateral security framework in East Asia. Unless the Korean issue finds a certain solution to ease the current tension, the ASEAN process, which by definition requires the participation of all the countries in the region, will not be applicable for East Asia. With the Korean issue unresolved, there should always be a state(s) which will choose not to join a multilateral security framework in the region. Finally, the currently developing ASEAN+3 process may make the United States and Russia worry about the possibility of being excluded from a future security dialogue mechanism in East Asia. By recognizing a clear linkage between the future East Asian community and the security dialogue on the Korean peninsula, the ASEAN+3 process would be able to avoid unnecessary
frictions with the two countries. In fact, when Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir suggested the introduction of East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), which was almost identical with today’s ASEAN+3, in the early 1990s, the US government opposed to “any attempts to exclude the US from a Pacific framework.” As the Asian economic “threat” faded out and the United States recovered its confidence in its competitiveness in the late 1990s, the US attitude toward the East Asian grouping was changed. Nonetheless, the US opposition in the early 1990s showed it important to avoid excluding any country in the process of building up a future East Asian community.

In sum, the realization of the East Asian Community is currently contingent on so many other security issues in the region that it cannot be an independent policy goal for any country. However, it does not mean that the multilateral security framework in the region is an unrealistic policy choice for a foreseeable future. Once the Korean reunification is realized, the multilateral security framework will be a good candidate for a new security mechanism in the region. As we already saw in the German case, once the reunification of the divided nation get a momentum, it can be realized with a rather unpredictable speed. Despite the seemingly little progress or prospect toward its realization, therefore, the multilateral security organization in East Asia will continue to be an issue of considerable strategic significance.

Notes


2 Summary of The ASEAN+3 Summit Meeting, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan,
On March 1, 2001, the Japanese Ministry of Education and Science permitted a new highschool textbook, which is reported to reinterpret the Japanese relations with its neighboring countries in the modern era. Both Peking and Seoul protested against the decision.

The original 12 members of APEC are Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, South Korea, Japan, and the six ASEAN countries. There are 21 members in today's APEC. The original 12 was joined by China, Chinese-Taipei (Taiwan), Chinese-Hong Kong, Russia, Papua New Guinea, Vietnam, Mexico, Chile, and Peru. South Korea's role in this respect has been rather unfairly treated. For example, the foundation of APEC is often credited to then Australian Prime Minister Robert Hawke, who made an official proposal of APEC in a joint communiqué with then South Korean President Roh Taw-woo. The South Korea's early commitment to APEC enabled Japan, which had been cautiously avoiding initiating the Asia-Pacific framework, to actively support the first APEC meeting in Canberra.


