

Northeast Asia

Regional perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding

Sachio Nakato

Introduction

This paper analyses challenges and opportunities for building peace in Northeast Asia. The paper begins by identifying the current challenges for peacebuilding in Northeast Asia, especially focusing on the security concerns of China, South Korea, North Korea and Japan. Next, it investigates the key opportunities for building peace in the region. Here, the possibilities for developing regional economic cooperation as well as for creating effective multilateral security frameworks in Northeast Asia and recent sub-national trends will be discussed. Then, it explores the key elements for maintaining peace and stability in Northeast Asia. In this section, the roles of the United States (US) and the United Nations (UN) in Northeast Asia will be discussed.

Challenges to building peace in Northeast Asia

There are growing concerns in the international community regarding the tensions that have emerged over the past few years among the countries of Northeast Asia. Major challenges for building peace in the region are mainly related to inter-state or traditional national security issues. There are at least three possible reasons for the increasing tensions.

North Korean Nuclear Issue. The North Korean nuclear issue and other Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programs have comprised what is considered by many to be the most serious challenge for building peace in Northeast Asia. Under the Kim Jong Un regime, North Korea has now claimed itself as a nuclear state in its constitution. North Korea actually launched a 'satellite' in December 2012 and conducted the third nuclear test in February 2014. North Korean nuclear and missile launches certainly pose a major international security threat in Northeast Asia. Neighbouring countries, such as Japan and South Korea, are seriously concerned about North Korea's nuclear weapons. The US is also concerned that North Korea has proliferated nuclear and missile technologies and goods. Even China is opposed to the nuclear tests and has pressured North Korea regarding its nuclear programs.

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a joint project of four institutions:



Territorial Disputes. Territorial disputes pose serious security concerns in the region. One of the most conspicuous tensions is the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands issue. China, Taiwan and Japan have claimed sovereignty over the small group of islets and tensions among the three parties have periodically erupted. The most recent severe tensions began when the then Tokyo governor, Shintaro Ishihara, announced his plan to purchase three of the eight islets in April 2002. While the Japanese government allegedly purchased the three islets to prevent the Tokyo governor's attempt, China and Taiwan opposed the purchase. Moreover, in China large-scale anti-Japan demonstrations spread across the country. In response to Japan's move, China deployed patrol ships near the islands and military surveillance planes in Japanese airspace, claiming that they are 'Chinese' territories.

Many analysts are concerned that armed conflict between Japan and China might occur over the islands. Tensions among the US, China and Japan rose when China declared a new Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) across the East China Sea on 23 November 2013.¹ The US Defence Secretary, Chuck Hagel, stated that 'we view this development as a destabilising attempt to alter the *status quo* in the region'. He further reaffirmed that the Chinese announcement 'will not in any way change how the United States military operates in the region'. On the other hand, China rebutted the US statement and warned that 'the US should not take sides in the dispute between China and Japan' and demanded that 'it make concrete efforts for the peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region'. In this sense, managing military conflicts among the US, China, and Japan would be the biggest challenge for building peace and stability in the region.

Another territorial dispute between Japan and South Korea also has posed additional challenges for building peace and developing cooperation in Northeast Asia. Both Japan and South Korea have claimed the small islands in the Sea of Japan/East Sea. Japan has claimed that it had incorporated the tiny uninhabited island named Takeshima or Dokudo into Japanese territory in 1905. On the other hand, South Korea claimed sovereignty over the Takeshima/Dokudo Islands in January 1952 basing its claim on historical documents, as well as the exclusion of the disputed islands from Japanese territory by Supreme Command for the Allied Powers (SCAP).

Recent tensions arose when then South Korean President Lee Myung Bak visited the Takeshima/Dokudo Islands in August 2012. In response to the move, the Japanese government hinted that it would bring the issue of the Takeshima/ Dokudo dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The Japanese government has before proposed to bring the territorial issue to the ICJ in 1954 and 1962. However, both proposals were rejected by South Korea as it controlled the islands and maintains the position that there is no territorial dispute.

It seems unlikely that South Korea and Japan – both allies of US – will engage in actual military conflict over the islands; however, the Takeshima/Dokudo problem has continued to be an obstacle for the development of bilateral relations and for Northeast Asia as a whole. According to a joint public survey in 2012, most Japanese (83.7%) and Korean (94.6%) respondents considered the Takeshima/Dokdo dispute as a significant obstacle to better relations.²

¹ For this paragraph, see S. A. Smith, "China Ups the Ante in East China Sea Dispute," *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 25, 2013.

² The Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, *the 1st Japan-South Korea Public Opinion Poll*, May, 2013, p. 17.

Increased Military Role of Japan. Japanese 'militarization' could be considered another source of confrontation in Northeast Asia, at least from the perspectives of China, South Korea and North Korea. The Cabinet of Japan adopted a new National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2012, which articulates Japan's foreign and national security policy for the next ten years. The NSS conceptualised the policy as 'Proactive Pacifism' based on the principle of international cooperation. The Abe administration has explored ways of changing the interpretation of Article 9 of the constitution in order to exercise the right of collective self-defense.

Along with issues stemming from differences in the perception of history, Japan's increased security role has created security concerns in Northeast Asia, especially in China and South Korea. South Korea and China have warned that such a move by Japan along with 'wrong' historical perceptions together would destabilise regional peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Such an attempt to reform the security policy in Japan has been interpreted to mean that, since the early 1990s, Japan has been hoping to become a 'normal country' regarding its international contribution, especially after the gulf war crisis. However, the idea of becoming a 'normal country' is widely understood outside Japan to mean that Japan will awaken its nationalism through the return of using a traditionally interpreted point of view for its military.³ Japan's effort to make Japan a 'normal country', therefore, and the adoption of the NSS are considered as an obvious attempt to militarise Japan, both in China and South Korea.

Opportunities for building peace in Northeast Asia

Northeast Asian Paradox. While political-security relations in Northeast Asia are currently at a low point, economic interdependence has been deepening. The South Korean President, Park Geun Hye, has on occasion referred to the current situation as a 'Northeast Asian paradox'. The concept characterises the nature of the security and economic environment in the region: political and security relations do not move in tandem with economic interdependence. Although President Park places emphasis on resolving the political-security related difficulties by proposing 'Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiatives', economic interdependence has certainly provided common economic interests and created room for cooperation and integration in the region.

Free Trade Agreement negotiations among China, South Korea and Japan. It is remarkable that China, South Korea, and Japan agreed to proceed with negotiations for a trilateral free trade agreement (FTA) in November 2012 despite territorial disputes between Japan and China, as well as Japan and South Korea, and worsening political relations among them. China, South Korea and Japan appear to have put aside their political and security disputes in order to obtain economic benefits.

The trilateral FTA could bring an enormous economic impact worldwide, as well as significant economic benefits for China, South Korea and Japan. If the agreement goes ahead, one study estimates that the combined gross domestic product (GDP) of China, South Korea, and Japan would reach 20 per cent of the world GDP and their combined trade volumes would account for 17.5 per cent of global trade.⁴ Needless to say, the three countries have to resolve political and economic difficulties in order for an agreement to be reached. However, they are fully

³ Y. Soeya *et al.*, *Futsu no Kuni Nihon* (Japan as a 'Normal Country'?), Chikura Shobo, 2014, pp. 3-4.

⁴ S. Tiezzi, "China-Japan-South Korea Hold FTA Talks Despite Political Tensions," *The Diplomat*, March 5, 2014.

aware that economic interdependence and integration would bring huge economic benefits to all, despite existing tensions.

Although economic interdependence and integration do not guarantee peace, they certainly contribute to building peace. Each participating country hopes to enjoy economic benefits through the increased trade in the region and would avoid destroying such opportunities through igniting armed conflict in the region.

Multilateral Security Framework. Various efforts to establish multilateral security framework are gradually expanding in Asia. These include the East Asian Summit (EAS), IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus, Six Party Talks and Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO). In comparison to in Europe, where multilateral security frameworks such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) have played an important role in security issues (including in peacebuilding, crisis management and conflict prevention), comprehensive multilateral security frameworks have not been fully developed in Northeast Asia. While multilateral security frameworks have developed in the Asia Pacific region, they still remain in the confidence-building stage and do not function as security cooperation in areas such as conflict resolution, preventive diplomacy and crisis management.⁵

ASEAN has played an important role in multilateral security frameworks in the Asia-Pacific region through promoting dialogue and cooperation in various traditional and non-traditional security issues. ASEAN has been the driving force of multilateral security frameworks in the Asia Pacific region, including the ARF, ADMM and EAS. It is notable that the ADMM-Plus Initiatives offers a framework in addressing a wide range of regional security issues. At the first ADMM-Plus Initiatives in 2010, five Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) established five non-traditional security areas to address security issues common to member countries: humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR); maritime security; counter-terrorism; military medicine; and peacekeeping operations. The ADMM-Plus successfully conducted the first HA/DR and military medicine exercise in Brunei Darussalam in June 2013 and has developed a platform for military-to-military cooperation in more than one of the many forums.

On the other hand, a comprehensive multilateral security framework specifically addressing security issues in Northeast Asia has not yet been developed. In this sense, the Six Party Talks Framework has been the only multilateral security framework in which countries in Northeast Asia, including the US, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and North Korea, discuss together the nuclear issues on the Korean Peninsula. Some analysts have therefore advocated the possibility of creating a multilateral security framework in Northeast Asia through developing the Six Party talks. However, the Six Party Talks have not occurred since December 2008. Moreover, the Six Party Talks Framework has focused solely on the North Korean nuclear issue. It therefore has limited capacity and utility in terms of creating a security mechanism to deal with traditional and non-traditional security issues in the region beyond North Korea.

Sub-National Trends and Future Possibilities for Peacebuilding. While formal institutionalisation of regional cooperation is less developed in Northeast Asia, business groups and government-affiliated think tanks have played an important role in creating regional networks that connect countries and sub-national actors in the region. The business groups in respective countries support a FTA among China, South Korea and Japan in Northeast Asia. Also, the economic impact of the China-South Korea-Japan trilateral FTA has been studied and supported through

⁵ The National Institute for Defense Studies Japan, *East Asian Strategic Review*, 2014, pp. 31-31.

joint research conducted by government-affiliated think tanks in each country. In this sense, non-state actors in business, as well as policy think tanks, are closely related, and cooperation in Northeast Asia is often promoted by these non-state actors along with state guidance.

In addition, transnational social networks in Northeast Asia may have great potential for peacebuilding in the region. The role of Korean networks in Northeast Asia is especially prominent. Globalisation and regionalism in Asia also provide opportunity for Koreans to form various global networks. A notable example is the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), an international university in North Korea that has been established and supported by Koreans living abroad in Northeast Asia. The PUST has been regarded as a contribution to economic development in North Korea, as well as the Korean unification process, that could contribute to peacebuilding in the region. Needless to say, inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation at the sub-national level should be considered as important stepping stones toward peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and for future unification. For example, the Kaesong Industrial Complex is a symbol of inter-Korean economic cooperation and has operated for a decade despite occasional severe tensions between the two Koreas.

Required support for building peace and the role of the UN

In Northeast Asia where traditional national security issues are predominant, the role of the US is key for peacebuilding purposes.

US Engagement to Northeast Asia. US engagement and commitment to Northeast Asia is one of the most important factors in managing territorial disputes between China and Japan. During the summit meeting with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in April 2014, President Obama made it clear that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are subject to Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty. Article 5 of the Treaty stipulates that the US is supposed to protect "the territories under the administration of Japan" and that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are administered by Japan.⁶ While the US commitment clearly expressed by President Obama irritated China, this statement contributes to stability in the region in the following two aspects. Firstly, Obama's statement assured that the US would engage in the event of a conflict over the Islands in the East China Sea, which would deter China from military action. Secondly, the statement also removed concerns or fears that Japan might be abandoned by the US in the case of a conflict with China. Japan has no need, therefore, for building up military facilities on the Islands, which might provoke China.

A New Model of Great Powers between the US and China. When it comes to the rise of China, the US has also explored the possibility of constructing a 'new model' of Great Power relations with China. This new model has been discussed by Chinese and American officials since February 2012 when the then Vice-President Xi Jinping visited the US.

There are certainly elements of competition and cooperation in US-China relations. On the one hand, the US and China have many shared interests and policy objectives regarding global issues, such as a sluggish global economy, the environmental and energy, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, as well as non-traditional security issues, such as terrorism and transnational crimes. On the other hand, the two great powers also have issues of tension or competition, including trade imbalance, human rights, the South China Sea issues and the increase of China's military expenditures. The new model of Great Power relations, therefore,

⁶ For more detailed analysis on US role with regard to Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands disputes, see M. E. Manyin, CRS Report for Congress *Senkaku (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) Islands Dispute: US Treaty Obligations*, January 22, 2013.

aims at preventing inevitable conflict and competition, while promoting deeper cooperation between the US and China.⁷ Both countries certainly recognise that cooperation rather than confrontation should be the dominant element of the new model; peacebuilding in Northeast Asia therefore depends on how the US and China manage the potential threats between them.

US-North Korea Relations. The role of the US would also be a key issue regarding North Korean nuclear and missile issues. While North Korea has to date twice conducted nuclear tests during the Obama administration, the US has maintained a policy of 'strategic patience', deterring aggressive behaviour from North Korea and protecting its allies, while encouraging North Korea to change its course of provocations, including nuclear and missile development programs. The US and South Korea have clearly expressed that they will not engage in negotiations with North Korea until it shows positive moves towards denuclearisation.

Nonetheless, North Korea is unlikely to move forward toward denuclearisation and continues to develop its nuclear and missile programs. From the North Korean perspective, 'hostile' US policy created a nuclear North Korea and, therefore, it is unlikely that North Korea will move first unless it obtains certain guarantees for its security from the US. Overall, the North Korean nuclear and missile issues would be strongly determined by the development of US-North Korean relations.

US-Japan Security Alliance. Finally, on the question of Japanese 'militarisation', it should be noted that Japan's increased military role cannot go beyond the scope of the US-Japan Security Alliance Framework. Interestingly, whenever the North Korean nuclear issue becomes a matter of focus in the international community, the question of a nuclear Japan is often discussed outside Japan. This line of argument over a nuclear Japan reflects concerns over Japanese militarisation. However, as long as the US-Japan Security Alliance functions and the US' commitment to protect Japan is assured, it is unlikely that Japan will go nuclear. Indeed, it would not be possible for Japan to go nuclear, as the US would never allow a move in that direction. Japan's 'Proactive Pacifism' is promoted based on the principle of international cooperation and within the framework of the US-Japan Security Alliance.

The Role of the UN. Although traditional inter-state relations are critical in Northeast Asia, the UN can still play an important role in supporting peacebuilding in the region. Firstly, the UN can facilitate economic and social development, which lead to social stability and contribute to peacebuilding. For example, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific: East and North-East Asia Office (ESCAP-ENEAO) has promoted multilateral partnerships and intergovernmental cooperation for sustainable development and integration in the region. Secondly, the UN can offer an opportunity to express alternative views and provide norms for peacebuilding. For example, the report of the UN Secretary-General on the work of the Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters made a recommendation that 'the Secretary-General [should] consider appropriate action for the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in North-East Asia'. Various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from Northeast Asian countries convened a forum at the UN headquarters and urged discussion of the possibility for creating a nuclear-free zone in Northeast Asia. While these efforts have a limited impact on inter-state conflicts among Great Powers, the UN can certainly play a role in facilitating cooperation by offering a venue for meeting and discussing common security concerns, promoting conflict prevention among countries and providing norms for peace in Northeast Asia.

⁷ The White House, "Remarks As Prepared for Delivery by National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice," at Georgetown University, November 20, 2013.

Conclusion: A shifting power balance

While challenges and opportunities for peace and stability in Northeast Asia are analysed, it should be noted that a shift in the power balance in Northeast Asia is an underlying cause for creating security concerns in the region. The rise of China is a most prominent issue in this respect and has influenced the strategic thinking of every country in the region. The US' rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific Region also reflects a strategic adjustment in the Obama Administration's foreign policy. Japan's new security strategy is also considered as a strategic response to the new security environment. Needless to say, China is also exploring the possibilities of avoiding military conflict with the US and pursues cooperative relations between the existing and emerging Great Powers by proposing a 'new model' of great power relations with the US. If the countries and non-state actors in Northeast Asia can work together to handle the potential conflicts and move forward to strengthen mutually beneficial relations, there would be multiple opportunities for building peace in Northeast Asia. Needless to say, this would be highly desirable for all countries and peoples in the region.

About the author: Sachio Nakato is a Professor at the College of International Relations of Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan. His current research interests are international relations of Northeast Asia, US-Japan relations and North Korean foreign policy. Professor Nakato has been a visiting fellow at the Centre for Asian Studies, American University and Graduate School of International Service, Sookmyung Women's University. He received his PhD in International Relations from Ritsumeikan University.

About this Paper: This paper is part of a series providing regional peacebuilding perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding. The authors' task was to provide an authentic, original and honest analysis about three questions: (1) What are the main challenges for building peace in your region? (2) What are the key opportunities for building peace in your region over the next one or two years? (3) What would be the key support necessary to build peace in your region over the next one or two years? Is there any specific role for the UN?

Disclaimer: All views expressed in this article are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, or the four Platform partners: the Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP); the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP); Interpeace; and the Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva (QUNO).

About the White Paper on Peacebuilding: The White Paper on Peacebuilding is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder process initiated by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. It has the objective to situate UN peacebuilding within the broader peacebuilding universe and to articulate visions for the future for building peace in violent and fragile contexts. The White Paper places peacebuilding within the changing characteristics of armed violence and security, and within the practical evidence of engagements in peacebuilding contexts emanating from a diversity of fields. Ensuring a better relationship between UN peacebuilding and the broader peacebuilding field is a complementary effort to the existing work surrounding the 10-year review of the UN peacebuilding architecture and an effort to take stock of the nature and evolution of the broader peacebuilding universe.

© Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, 2015

<http://www.gpplatform.ch>

