

Regional Styles of Security Cooperation:

Lessons from East Asia and Implications for the Middle East

Intaek Han
Jeju Peace Institute

1. Emerging Security Multilateralism in Northeast Asia

Multilateralism in Asia was called an oxymoron. Nevertheless, there is now a growing interest in multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia, as evidenced by two multilateral security processes recently proposed. South Korea has proposed the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI); China has proposed a new multilateral security process based on the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). What explains increasing interest in security multilateralism in Northeast Asia? Why do countries propose “oxymoronic” processes?

One answer lies in the fact that existing mechanisms for peace and security in Northeast Asia are proving increasingly costly and irrelevant, while exacerbating the security dilemma. Take the South Korea-United States alliance for instance. The ROK-US alliance has been effective in deterring North Korea from a conventional attack on the South but it is now becoming increasingly irrelevant in deterring the North from a cyber or nuclear attack on the South or even on the United States. The North has already launched successful cyber attacks on South Korean and US targets, including Sony Pictures Entertainment. If the day comes when a North Korean ICBM or SLBM that can reach a US target, the credibility of US nuclear umbrella and consequently, the very existence of the ROK-US alliance will be seriously questioned. Also important, even an effective ROK-US alliance cannot force the North to denuclearize or incentivize it to implement a regime change. On the contrary, a strong ROK-US alliance is likely to harden rather than soften North Korea’s stance if the North’s recent behavior is any guide. Not only that, efforts to strengthen and update the ROK-US alliance in response to new threats from the North are getting China worried, exacerbating security dilemma not only between the US and North Korea but also between the US and China.

At the same time when existing security mechanisms are proving insufficient, new security risks are multiplying. This naturally creates the impulse to “fix” existing security measures. So it is not at all surprising that the ideas that a multilateral security process or multilateral security architecture may be able to offer an efficient or effective solution have nearly simultaneously appeared in South Korea and China.

2. Europe vs. Southeast Asia

The challenge for Northeast Asia is that the region lacks successful precedents of multilateral security cooperation to build on. The Six Party Talks may be what comes closest to a precedent of multilateral security cooperation in the region but the talks have been stalled for years now and had not led anywhere near the intended denuclearization of the DPRK. Quite the contrary, after the six rounds of the Talks, North Korea has become a potential, if not immediate, nuclear threat to the United States.

With no successful precedents in Northeast Asia to emulate, it has been customary to look outside of Northeast Asia for a successful precedent of security cooperation. In this search for a successful precedent, Europe has been always on the top of the list. Multilateral security cooperation in Europe, as embodied in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and later in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), has inspired Northeast Asia ever since the Helsinki Final Act was signed in 1975.

Despite the shortcomings of the OSCE, the latest of which has been apparent in the unfolding of the Ukrainian crisis, there is little doubt that multilateral security cooperation in Europe is an inspiration for the rest of the world--not just for Northeast Asia. But given the differences in history, geography, and culture between Europe and Northeast Asia, can Europe also offer a practical roadmap for Northeast Asia? Put differently, Europe can certainly show where Northeast Asia should go but can it also show Northeast Asia how to get there?

3. Multilateral Security Cooperation, the Southeast Asian Style

Though overshadowed by the success of Europe, Southeast Asia is also a successful case of

multilateral security cooperation. At the beginning of the 1990s, there was almost no multilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. But today, war between ASEAN countries is unthinkable, and all sorts of security cooperation take place among ASEAN countries. Southeast Asia's equivalent of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the ASEAN Regional Forum draws participants from Southeast Asia and beyond.

How did Southeast Asia achieve multilateral security cooperation in such a short period of time despite the virtual absence of multilateralism? The end of the Cold War certainly helped. Improving relations between the United States and the Soviet Union and the subsequent peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union removed a lot of tension from inter-state relations in Asia as well as in Europe. With the Cold War over, old lines of cleavages suddenly became less salient; ideological differences, for instance, did not put countries against one another as they had done before. But the end of the Cold War was a global phenomenon; it was not specific to Southeast Asia. We also need a region-specific factor or factors to explain the emergence of security multilateralism in Southeast Asia.

One unique feature in multilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia is the prominent role of Track 2 diplomacy i.e. informal policy dialogue between officials in their private capacities and experts. A loose but influential network of experts in Southeast Asia advocated multilateral security cooperation, and through frequent policy dialogues between officials and experts, their idea of multilateral security cooperation came to be accepted and later implemented as actual policies by governments in the region.

To be fair, there were also activists and experts in Western Europe who called for denuclearization or disarmament during the 1960s and 1970s. But their voice was subdued because of the conditions of the time: the Cold War. Nor were they officially involved in negotiation between the West and the East in the run-up to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. After all, the talks were intergovernmental in nature; ambassadors and their political principals were the main players. But not so in Southeast Asia. Security experts played a critical role there. They were the ones who proposed the convening of the ASEAN Regional Forum; they also helped government officials in Southeast Asia to cooperate on security issues through proposals and consultation. The combination of an active transnational epistemic community advocating cooperative security and receptive national governments was the key to the success of multilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia.

Was this combination truly unique to Southeast Asia? Not necessarily. As Peter Haas' study

on the Mediterranean Action Plan shows, an ecological epistemic community played a similarly crucial role in international effort to fight marine pollution in the Mediterranean in the 1970s. Essentially, epistemic communities that Peter Haas has found and Track 2 diplomacy in Southeast Asia point to the same phenomenon: Interaction between experts and officials. To put generally, cooperation occurs when knowledge and power are joined.

4. Which Style of Security Cooperation for Northeast Asia?

Depending on which region we look, we find a different road to multilateral security cooperation for Northeast Asia. If we look at the European case, the road to multilateral security cooperation is through active Track 1 diplomacy or intergovernmental multilateral talks. If we look at the Southeast Asian case, the road to multilateral security cooperation is through vibrant Track 1 diplomacy or security epistemic community.

The problem so far has been that we did not look at Southeast Asia closely enough. Rather, we have focused on Europe despite the differences between Europe and Northeast Asia and in spite of difficulties of Track 1 diplomacy in Northeast Asia. Official diplomacy in Northeast Asia is currently “dysfunctional.” Official diplomacy between South and North Korea is almost non-existent, for instance; not much is going on between two Koreas at the official level. Official diplomacy between South Korea and China, on the one hand, and Japan, on the other hand, is also at one of its lowest points. As the recent trilateral summit held in Seoul demonstrated, it is hard for the leaders of China, Japan, and South Korea to get together; it is even harder for them to make any meaning progress in issues that require trilateral cooperation. Not only that, relations between the United States and China are more strained than ever since the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Given the current dismal state of intergovernmental relations, the Track 1 road to regional security cooperation will certainly be long and winding, and take us long time to get to the destination.

Thus, it makes sense to study and try to replicate the Southeast Asian style of multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia in addition to, if not in place of, CSCE/OSCE-style security cooperation. It is important to recognize that the Track 2 road is not without its share of problems. Judging from the experience of Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean, there needs to be a vibrant transnational epistemic community for international cooperation to succeed.

Take Southeast Asia. ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN ISIS) is a loose network of think tanks in Southeast Asia. Ever since its inception, ASEAN ISIS has been at the forefront of Track 2 diplomatic efforts in Southeast Asia. In fact, Track 2 in Southeast Asia is largely synonymous with ASEAN ISIS.

For Northeast Asia to be able to achieve security cooperation, it would need particularly active Track 2 diplomacy to complement and even lead the troubled Track 1 diplomacy in the region. Active Track 2 diplomacy, in turn, requires a vibrant transnational epistemic community. Unlike Southeast Asia or the Mediterranean, security epistemic community in Northeast Asia is weak and fragmented along national lines.

The underdevelopment of transnational epistemic community in Northeast Asia is a setback to multilateral security cooperation just as dysfunctional Track 1 diplomacy is. However, it is important to realize that Southeast Asia also did not have vibrant Track 2 diplomacy until around the early 1990s. For instance, ASEAN ISIS was officially launched in 1988 with the signing of its charter. In 1991, just three years after the ASEAN ISIS was officially formed, ASEAN ISIS made a proposal to start a regional security dialogue titled “A Time for Initiative.” This proposal was accepted by governments in Southeast Asia and the ASEAN Regional Forum was born. ASEAN ISIS did not stop there. It soon went to create a loose network of experts to advise and support the ASEAN Regional Forum: Council for Security and Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). If the experience of Southeast Asia is any guide, transnational epistemic community can develop over a relative short period of time, and an even newly formed epistemic community can have a big impact.

5. Implications for the Middle East

Traditionally, peace and security in the Gulf region has been maintained through military means, with the United States acting as the defender of the last resort (as in the case of the Gulf War) and balancer (as in the case of Iran-GCC relations). Recent years, however, witnessed changes in U.S. policy toward the Gulf region: America may be disengaging itself from the Gulf region. If America’s “Pivot to Asia” accelerates, especially after the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal, it may be no longer possible to maintain peace and security in the Gulf region in the traditional manner. Sooner or later the Gulf region will need new security arrangements to complement or

even replace the existing security order.

So far it has been customary to study the experience of Europe as a model of security cooperation. It is the argument of this paper that East Asia may be able to offer more valuable insights than Europe in designing a new security order for the Gulf region.

1) Lessons from East Asia

Despite cultural, historical, and geographical similarities between the two sub-regions of East Asia, Southeast Asia has succeeded in creating a “security community,” while Northeast Asia is mired in crisis one after another. By comparing the success of security cooperation in Southeast Asia and the failure of security cooperation in Northeast Asia, we may be able to identify those institutions, strategies, and processes that lead to peace and security and those institutions, strategies, and processes that do not.

At the beginning of the 1990's, there was almost no multilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. Now, war among ASEAN countries is unimaginable due to the multiple layers of security cooperation that exist between ASEAN countries. Southeast Asia's equivalent of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the ASEAN Regional Forum, draws participants from Southeast Asia and beyond.

One unique feature in multilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia is the prominent role of Track 2 diplomacy, or the informal policy dialogue between experts and officials in their private capacities. A loose but influential network of experts in Southeast Asia (ASEAN ISIS) advocated multilateral security cooperation; consequently, frequent policy dialogues between officials and experts created multilateral security cooperation ideas that came to be accepted and implemented as actual policies by governments in the region.

It may be therefore useful to study and try to replicate the Southeast Asian style of multilateral security cooperation in the Gulf region. It is also important to recognize that the Track 2 road will have problems. The experience of Southeast Asia indicates the need for a vibrant transnational epistemic community that can successfully implement international cooperation. Unlike Southeast Asia, the security epistemic community in the Gulf region is weak and fragmented along national lines. But it is also important to realize that Southeast Asia

did not have vibrant Track 2 diplomacy until the early 1990's. For instance, ASEAN ISIS was officially launched in 1988 with the signing of its charter. In 1991, just three years after the ASEAN ISIS was officially formed, ASEAN ISIS made a proposal to start a regional security dialogue titled "A Time for Initiative." This proposal was accepted by governments in Southeast Asia and the ASEAN Regional Forum was born. ASEAN ISIS soon created a loose network of experts to advise and support the ASEAN Regional Forum: Council for Security and Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). The experience of Southeast Asia shows that a transnational epistemic community can develop over a relative short period of time and that even a newly formed epistemic community can have a big impact.

2). The Role of South Korea

South Korea is not a country in the Gulf region. Also, it has more than its share of security problems. But exactly because of the continuing security threats it faces, South Korea has been rather ingeniously experimenting with a variety of peace and cooperation initiatives. Few of them worked but ideas behind them may be still good. (Some ideas may have failed not because the ideas were flawed but they were poorly executed.) I would like to share some of them-- for instance, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) and the Korean Peninsula Trust-Building Process.

Another way South Korea can contribute to the peace and security of the Gulf region is through its middle power activism. South Korea considers itself a middle power and increasingly sees promotion of peace and stability in the Middle East as one of its global roles. Exactly because South Korea is not a country in the Gulf region, it hopes it can act as impartial mediator, facilitator or mere observer in the Gulf region.