

## COMMUNITY-BUILDING IN NORTHEAST ASIA AND THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES\*

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### *Introduction*

Regional integration is an undeniable worldwide phenomenon. It has risen both as a way to cope with the challenges of globalization, and as a way to accomplish it more efficiently.

But while the institutionalization of integrative processes has been accelerating, integration in Northeast Asia (NEA) has been quite slow. I'm not saying that it hasn't been advancing. It has. But alongside that advance has been a worrisome escalation of threats to regional peace and security. We know that peace, security, and economic prosperity share an intricate relationship. For NEA, full understanding of this intricacy is crucial.

Increasing understanding and cooperation to build a community of peace and prosperity is crucial. In addressing this, I would like to talk about three things: First, the Roh Moo-Hyun government's Northeast Asian Cooperative Initiative. What is it? Understanding this bold attempt to address the issue of cooperation so that we may build sustainable peace and bring greater prosperity to the region and its peoples is important. Second, socio-cultural activity: What is its relevance in this regional community-building process? Third, the role of universities in this vision for building a Northeast Asian Community through increased socio-cultural activity.

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*Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative*

In South Korea, the Roh Moo-hyun government has been attempting to accelerate the pace of institutionalization. At the same time, it has been trying to meet head on that which most threatens regional peace and prosperity. To do this it launched the “the Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative.” What is it exactly? Is it important? I believe it is, and I believe our understanding of it is too.

In simple terms, it is a bold initiative that outlines an assertive role for South Korea in the institutionalization of NEA integrative processes. Underpinning it is the notion of NEA itself. This notion recognizes the growing importance of NEA in the world system and also the region’s internal dynamism. At the same time, it tries to respond to the challenges that arise as a consequence of NEA’s increasing weight and dynamism. Given the ambivalent geopolitical position that South Korea occupies, it feels obliged to transform such challenges into opportunities through cooperation. Likewise, this notion recognizes the necessity for the Korean peninsula to overcome its division and to establish a peace regime so as to eliminate the sources of major regional security threats. Sustaining peace in Northeast Asia will be virtually impossible without establishing a sustained peace on the peninsula.

Sounds like a nationalistic venture, right? Let me be clear. This notion represents more than just Korea’s interests. It is not simply a nationalistic enterprise. In fact, it transcends Korean interests to include those of the region. It must be distinguished from a national development strategy. It represents a more comprehensive and bolder vision toward regional integration, seeking to accelerate economic cooperation and peace building.

In this initiative, no actor is left out. Not even North Korea. Indeed, the initiative embeds North Korea into the larger regional framework of NEA. Simply, it demonstrates its attempt to tackle the regional problem of North Korea by carrying out various cooperative projects in the region. For NEA to achieve lasting peace and sustainable prosperity via integration, it must engage North Korea.

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Remember, sustainable growth for the nations in the region cannot be achieved unless barriers to integration -- including the problem of North Korea -- are addressed and further measures toward mutual trust, cooperation, and co-prosperity are stepped up. Legacies of the past still haunt the region's peoples. The Roh government understands that without a rapid and institutionalized dismantlement of the Cold War system in the region -- including the Korean peninsula -- rivalry and competition will impede development. We have no choice but to call for peace building and economic co-prosperity through cooperation.

Thus the initiative outlines Korea's role in materializing our shared goal and vision of building a Northeast Asian Community of peace and prosperity. Korea's geographic position, vibrant democracy, as well as its grassroots level perceptions of, historical bonds and greater time to reconcile with its regional neighbors puts it in a position to better neutralize and mediate conflicts in the region, in particular the Sino-Japanese rivalry.

Regrettably, the Korea-Japanese government-level relationship has not been particularly amiable as of late. But the current diplomatic feud will be settled, because from a mid-to-long term perspective both Korea and Japan have every reason to cooperate.

For its part, South Korea can work to "bridge" that gap between continental NEA and Japan. It can also position itself in selected areas -- such as peace, financial services, logistics, and tourism -- to build "nodes" of intra-regional networks, nodes that will help promote peace and common prosperity by serving as a common ground for mutual discourses on pertinent issues. Furthermore, South Korea can be a "promoter of cooperation" that works to activate the process of community building in Northeast Asia.

The ultimate goal of the Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative is to materialize a peaceful and prosperous Northeast Asia by fostering the governance of cooperation and building a regional community of mutual trust, reciprocity, and symbiosis. To realize this vision, the region must be freed of the threat of war. As well, regional cooperation and maximization of growth potential must be sought, among other things. Sincere efforts must be made to accelerate regional cooperation to

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promote “sustainable development” and a quality of life that envisions a “greener” world for the region’s peoples.

As with European integration, progress toward realizing a Northeast Asian Community should start with an interest in security and peace. From here a community can be developed through synergy of dialogue, cooperation, and trust. To help with this, guiding the initiative are three operational principles.

The first principle stresses cooperation in the functional areas. The second stresses the need to exert concerted efforts in security, economic, and socio-cultural fields in an integrated manner. This will help achieve successful outcomes and maximize synergistic effects. The third principle emphasizes a multifaceted approach to the establishment of a regional community. It envisions cooperative efforts to be deployed at every level and dimension simultaneously. Also governmental and non-governmental approaches are to be combined to maximize the efficiency of cooperation.

In particular, activities taking place at the non-governmental level should be taken very seriously and perhaps given more significance. Today governments are becoming constrained actors with decreasing authority and resources. Exchange, dialogue, communication, mutual understanding, and solidarity at non-governmental levels seem more appealing and prevailing. Activation and consolidation of non-governmental efforts should be valued on moral and cultural grounds.

#### *Socio-Cultural Activity*

Thus to build a Northeast Asian Community, it is important for countries in the region and their peoples -- at the grassroots and non-governmental levels -- to get involved. They will be vital to building a sense of collective responsibility or identity, something that is sadly lacking in NEA.

In fact, there seems to be stronger tendencies toward promoting nationalism rather than a regional identity important for a regional community. In so far as political leaders continue to take advantage of nationalistic sentiments widespread among the general populations in Korea, Japan, and China for

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their political objectives, the regional community-building process in NEA will be agonizingly slow.

Again, the importance of the non-governmental sector is obvious. While government lags, the private sector speeds up. Economic integration is already well under way. It will be a contributing factor in enhancing the community-building process.

However, a Northeast Asian Community cannot be founded, built, and sustained purely on economic objectives and business interactions. Such a regional community brings together societies and cultures, each one wanting a relationship yet also desiring to celebrate and protect its own culture and values within that new relationship. Culture is not a domain that can be expected to just “follow along” as economic integration occurs. Culture affects the way we view and value our interactions. Therefore customs, norms and attitudes that we place on relations will affect the economic and security relations we seek to improve.

Much more can be gained, and much quicker, if we recognize this and work to enhance its power.

In my view, one important factor in building a regional community will be how well we can “speed up” socio-cultural exchanges and communications in non-governmental areas. Here, joint-development of the culture industry should be pursued. Sharing of cultural products and promotion of artistic collaborations would be a positive step forward. Advancing the pop culture industry through the promotion of joint-development and distribution of film, popular music, and so forth would be encouraging. Collaborative development of cultural enterprise should also help advance cultural exchange and intercommunication between peoples.

For itself, the South Korean government has been pursuing a policy of building a culture community bloc in Northeast Asia in order to set up a paradigm of reciprocity and cooperation. Cultural exchanges with China have rapidly progressed in recent years via expansion of trade and on the surge of what is known as the “Korean Wave.” Also, cultural exchanges with Russia are actively ongoing, as are those with Japan.

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Korea plans to utilize the “Korean Wave” as a catalyst to form a cultural community and to set Northeast Asia cultural identity. To culturally exchange and cooperate with countries in East Asia, in 2004, the Korean government established the Culture Exchange Center in Shanghai and Hanoi and the centers expanded their operations toward areas where the Korean Wave prevails. These and other centers strive to build human networks with local government, academia, businesses, and related figures as strategic points for the cultural and industrial exchange and cooperation.

These human networks may also work to help deal with the sensitive issue of Northeast Asian history and history textbooks, still one of the major sources of conflicts among nations in NEA. When looking at history, sectarian interpretation and description in terms of nationalistic criteria should be avoided. Instead, some universalistic way of reconciling with the past should be maintained. The issue of history is inevitably linked to the future. The reason why the South Korean government has put emphasis on the issue could be in part explained by its concern with the future regional order.

### *The Role of Universities*

That’s what our government is basically doing. Now what about the universities? Well, the cultural dimension and the activities of civil society are essential to provide the bond for the formation of a strong community. This seems distinctively an area where the region’s universities can play an active and significant role.

Universities have been for decades at the center of much transnational collaboration. Functionally, this must deepen before it expands. Deepening the relationships means universities must also provide our future leaders, professionals, and entrepreneurs with the opportunities to increase their knowledge and understanding of other cultures. This should be done not to increase competition between countries, but to foster understanding and cooperation in competitive business environments.

In my mind, universities should look toward being active in several different areas and in many different ways. A few may include the following. First, deepen sisterhood relations by increasing student exchanges, in particular language and cultural ones. Communication is the means to

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promoting understanding and cooperation with others. Improving communication fosters collaborations, which in turn can foster peace. Second, universities can increase Northeast Asian consciousness by promoting the joint-development of history curriculum. Through this process, future generations can reach for the possibility of a “restoration of Asia.” Issues of history will need to be redressed at some point in the future if long-term cooperation is to be assured, and if we are to move along a path that leads to peace and co-prosperity. Third, promote cultural industry within local areas and through various collaborations, publications, exchanges, and so forth. And fourth, promote and increase bilateral and regional inter-collegiate sporting events.

These are just a few ideas that may be seized and acted upon. I encourage all to sincerely become more active in promoting such activity at the local level, for that is where we must begin building the greater Northeast Asian Community.

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