

## IN SEARCH OF A MODEL FOR NORTHEAST ASIAN GOVERNMENT AND REGIONAL COOPERATION\*

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A Japanese specialist on Southeast Asian regionalism, Shimizu Hajime, once wrote, “A concept of region is a presentation of a world view or an ideology.”<sup>1</sup> When we think about our own region, or the region to which we belong, it is necessary for us to remember that a region is not anything given to us, but something to be discovered or created by us. That is to say, a region does not exist without our wishes to belong to it. Let us look back to see how the concept of Northeast Asia rose and developed.

### *Northeast Asia as a Region*

This concept is rather young. After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, a new international atmosphere enabled new arguments to develop about the necessity of regional cooperation in this part of the world. The concept of Northeast Asia became a topic of international discussion in the region during the 1980s.

In Japan, several prefectural and municipal authorities endeavored to initiate economic cooperation among prefectures and cities surrounding the Japanese Sea (or the “East Sea,” as Koreans refer to it in English). Matsue City of the now famous Shimane Prefecture took the lead in holding the Matsue International Conference for Friendship Surrounding the Japanese Sea (Kannihonkai Matsue kokusaikoryu kaigi) in 1986. Due to this conference, the term “Sphere of Economic Cooperation Surrounding the Japanese Sea” (Kannihonkai keizaiken) became popular and spread widely in Japan. But Koreans expressed their displeasure with this term and proposed to replace it with the term “Economic Cooperation of Northeast Asia.” In 1990, Niigata City and Niigata Prefecture organized the first annual Niigata Economic Conference of Northeast Asia, inviting Russian, Chinese, and both North and South Korean representatives to the event. In 1993, eight other prefectures on the coast of the Japanese Sea joined Niigata Prefecture and Niigata City to establish the Economic Research Institute of Northeast Asia (ERINA).

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<sup>1</sup> Shimizu Hajime, “Kindai Nihon niokeru ‘Tonan Aziya’ chiiki gainen no seiritsu” (The Birth of a Regional Concept “Southeast Asia” in Modern Japan), *Aziya Kenkyu*, No. 6 (1987), p. 3.

The notion of Northeast Asian economic cooperation spread widely both in the northeastern part of China and in South Korea. In 1988, research centers whose main focus would be Northeast Asia were set up in Jilin Province and Jilin University. They began to publish the magazines *Study of Northeast Asia* in 1990 and *Northeast Asian Forum* in 1992. Similar research institutes were established in Liaoning Province in 1990 and at Beijing University in 1993. During this initial phase, the main agenda was the project of economic development in the Tumen River area and the proposal to found a Northeast Asia Development Bank.

Thus, a clear and substantial concept of Northeast Asia as a sphere of regional economic cooperation appeared around 1990. Here the concept of Northeast Asia included the northeastern part of China, the two Koreas, Mongolia, the Russian Far East and Japan.

In the 1990s when the Soviet Communist regime came to an end, a new trend of arguments about Northeast Asian regional cooperation appeared with the perspective of holding constructive peace talks in the region. First, it should be noted that Northeast Asian cooperation achieved visible success in environmental cooperation. In 1992, the Northeast Asian Conference on Environmental Cooperation hosted government representatives of China, South Korea, Japan, Mongolia, and Russia. The Northeast Asian Sub-regional Program on Environmental Cooperation began operating in 1993 and received assistance from the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), a department of the United Nations. And in 1999, China, South Korea, and Japan agreed to hold annual tripartite ministerial meetings on the environment.

On the other hand, several scholars began to talk about a regional community of Northeast Asia in South Korea and Japan. Among others, I have proposed the organizing of a regional community in Northeast Asia, called the “Common House of Northeast Asia,” suggesting that “a new alliance of the Soviet Union, China, South and North Korea, the United States, and Japan in Northeast Asia can be called a house where peoples of the world live together and where the rapprochement and the merger of South-North Korea, on the basis of democracy, constitute the core of that house.”<sup>2</sup> The term “Common House” is taken from Mikhail Gorbachev’s proposal for European regional cooperation. Borrowing Gorbachev’s term, I

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<sup>2</sup> The first occasion on which I spoke about the idea of the Common House was at the Japanese-Korean Symposium jointly organized by the *Donga Ilbo* and *Asahi Shimbun* in Seoul in 1990. The second occasion on which I proposed my idea of the Common House was in an article entitled “A Common House of Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula” in the Seoul journal *Changjak kwa Pipyong*, No. 87 (Spring 1995). For a more systematic description, see Wada Haruki, *Tohokuazia Kyodo no Ie* [A Common House of Northeast Asia] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2003) (Seoul: Ilchokaku, 2004, in Korean).

intended to contrast my idea with the “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere.”

On a governmental level, the first agreement between two countries where the concept of Northeast Asia was featured is the Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration. Japan’s Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and North Korea’s National Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong Il met on September 17, 2002 and signed a declaration, in which the two leaders expressed their determination to “cooperate with each other in order to maintain and strengthen the peace and stability of Northeast Asia.” The two leaders went as far as to recognize that “it is important to have a framework in place in order for these regional countries to promote confidence-building, as the relationships among these countries are normalized.”

Next, a bold and ambitious statement was made by new South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun in his inauguration speech delivered on February 25, 2003. President Roh appeared to be a strong champion of a new regionalism in Northeast Asia and of South Korean initiatives for regional community-building. He said:

The Age of Northeast Asia is fast approaching. Northeast Asia, which used to be on the periphery of the modern world, is now emerging as a new source of energy in the global economy. . . . The Korean Peninsula is located at the heart of the region. It is a big bridge linking China and Japan, the continent and the ocean. Such a geopolitical characteristic often caused pain for us in the past. Today, however, this same feature is offering us an opportunity. Indeed, it demands that we play a pivotal role in the Age of Northeast Asia in the twenty-first century.

It should be noted that President Roh mentioned three countries: Korea, China and Japan. For him the Northeast Asian Community is ultimately a body of regional economic cooperation.

Finally, on September 19, 2005, representatives of six Northeast Asian countries signed the Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of Six-Party Talks in Beijing. It stated that “the Six Parties committed to joint efforts for lasting peace and stability in Northeast Asia” and that “the Six Parties agreed to explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation in Northeast Asia.”

It can be concluded that these six countries of Northeast Asia -- the two Koreas, China, the United States, Russia and Japan -- were aiming to create a framework of regional security cooperation through solution of the North Korean nuclear problem. At that moment, an image of future regional community showed itself, albeit briefly, through the dense mist of hostilities and

tensions covering the region.

*The Identity of the Northeast Asian People*

In order to prepare for a regional community we should find and create a regional identity. People often seek it in cultural traditions, for example in the usage of Chinese characters or in the spread of Confucianism, but to no avail. Northeast Asia is a heterogeneous region in terms of culture, where East Asian, Russo-Eurasian, and Western cultural values come together.

Furthermore, the Northeast Asian people are most divided by the differences in politico-social systems and the memory of past conflicts and war, namely the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), the annexation of Korea (1910), World War II (1941-1945), the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949), the Korean War (1950-1953), and the Vietnam War (1965-1975). As a result of this long history of war, great animosities, bitter rivalries, and territorial disputes remain.

It seems that there is no other region on earth where such awful and complicated memories of the past and lasting anguish are cleaving peoples as in Northeast Asia. The perpetrators should apologize, damages should be compensated, and conflicts should be solved. Above all, hatred should be overcome and vengeance replaced by forgiveness. The people of Northeast Asia sincerely desire complete reconciliation.

It is this passion for reconciliation that forms the basis of our Northeast Asian identity. The recent rise of anti-Japanese feelings in China and South Korea can be thought of as a misguided expression of this passion for reconciliation. They are urging the Japanese people to respond to them. This passion can be strengthened through economic and cultural integration of the region and unite the Northeast Asian people.

*Security Cooperation and Environmental Community*

The first step to a Northeast Asian Community is creating a body of regional security cooperation. This body would be formed through the solution of the North Korean nuclear issue and a peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula. If the leaders of the six countries were to sign a final document of agreement of the six-party talks, this gathering could turn into a Northeast Asian Summit, which could lead to the formation of ANEAN, the Association of Northeast Asian Nations.

Security cooperation between the six countries should first of all keep peace on the Korean Peninsula, but it will also play an important role in preventing an undesirable event in the Taiwan Straits. In such a regional system of security cooperation, the Japan-US Security Pact and the ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty can be redefined and improved.

Mongolia should be included in the security cooperation of Northeast Asia from an early stage. Mongolia has an army of only 21,000 men and has declared itself a nuclear-free state.

The second step to a Northeast Asian Community is building an environmental community. The basis for this community has been already laid. The issues of yellow sand and acid rain, and now bird flu, have already united all the countries of this region. Taiwan should be included in this cooperation, along with the other large islands of the region—Okinawa, Cheju Island, Sakhalin and Hawaii.

Perhaps the most serious problem is the possibility of an accident at a North Korean nuclear plant. The North Korean nuclear reactor in Yongbyon is the same type that exploded at Chernobyl in 1986, just twenty years ago. Hazel Smith, an English specialist on North Korea, warned in last October's issue of *Jane's Intelligence Review* that "irrespective of the truth of North Korea's claims to be developing or to have manufactured nuclear bombs, the possibilities of a nuclear accident provide a real and present danger for the population of North Korea, those few foreigners living in the country and the population of neighbouring countries." To prevent such a catastrophe is a common task of the Northeast Asian people.

The DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) on the Korean Peninsula has a rare natural heritage that has not been spoiled by human activity for half a century. This can be turned into a Green Peace Belt, once a peace settlement is realized on the Korean Peninsula. It could also serve as the location for central institutions of the Northeast Asian Community.

*From Northeast Asian Community to East Asian Community*

In 2005, another community building project was officially recognized: the East Asian Community. Sincere and stable steps toward building a Northeast Asian Community can contribute much to the formation of this greater regional community project.

Last December, two summits were held to promote an East Asian Community in Kuala Lumpur.

The regular ASEAN+3 conference and the East Asian Summit both issued declarations promoting an East Asian Community. It is generally agreed that these conferences are the starting points of a long journey towards an East Asian Community.

At the second conference of the ASEAN+3 in 1998, South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung proposed the organization of an East Asian Vision Group for thorough discussion of measures to overcome economic crisis. In December 2001, the resulting Vision Group presented to the fifth ASEAN+3 conference a report entitled "Towards an East Asian Community: Region of Peace, Prosperity and Progress." The report begins: "We, the people of East Asia, aspire to create an East Asian community of peace, prosperity and progress based on the full development of all peoples in the region." The authors of the report proposed to organize an East Asian Summit in the near future.

Last December, the East Asian Summit was perceived as a significant step forward in realizing such a community and enjoyed wide support among countries of the region.

However, the outlook is not completely optimistic. First, there are disagreements between Japan and China over membership in the East Asian Community. Japan wishes to include India, Australia and New Zealand, while China appears to be unwilling to do so. Second, the United States government is skeptical of this scheme of regional cooperation without U.S. participation. Americans cannot be indifferent to any idea of regional cooperation in Asia, and are unlikely to support an East Asian Community without their participation.

It is noteworthy that Francis Fukuyama suggested that the form of the six-party talks can be used for Northeast Asian regional security cooperation.<sup>3</sup> For him, this is the form in which the United States can become a full member. Former U.S. Ambassador James Goodby (Brookings Institute) propounded at the Cheju Peace Forum in June 2005 that an organization of Northeast Asian security cooperation should be prepared by the development of the six-party talks or a five-partite conference. The joint statement of the six-party talks issue last September confirmed the scheme of Northeast Asian security cooperation.

If we think of community building as a multi-layered process, the Northeast Asian Community and East Asian Community can coexist. We need not think of them as contradictory. On one level, the Northeast Asian Community, including the United States as a member, can be combined with the Southeast Asian Community, growing from ASEAN. On a second level, an

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "Re-Envisioning Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (2005).

East Asian Community without the United States can be built.

*Conclusion*

Geographically, the Korean Peninsula is located at the center of Northeast Asia. Politically, peace and reconciliation between South and North Korea are the crucial problem of the region. Koreans are living in four other countries of the region: two million in China, less than half million in former Soviet Union, less than one million in Japan and two million in the United States. It is natural that the two Koreas will take the lead in forming the Northeast Asian Community. China, Russia, the United States and Japan should also make sincere efforts to construct the Northeast Asian Community. Furthermore, Mongolia can play an important role in uniting the region. Last but not least, representatives of the larger islands in the region—Taiwan, Cheju, Okinawa, Sakhalin and Hawaii—can also contribute to the cause of forming a Northeast Asian Community.

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