Complex Legacies: Bridge-Building in Northeast Asia
By Cho Hyun

Building a multilateral security architecture in Northeast Asia is essential for enhanced peace and stability in the region. With this in mind, South Korea, Japan and China will need to find ways to converge their interests further and deepen cooperation with each other.

Such an approach, together with the continued involvement of the US in the region, will be crucial for effective security in Northeast Asia, writes South Korea’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Cho Hyun.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, and provides a meaningful juncture to reflect on the current security environment in Northeast Asia. It is also worth exploring the possibilities for creating a new security architecture in the region.

The security situation in Northeast Asia has been characterized by multiple bilateral alliances, including those between South Korea and the US, Japan and the US and between North Korea and China. In contrast to these alliances, however, the countries in the region have little experience of multilateral security cooperation. Consequently, while a careful balance of power has more or less been achieved over time, and the situation is not entirely Hobbesian in nature, countries continue to be concerned about their security. One way to ease this chronic uncertainty is to establish a multilateral security regime through which members can work together to build confidence between them and cooperate toward establishing durable peace and stability.

How then can such a regional security architecture be achieved? To answer this question, one needs only to look at Europe, which rose from the ashes of two World Wars to successfully establish a regional security regime: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This multilateral security framework enabled the effective management of the Cold War, and the resulting peace and stability brought unprecedented economic prosperity to the continent.

Would it be possible for Northeast Asia to emulate this success? More specifically, would it be possible to move from the present Cold War alliance structure and build a regional security community where the countries cooperate towards a common objective? What are some of the challenges and limits, and how may they be overcome?
LEGACIES OF PAST CONFLICT
In Northeast Asia, there are many lingering issues that have given rise to a pessimistic outlook on the development of a multilateral security community similar to that of Europe. The vestiges of the Cold War here have long outlived détente, and the division of the Korean Peninsula continues to pose one of the greatest obstacles. Indeed, the two Koreas are still technically at war with each other. Furthermore, North Korea's weapons of mass destruction program, which includes nuclear and missile activities, has also been a major hindrance to a stable security situation. After six rounds of the Six-Party talks, North Korea has refused to return to the negotiating table since December 2008. It further defied the international community in 2009 by launching a long-range rocket and ballistic missiles and conducting a nuclear test. These provocative actions pose a great threat to both the region and the world, and it is imperative that they be resolved.

Meanwhile, the wounds of history continue to be a source of underlying tension. The memories of Japanese occupation remain vivid in the minds of many Koreans and Chinese, and the passive attitude of the Japanese government in addressing the grievances has made it difficult to achieve genuine reconciliation. This historical issue is further compounded by territorial disputes and the resulting intensification of nationalistic sentiments. The regional security landscape is even more complicated given the existence of an ideological fault line.

SIGNS OF HOPE
In spite of the existing challenges, there are signs of hope. First, in today's globalized world, unconventional threats such as climate change, natural disasters, financial crises, pandemics, piracy, terrorism, cyber-terrorism and energy security are important issues facing the international community, thus giving rise to a change in the very definition of security. Paradoxically enough, these unconventional security issues are areas in which stakeholders in Northeast Asia, even China and the US, may find a convergence in their interests. Because no one single nation can effectively address these issues alone, the new global threats have made multilateral and regional cooperation not only desirable but inevitable. As evidenced in the case of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), countries have begun a process of cooperative rule setting, which is a crucial part of any security architecture. Elaborating and formalizing these rules will become an important part of institutionalizing regional security cooperation, as seen in the work of the OSCE to increase inter-regional compatibility in various areas.

Against this backdrop, trilateral talks between South Korea, Japan and China at various levels and on a range of issues have been held during the past decade. A trilateral summit is now held on a regular basis and the leaders of the three countries will meet for the third time in South Korea in the course of this year. Sensitive issues such as the reduction of military tensions have yet to be addressed at these meetings, and these are matters that also need to be addressed in the long term. These diplomatic initiatives will serve to build confidence and upgrade the already existing, albeit somewhat limited, cooperation between the three countries and help them to slowly move beyond historical antagonisms.

In another light, the challenges posed by the North Korean nuclear issue may prove to have a silver lining. The urgency of the issue has necessitated and enabled coordination and cooperation among the major stakeholders in the region. Although currently stalled, the Six-Party talks have contributed to building confidence among the parties. As countries learn to cooperate with
each other over time, this experience will prove to be a valuable asset in developing and institutionalizing a multilateral security framework. Indeed, once all parties, including North Korea, come to an agreement on the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea, the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism of the Six-Party talks will be ready to demonstrate its full potential.

A second positive indication is the growing economic interdependence in the region. Specifically, the volumes of intra-regional trade and investment have steadily increased, reaching $523 billion and $13.8 billion, respectively, in 2008. China has become the largest trading partner for both South Korea ($168 billion) and Japan ($266 billion). South Korea and Japan also continue to be strong partners in trade, with a bilateral trade volume of $89 billion. Furthermore, there has been a steady rise in investment among the three countries. The launch of the trilateral free trade agreement (FTA) feasibility study is expected to further increase these numbers, forging even stronger ties among the three economies. The recent global financial meltdown and the ensuing economic recession have also strengthened cooperation among them as they have been working together, with other major economies of the world, to overcome the crisis. In addition to the trilateral economic integration, the South Korea-US FTA, once ratified, will contribute to bringing the US closer to Northeast Asia and keep its interests rooted in the region. Accordingly, the US will remain an important stakeholder in the Northeast Asian economy, and this will be conducive to maintaining its role in the region.

While it may be some time before a trilateral FTA actually enters into effect, the efforts to bring it about will, nevertheless, contribute to developing a common market comparable to that of the European Union. New York Times columnists Thomas Friedman famously asserted that no two countries with a McDonald’s franchise go to war with each other. Indeed, wars between countries with closely linked economies are less likely to occur, as the costs of economic damage outweigh the benefits of winning a war. Thus, economic integration strengthens security, and this in turn facilitates regional security cooperation.

Third, there is growing interaction among the people in the region, promoting both cooperation and mutual understanding. In 2008, there were almost 2,000 flights per week between South Korea, Japan and China. These included shuttle flights to and from the domestic airports of the three countries, making it possible to travel to Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing within the same day. As a result, the total number of visitors between the three countries reached over 14 million in 2008. Similarly, in 2008, more than 200,000 students chose to study in countries outside their own within Northeast Asia rather than going to other countries (the US and Europe).
Such people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges are a form of soft power, bringing countries closer together. South Korea, with the spread of its popular culture known as the “Korean Wave,” or Hallyu, and a diaspora of 600,000 Koreans in Japan and another 2 million in China, may be in a unique position to exert this soft power to expand the commonality among the three countries. This will be yet another catalyst for closer cooperation in the area of regional security.

**WHAT IS TO BE DONE?**

To further build upon the progress made, a more comprehensive and sophisticated approach is needed. First, sharing a vision for peace and prosperity may be the starting point. The first steps of European integration were made possible thanks to the wisdom and will of visionaries such as Jean Monnet and Konrad Adenauer. In this regard, the ongoing trilateral summits are encouraging. The Joint Statement between the three leaders in 2009, which includes some elements relating to a regional security architecture, may be able to mould these positive developments into solid building blocks. It is also crucial that the leaders of the three countries share this common vision with their respective constituencies through public diplomacy in order to create a sense of unity among the people of the region.

Second, when working on areas where the differences are more readily reconcilable, compromises are more likely. If the benefits are more tangible, more support can be generated, paving the way toward regional security cooperation. Working together to combat non-traditional and transnational threats such as terrorism, cyber-crimes and piracy may be areas in which we can forge still stronger bonds of cooperation. It may even be feasible to establish a specific regional forum for such cooperation. In the economic field, efforts to further increase inter-regional trade and investment will need to precede the trilateral FTA, as such a de jure approach will take much more time. Rather than attempting to achieve everything at once, taking a step-by-step approach and building on past successes may yield more fruitful results. This will build mutual confidence, a fundamental prerequisite for substantial security, and even military cooperation. This is the lesson to be learned from the European example.

Energy cooperation presents further opportunities for enhanced intra-regional cooperation. In 2007, South Korea, Japan and China accounted for 17.8 percent of the world’s petroleum consumption and 47.1 percent of coal consumption. Almost all of these energy resources are imported from outside the region, and the three countries all rank near the top among the world’s energy-importing countries. The total imports of natural gas for Japan and South Korea amounted to 54 percent of the global natural gas trade. As major energy importers, the three countries may be able to find ways to collaborate with regard to the importing process, perhaps in the form of cooperative purchasing. There are additional possibilities for energy cooperation, particularly in the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The high dependency
on imported energy has led to a heightened sense of awareness of the importance of energy security. This awareness has provided the three countries with further impetus to build more nuclear power plants to ensure greater energy self-sufficiency. Such a trend will eventually necessitate regional nuclear security cooperation, and here again the European experience, in the form of the European Atomic Energy Community, could offer a very valuable point of reference.

Third, the North Korean issue — both its nuclear program and its integration into the region — is a pressing and crucial task. Persuading North Korea to return to the Six-Party talks is a matter of the utmost urgency. Meaningful security cooperation in Northeast Asia will only be possible following the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea and its return to the international community as a responsible member. In the longer term, it will be necessary to assist the North to achieve a “soft landing” through the gradual reform and opening of its society. These efforts would also facilitate the peaceful and democratic reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Even after the North Korean nuclear issue is resolved and the reunification of the two Koreas is achieved, it would be important to keep the US engaged in the region as a key player, so that it may act as a guarantor of peace, as it has done in Europe. A role for the US in Northeast Asian regional security is an irrefutable reality, and security cooperation can in no way exclude the US. If the US were to be excluded, regional security cooperation would not be able to move forward. Maintaining a link with the region will also serve the interests of the US, both economically and politically.

**A PEACEFUL AND PROSPEROUS EAST ASIA**

Given the current reality, the Northeast Asian security cooperation envisioned here is not exclusive of existing bilateral alliances. On the contrary, these bilateral alliances can become important vehicles in achieving multilateral cooperation. Moreover, while the new architecture may include the parties to the Six-Party talks and the existing bilateral security alliances, it may also be open to others, as in the case of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. Therefore, any kind of security cooperation mechanism that arises in Northeast Asia should complement, and not compete against, the already existing mechanisms in East Asia, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum. Northeast Asian security cooperation together with such existing mechanisms could eventually become a ‘minilateral’ part of a larger multilateral framework, similar perhaps to the East Asian Community proposed by Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama and the Asia-Pacific Community suggested by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Not only will a regional security regime be a *sine qua non* for peace and security, but it will also expedite the process of regional integration of Northeast Asia and even of the entire East Asian region, ultimately contributing to building lasting peace and prosperity.

Cho Hyun is Deputy Minister for Multilateral and Global Affairs at South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. He is responsible for oversight and coordination of the departments of the Ministry covering international organizations, global issues such as development, human rights, and non-proliferation, as well as legal affairs, policy planning, and cultural diplomacy. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not in any way represent the official position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of South Korea.