Security Co-operation in Northeast Asia: The Relevance of Europe’s Experience

By Frances Mautner-Markhof

Despite its potential for conflict rooted in historical grievances, Northeast Asia lags far behind Europe in developing multilateral systems to ensure effective regional security co-operation. Frances Mautner-Markhof argues that the experiences of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe provide the region with a potential road map.

THE POST-WORLD WAR II ORDER saw the creation of a number of international regimes that have functioned with varying degrees of effectiveness, efficiency and equity. It could be argued that at the present time the trend, as well as the perceived need, is in the direction of multilateral mechanisms that complement these international regimes, helping them to achieve their goals both regionally and globally. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union are examples, as are the various nuclear weapons-free zones.

We may now be in a period where security and other threats, while certainly having a global component and impact, are primarily perceived regionally, and therefore should be dealt with in the first instance on a regional basis.

 EFFECTIVE MULTILATERAL SECURITY CO-OPERATION

In determining whether a process of multilateral security co-operation is needed, a key question is whether certain national interests can be served better, or at all, by solely national approaches. In other words, are there common interests and issues that can only be pursued by multilateral co-operation? This applies not only to security but also to financial and economic crises, environmental issues and non-traditional and trans-border issues and threats. The challenge is for a group of states to organize itself to cope with both actual and potential threats and instabilities. Such a group must be capable of flexible, timely and innovative responses to conflicts and crises, while serving the interests of each state. In the process of considering and setting up a regional multilateral security mechanism, it is essential to take into account the differing and complex histories, cultures, interests and security threats and arrangements of the various states in the region.

The success of multilateral co-operation depends on the awareness that effective co-operation on multilateral security is not and cannot be a zero sum game: what increases the security of one country can and should increase the security of others. Multilateral security co-operation must be inclusive, and should not be directed against or exclude any country in the region.

Political will and enhanced co-operation are necessary for multilateralism to succeed. The OSCE represents what may be called the cooperative pooling of sovereignty. Since OSCE decisions are generally driven by consensus, this points to a creative and co-operative use of sovereignty to provide options and achieve outcomes unachievable unilaterally. In the OSCE, little or no sovereignty is relinquished or transferred. Each state agrees to politically — if not legally — binding demands and obligations that enhance co-operation, confidence, transparency and mutual efforts to prevent and resolve conflict.

There can be value, however, in relinquishing some sovereignty. While states always jealously guard their sovereignty and complain about relinquishing too much, often the problem is that they have given up too little, which undermines the functioning of the international or-
Global Asia Feature Essay: Security Co-operation in Northeast Asia: Lessons From Europe

It is important to realize that the OSCE and the EU were created to achieve and enhance political stability and security. The early phases of the OSCE were concerned with ways to foster peace and security — that is, the “three baskets” of military/security, economic/environmental and human dimensions — but also the importance of co-operation in all three areas for the peaceful resolution of disputes. The Helsinki Final Act remains the basic rulebook guiding the behavior of OSCE states.

Certain similarities have been noted between the HFA and the so-called Basic Agreement between South and North Korea — officially known as the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression and Exchanges and Co-operation between South and North Korea — that entered into force in February 1992.

RELEVANCE FOR NORTHEAST ASIA

A series of meetings in connection with a project, “Multilateral Security Co-operation in Northeast Asia and the Relevance of the OSCE Experience,” has been co-organized by the OSCE and The Austrian Center for International Studies, of which I am the director. These meetings were held in Vienna in 2006, Jeju, South Korea in 2007 (at the 4th Jeju Peace Forum), Washington, DC, in 2008, Vienna again in 2009 and in Almaty, Kazakhstan in 2010. One of the main recommendations has been that the CSCE/OSCE experience, especially leading up to the Helsinki Final Act and the decade and a half thereafter, would be of relevance and importance for establishing a mechanism for multilateral security co-operation in other regions, in particular Northeast Asia. Through these and other activities, this project has identified the key aspects of the CSCE/OSCE experience and has made specific proposals on

EU, a result among other things of the 2008 global financial crisis. To deal with these challenges, there has been recent agreement by all but one of the EU member states on closer and more effective fiscal co-operation, co-ordination and control for the euro zone and also for the other non-eurozone EU members. The key reasons for creating mechanisms for multilateral security co-operation in Europe include: (1) nation states gain by evolving, under certain circumstances, towards effective regional co-operation that can better achieve stability and security and thus peace and prosperity; (2) such mechanisms serve the interests of individual participating states; and (3) regional mechanisms, individually and together, can contribute to achieving a more robust global order.

In times of serious crisis, it is usually too late to contemplate the creation of a regional security mechanism; thus, it is essential to have one in place before crises become unmanageable.

THE HELSINKI FINAL ACT AND THE EARLY PHASES OF THE OSCE

The Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) began meeting in Helsinki in 1973 as the outcome of a compromise between NATO countries that preferred open negotiations on conventional arms control and the desire of the Warsaw Pact states to begin negotiations on a set of general principles to govern security relations in Europe.

The Helsinki Final Act (HFA) was signed on July 31, 1975, by 35 heads of state from Europe and North America, and it established 10 normative principles to govern relations among these states. Among those principles were: refraining from the threat or use of force, the inviolability of frontiers, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-intervention in the internal affairs of states, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and co-operation among states.

The HFA was negotiated in the midst of the Cold War, creating a framework for security and co-operation that embraced the major rival states in the Cold War conflict. It adopted a set of confidence-building measures (CBMs) on a voluntary basis that involved advance notification of military maneuvers and the invitation of observers to notifiable activities throughout Europe. These confidence-building measures were unique and important steps to increase transparency, predictability, confidence and stability, and thus to reduce risks due to miscalculation or lack of information.

In 1986 the Conference on Disarmament in Europe adopted a set of confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) that significantly expanded those contained in the Helsinki Final Act and largely made them obligatory as well.

The HFA emphasized not only comprehensive security — that is, the “three baskets” of military/security, economic/environmental and human dimensions — but also the importance of co-operation in all three areas for the peaceful resolution of disputes. The Helsinki Final Act remains the basic rulebook guiding the behavior of OSCE states.

Permanent framework for political dialogue and permanent debate and engagement without preconditions. This dialogue is based on the principles of inclusiveness, equality and the free exchange of views.

Decisions are driven by consensus, with few exceptions, which are rarely applied.

Without a founding treaty or a legal personality, the OSCE adopts politically binding commitments that are not legally enforceable. This means that the organization relies on the political will of its participating states to respect and take forward a body of shared values and commitments.

The OSCE’s Confidence and Security Building Measures regime was developed further after the HFA and became a set of codes of conduct regulating certain types of military activities and ensuring the exchange of information and greater transparency.

Agreed guiding principles — and the obligation to act according to these.

Innovative, comprehensive approach to security, encompassing the military/security, economic/environmental and human dimensions.

Essential Aspects of the CSCE/OSCE

The Creation of Multilateral Mechanisms in Europe

It is important to realize that the OSCE and the EU were created to achieve and enhance political stability and security. The early phases of the OSCE were concerned with ways to foster peaceful co-existence and diminish threats, while the post-World War II EU project was aimed at ensuring that no war would occur again between or among its member states. The EU objectives were pursued and achieved primarily but not exclusively through economic integration. Now, the European Union has an increasingly active foreign and security policy, based on decisions taken by consensus.

Economic growth and stability not only in Europe but worldwide have been undermined by financial challenges in the euro zone and the

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the aims, principles, processes and measures considered to be important and relevant for starting a process of multilateral security co-operation in other regions. The key aspects of the CSCE/OSCE are outlined in a box on the previous page and the steps toward multilateral security co-operation are outlined in the box on the right.

The political process that led to the HFA would, it was agreed, be of special relevance to a co-operative security mechanism in Northeast Asia. The three key areas or baskets of the HFA could find counterparts in such a mechanism.

For example, one key area could address important traditional and non-traditional security-related issues including trans-border issues and threats; a second could build upon the already extensive co-operation in economic areas such as trade, investment and finance, as well as on energy and environmental issues; and a third could focus on identifying fundamental principles, common interests and bridge-building. The content of these three key areas could develop over time and in parallel. Cross-cutting issues would include all measures that contribute to trust, transparency, stability, security and development, such as peaceful settlement of disputes; crisis and conflict anticipation, prevention and management; and joint risk and threat assessment.


The realities of increasingly complex and unpredictable systems and environments require new approaches and capabilities for the negotiation and management of crises, organizations and systems. With this in mind, thinking outside of the box on how to deal with the issues and challenges of multilateral security co-operation in Northeast Asia should be encouraged. And the OSCE experience should be carefully studied.

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Steps Toward Multilateral Security Co-operation in Northeast Asia

1. There is a need for both agreed principles and actions — that is, mechanisms for implementing the principles. Principles alone are insufficient. A co-operative security mechanism must also have an agreed range of capabilities (a “tool box”) to take appropriate action when necessary to deal with actual and potential conflicts and disputes.

2. The Cold War political and security situation at the time of the HFA and in the earlier phases of the CSCE is seen as relevant to certain aspects of the prevailing political and security environment in Northeast Asia, as is the fact that the existence of the CSCE/OSCE also proves that existing military alliances should be no obstacle if there is political will on the part of the countries involved.

3. Security among states should be built as comprehensively as possible.

4. Starting a multilateral security co-operation process will require political will on all sides, as well as trust. These are needed to develop and agree on the basic principles and norms, as well as the initial measures and steps that can be taken.

5. Aims:
   - Establish mutual trust, confidence and transparency in the political and military spheres. The CSCE/OSCE experience and the situation in Northeast Asia indicate the need for more mutual transparency and trust.
   - Co-operation to enhance peace and security in the region.
   - Ultimately, there should be a framework that could cover East Asia and include the US and Russia’s geo-strategic interests there.
   - Something like the OSCE could be appropriate to meet the security and other interests of the countries involved.

6. Principles:
   - Acknowledge and respect the core security interests of countries involved.
   - Be inclusive, not exclusive.
   - Decision-making should be by consensus.
   - Adopt a multilayered approach that accommodates existing bilateral security agreements and multilateral arrangements.
   - Parties must enter any confidence and security-building mechanism on an equal basis and agree to negotiate, review and improve CSBMs.
   - CSBM regimes must be backed up by trust and political will.

7. Processes:
   - Establish a permanent open forum or dialogue mechanism without preconditions, even in times of conflict and crises.
   - Adopt a gradual or evolutionary process, a step-by-step approach.
   - Start with realistic objectives, moving from the easier and less sensitive to the harder.
   - Some CSBMs could be applied now. It is necessary to agree on how CSBMs would be initiated, implemented and verified.

8. Measures:
   - Declaratory measures such as jointly designating means for the peaceful settlement of disputes; refraining from the use or threat of force.
   - Transparency; for example, via advance notification of military exercises and mutual observation.
   - Communication; for example, hotlines set up for crisis communication for leaders and command centers.
   - Consultations and risk-reduction and confidence-building measures addressing specific political/military situations and disputes; for example:
     a) Maritime sovereignty and security: A regional or multilateral agreement to cover incidents at sea would be desirable. An arrangement to deal with maritime disputes, for which the US-Soviet agreement on incidents at sea could be a useful example, should be considered.
     b) Exchanges of military information, prior notification of certain military activities, addressing significant increases in weapons and other military capabilities and joint exercises.
     c) Verification: to monitor adherence to commitments, ensure transparency and verify information.