


Policy Forum 10-017: Northeast Asia - A Major Global Challenge for the New Decade

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Northeast Asia - A Major Global Challenge for the New Decade

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By James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen

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I. Introduction

James Goodby, nonresident Senior Fellow at the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution and former US Ambassador to Finland, and Markku Heiskanen, Senior Expert Associate at NIAS-Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen, write, "Energy cooperation

between China, Japan, North and South Korea and Russia could be a first step towards building broad international and institutionalized cooperation between these countries. The United States and the European Union should be fully participating members of an energy community in Northeast Asia."

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II. Article by James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen

- "Northeast Asia - A Major Global Challenge for the New Decade"

By James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen

Remnants of the hard feelings of World War II can still be found in Northeast Asia. The Cold War ended in Europe two decades ago, but it lingers on in Asia. Divided Korea, the North Korean nuclear issue, lack of a peace treaty between Japan and Russia and the China/Taiwan conflict make Northeast Asia one of the sources of global insecurity.

A major part of the process of ending the cycles of devastating wars in 20th century Europe was post-war reconstruction based on the creation of multilateral institutions among the former belligerents, particularly France and Germany. The founding of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 led to the establishment of the present European Union and, in time, to the end of the Cold War, and the end of the division of Europe, and the reunification of Germany.

Northeast Asia has lacked regional, institutional and multilateral institutions. Security arrangements are bilateral: the U.S.-Japan and the U.S.-Korea security treaties. Visionaries like Jean Monnet and Robert Schumann have not appeared in Asia. There has been a dearth of respected statesmen willing to vigorously promote the establishment of a regional peace regime based on permanent institutions.

Several new factors may contribute to initiating a process towards an institutionally-based peace regime also in Northeast Asia. The international context is now changing positively in many respects, even if China's increased willingness to flex its economic muscles is casting shadows on these positive prospects.

- Perversely, the current global financial crisis may open the door for utilizing regionally the options offered by the abundant economic resources in Northeast Asia, and the complementarities of national economies of the region.
- The election of President Obama in the United States and Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama in Japan is opening new prospects for multilateral cooperation and overcoming the Cold War legacies in Northeast Asia.
- The Six-party talks, which were started to tackle the North Korean nuclear issue, have shown in spite of several setbacks, that a multilateral forum, including also North Korea, is possible in Northeast Asia. In the long run it could be developed towards a system similar to the CSCE/OSCE in Europe.

Any major civilian catastrophe in North Korea may cause millions of its citizens to flee to the neighbouring countries, Japan included, shaking immediately the whole international system. Even a limited military conflict with conventional weapons on the Korean peninsula would involve not only the 1.5 million soldiers on the alert on the inter-Korean border, but also the U.S. troops in South

Korea. The risk of a U.S. - Chinese military confrontation in the event of a civil war in North Korea is an imaginable threat scenario.

A nuclear war in Korea, starting on purpose or by mistake, would be a horrible catastrophe. Not only would it likely destroy major cities, with millions of victims, but also cause serious changes to the global climate, according to recent studies, which would be more serious than the present global warming.

To prevent these horror scenarios from becoming reality, and to support the establishment of a regional peace regime in Northeast Asia, is one of the major and urgent challenges to the whole international community, the European Union included. Now, not tomorrow.

One of the still unfinished tasks of the Cold War era is to end formally the Korean War, which started 60 years ago, and ended in an armistice in 1953, signed by the U.S, China and North Korea. South Korea did not sign the agreement. A formal peace treaty has never been negotiated.

Participants in the Six-party Talks have said that a peace treaty can be negotiated once the North Korean nuclear issue has been resolved. North Korea has declared that a peace treaty should be negotiated now, as part of the North Korea's return to the Six-party talks.

It goes without saying that this demand is a political impossibility. You don't conclude and ratify a peace treaty overnight. The process can be expected to last even several years. The world cannot tolerate the further development of the North Korean nuclear weapon arsenal while waiting for a peace treaty.

One of the main ways to open the process towards a peace regime could be negotiating a U.S. - North Korea *interim agreement* on regulating military activities on and around the Korean Peninsula, in the context of a North Korean acceptance of disabling and dismantlement of its weapons programme. South Korea should join in, and probably China. This interim agreement would not be a peace treaty. Relations are not yet mature enough for that.

But, this agreement could define borders and provide a Four-party Consultative mechanism between North and South Korea, China and the United States - those nations most directly concerned with the Armistice Agreement.

European post-war experiences might be useful references in this process, including military confidence-building measures, a CSCE invention in 1970s. Such agreements, like "an incidents at sea" agreement, which helped the U.S. and Soviet navies avoid confrontations in the last years of the Cold War, would be a genuine step forward.

The longer-term goal should be establishing a fully-functioning multilateral mechanism of security and cooperation in Northeast Asia, whether directly derived from the Six-party talks or not. It could be a sort of Northeast Asian OSCE, including Russia, China, Japan, and North and South Korea, as well as the United States. It should not be limited to security issues.

The European Coal and Steel Community was based on energy cooperation between former belligerents. Energy cooperation between China, Japan, North and South Korea and Russia could be a first step towards building broad international and institutionalized cooperation between these countries. The United States and the European Union should be fully participating members of an energy community in Northeast Asia. This would be in keeping with earlier practice in the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, which supported energy cooperation in the region as part of an earlier effort to end North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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