Is Rousseau Still Right?  
The Recurring Allure and Uncertain Prospects of Northeast Asian Regionalism*

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Abstract

For the first five years of this century there was a rising tide of optimism about the future of Northeast Asian regionalism. Many policy analysts around the Pacific believed that a multilateral process was not only necessary to resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis but that what became the Six Party Talks had the promise of developing into an effective multilateral security forum for dealing with a range of security issues. Using a logic similar to a piece written by Jean Jacques Rousseau in 1754, the presentation argues that these hopes are not likely to be realized in the near future. Northeast Asia is more "an anti-region" than a "region in waiting." While recognizing the appeal and potential value of a multilateral mechanism, it contends that there are deep-seated reasons of history, interests, and failure of leadership that present unresolved obstacles. Recent writings that focus on economic and social integration in Northeast Asia present a more positive possibility. They suggest that Northeast Asia is on the cusp of geopolitical change, just as Southeast Asia was four decades ago. But recent developments focused on North Korean provocations and anxieties about China's new assertiveness indicate that security concerns still trump economic and social dynamics. Effective multilateral institutions are at least a generation away. Meantime, bilateral arrangements and Asian-wide institutions are the best bet for deepening regional cooperation.

The Case for Pessimism

In 2005 the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security in Seoul asked me to write an essay on whether the nascent Six Party Talks (hereafter 6PTs) could be expected to produce a viable mechanism for managing security issues in Northeast Asia.

The people who commissioned the paper knew of my involvement with the Canadian-initiated North Pacific Cooperative Security Dialogue that between 1990 and 1993 was among the first of the inclusive second-track dialogue programs in the region. They may well have assumed that multilateralism was hardwired into Canadian DNA (at least in the pre-Conservative era) and that the idea of the North Pacific would provide both a semantic rationale for including Canada in the region and stimulate more constructive discussion that would get Northeast Asia out of a narrowly Northeast Asian mold.

In 2007 the essay was expanded, revised and published as “Constructing Multilateralism in an Anti Region: From Six Party Talks to a Regional Security Framework in Northeast Asia?” The piece began with a quotation from Jean Jacques Rousseau written in his 1754 essay “Judgment on the Abbé de Saint Pierre’s Project for Perpetual Peace.”

“Realize the Commonwealth of Europe for a single day, and you may be sure it will last forever.”

Projected into the 21st century, the analogous message was if leaders would agree to create a Northeast Asian (or North Pacific) multilateral framework it could not just deal with the North Korean problem but transform the whole dynamic of the region and open the door to a prosperous future.

My conclusion, decidedly un-Canadian, probably disappointed the people who commissioned the essay. Northeast Asia was not going to be able to create a regional multilateral framework in the foreseeable future. Regional cooperation was important, needed, and creeping forward but would not produce an inclusive institution, much less a Rousseauian Commonwealth, any time soon. The most promising forum for this kind of cooperation was unfolding in the context of the soft but functioning ASEAN Plus Three and East Asian Summit processes. On the hard security matter of the North Korean nuclear program, the 6PTs
remained the best option for achieving concrete results even if its status at that moment was uncertain. But their prospects for evolving into a multi-party, multi-issue security mechanism were remote.

This pessimism was the product of four basic considerations.

First, it is difficult to think of an area of such size and significance that is more bereft of multilateral institutions. Most of the factors normally constitutive of a 'region' are in scant supply. Northeast Asia lacks common or defining topographic boundaries, similar climate patterns, or an integrated transportation infrastructure. In terms of identity and culture, differences heavily outweigh similarities. There is no unifying religion, language, consciousness, or sense of shared destiny. Perversely, most of the definitions of Northeast Asia include the United States, clearly not a part of Asia, yet so deeply involved in economic and security terms that it is not just the key external player but, to many, an integral part of the region.

Peter Hayes has gone further, characterizing Northeast Asia as an "anti-region," that is a place where the national political cultures largely define themselves by virtue of their differences and in relation to their opposition against their neighbors.1) Whether region-in-waiting or anti-region, the region is dangerous, volatile, and conflict prone. In the words of one American author, Northeast Asia has been "the cockpit of battles" with recurring conflict for more than a hundred years.2)

Second, past efforts at building regional institutions have produced a junkyard of failed and faltering schemes, including in the areas of track-one and track-two security dialogues, cross border environmental projects, and large scale economic development projects. Advocates of regional cooperation face a recurring conundrum. In a region where the security situation remains turbulent, it makes sense to build the foundations of cooperation on economic, environmental and social issues. However, the abiding presence of political and security differences makes this functional cooperation tortuous and vulnerable. In the context of the North Korean nuclear program, the dilemma is even more

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acute, because significant investment by the United States and Japan is being withheld, and sanctions are being applied, pending a solution to the nuclear crisis.

Third, the 6PTs have been an historic attempt using a “2+4” logic to build an explicitly multinational, track one, Northeast Asian forum to address an immediate crisis without recourse to coercive diplomacy or military action. Its logic is explicitly Realist in character. Bring to together the key states that have the resources to establish a solution. Next, use a multilateral forum to coordinate the various aspects of a package solution. Finally, leverage the multilateral forum to ensure that commitments made are monitored and honored. It has benefited from an unprecedented period of comparatively positive relations among all of the great powers in the region. And the economic driver has been soaring rates of trade and investment in the major economies with convergence around the principles and practices of open markets and economic liberalization. These have coincided with a plethora of free trade agreements and multilateral processes (including the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and the ASEAN Plus Three and East Asian Summit process) intended to stimulate economic cooperation in broader Asian and Asia Pacific contexts.

The North Korean missile tests in July 2006 and the nuclear detonation three months later made the 6PTs more desirable and more difficult. The breakthroughs in the United States—North Korean bilateral talks in Berlin in January 2007 and then in the 6PT in Beijing a few weeks later—opened the door to a step-by-step package and for the creation of five working groups to deal with specific issues. In due course all of the agreements put in place demanded a complex set of bilateral and multilateral instruments for monitoring, surveillance, verification, and, possibly, enforcement. If a negotiated settlement proves impossible, a different form of multilateral cooperation will be necessary for purposes of coercive diplomacy along the lines of the PSI. All paths to a resolution appear to demand a multilateral dimension and great power cooperation was flourishing but progress was limited.

Fourth, national leadership has been in short supply. The Bush administration preferred a multilateral solution but was allergic to the kinds of multilateral cooperation that were needed to achieve it. North Korea had a strictly narrow and self interested agenda. South Korea and Japan vacillated and Russia was inconsistent. China at that point was reluctant to define a
Northeast Asian agenda as compared to a role in other contexts including Central Asia (via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and in multiple Asian and Asia Pacific settings.

The 2007 essay ended on a pessimistic note. The 6PTs were not likely to succeed in reversing North Korea’s nuclear program and looking down the road coercive diplomacy, sanctions, interdictions, and military action were just as likely as a negotiated settlement or regional acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear power. There was little likelihood that Northeast Asian economic regionalism could proceed without progress on the North Korean nuclear issue. An active and inclusive multilateral structure for cooperative or comprehensive security in Northeast Asia, ASEAN style, seemed also a long way off. Mutual images remained negative and there was no indication that China and Japan can work in tandem as the necessary leadership team.

What seemed feasible was a deeper form of cooperation on economic and environmental issues in Northeast Asia, more market openness, and even some kind of free trade arrangement involving China, Japan, and South Korea in various bilateral combinations, or on a trilateral basis. A landscape of pipelines and power lines, highways, and railroads would appear before any substantial regional organization. Deeper economic interaction would occur on an ad hoc basis with extra-regional partners focusing on North Korea (if the nuclear issue could be solved), confidence building, identity building, and management of non-traditional security issues through Asia wide processes like the ASEAN Plus Three and ARF.

The path to Northeast Asian multilateralism, “big M” or “small m,” needed to include a detour through Southeast Asia, and involve other non Northeast Asian players, in addition to the United States. Northeast Asia, the “cockpit of conflicts” and the “anti region,” was better replaced than transformed. The best use of energy was simply to open markets and societies: cooperate regionally but build institutions bilaterally and extra regionally.

That Was Then but This is Now?

Viewed in late 2010, on the eve of “Plus Three” summit involving China, Japan and South Korea, how does the argument stand up? It is obvious that the 6PT process has not yet achieved its immediate or longer term objectives. It
may or may not meet again. But are there signs of positive movement beneath the surface?

The answer must partly be yes, particularly in the realm of economy and society where there have been developments that have knitted Northeast Asia together in ways only dimly imaginable a decade ago. The major economies of Northeast Asia have weathered the global financial crisis far better than most regions of the world. And the level of economic interaction within Northeast Asia has accelerated substantially. China has replaced the United States as the largest two-way trading partner of the South Korea and Japan.

Some of these economic changes are being reflected in the scholarly debates. At least one wing sees a more positive future than the perspective of Northeast Asian as the graveyard of regional dreams, the cockpit of battles, or an anti-region. Kent Calder and Min Ye are representative. Their analysis has its foundations in the economic transformation of the region and the fact that, if the United States is included, it contains the world’s three largest economies. They see Northeast Asia on the cusp of geo-political change, just as Southeast Asia was four decades ago. And they see it as growing “steadily more interdependent, connected, and cohesive in socioeconomic terms” since the early 1990s. Intra-regional commerce among Japan, South Korea and China doubled between 1990 and 2004. If Hong Kong and Taiwan are added, intra-regional commerce has surpassed trans-Pacific commerce (p.9). Corporate production networks are deepening and coincide with increased flows of intra-regional investment.

As for leadership they look to South Korea and ASEAN as the catalysts and identify subtle but important changes in Japan, China and the United States that may combine to brighten prospects for both “Northeast Asian economic interdependence and policy integration” as the “ASEAN fig leaf drops away” (p.254). They see the “hub and spokes” system of American dominance waning “even as underlying geopolitical rivalries themselves continue” (pp.257–258). And they paint a picture of these rivalries being reduced in the presence of overwhelming economic gains and new lines of interdependence. Regarding North Korea, they outline five steps for crisis management and advocate dealing with the nuclear issues “in a multilateral context” (p.267, emphasis theirs).

Their view is that Northeast Asia is on the cusp of geo-political change, just as Southeast Asia was four decades ago. The constraints of history and geopolitics are waning because of economic interactions, local, corporate and epistemic linkages (e.g. the Network of East Asian Think Tanks), tourism, popular culture, improved cross straits relations, and deepening trilateral policy dialogue (here trilateral refers to China, Japan and Korea, not Japan, Korea and the US). There is, in short, “a more dynamic, if still dimly perceived, new reality” that has come to life after the critical junctures of the economic crises of 1997 and 2008.

Calder and Ye creatively summarize the transformative economic and social forces that are present in some parts of Northeast Asia. But they do not tackle head on the North Korean nuclear problem, incipient rivalries, and geopolitical uncertainty. The changes they document may have prepared some of the foundations for a new institutional order in Northeast Asia. But that order has not yet arrived and Rousseau’s conundrum remains unsolved—economic rationalism confounded by short term interests, conflicting identities, and geo-political distrust.

North Korea is a self-declared nuclear power and seems determined to keep what it considers a strategic deterrent. Despite a new government in Washington open in principle to multilateral cooperation (but preoccupied with other issues), new administrations in Seoul, Tokyo, and Moscow, a looming leadership succession in Pyongyang, and China’s growing skill in leading multilateral processes, there is still not a unified or compelling vision or a leadership group driving inclusive multilateral institutions in the region. North Korea remains a diplomatic and security problem and the “hole in the donut” of regional economic cooperation. Almost all of the energy on institution building is being focused on the plethora of existing and proposed arrangements on a broader Asian or Asia Pacific basis.

The sinking of the Cheonan in March and the Diaoyutai/Senkaku fishing trawler incident in September have amplified tensions in Northeast Asia that have the potential to unravel the economic and diplomatic progress of the last five years. The incidents underscore how valuable a regional forum would be and how difficult it is to achieve. North Korea’s provocations borne of a new sense of invulnerability provided by its nuclear weapons, and increasing strategic anxiety about the rise of China are stark reminders that security
concerns, bad memories, and distrust still trump economic and social interactions.

All considered, Rousseau’s logic still holds. Paradoxically a multilateral future for Northeast Asia seems both more inevitable and more impossible than ever. Effective multilateral institutions are at least a generation away. Meantime, bilateral arrangements and extra-regional efforts may be the best way for gradually transforming, or replacing, the anti-region that is Northeast Asia.

References