

Improving Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia

Asia-Pacific Leadership Network

Recommendations

Military and economic competition, shifting power dynamics, and environmental problems are creating increasingly complex security challenges for states in Northeast Asia. Regional security mechanisms could help manage these challenges, but such mechanisms have been slow to develop in the region. In 2021-22, the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Royal United Services Institute engaged Northeast Asia's expert and policy community in a project that seeks to identify the principles and steps needed to accelerate the establishment of a robust and inclusive Northeast Asian security architecture. Two areas of broad agreement emerged:

1. Regional security cooperation should be expanded via existing institutions, fora, and multilateral arrangements via an 'ecosystem approach'. Issue areas where there is common ground and the barriers to cooperative action are relatively low, such as transboundary environmental risks, should be tackled first. This will help foster greater trust, transparency, and habits of cooperation, and encourage the development of binding regimes and conventions.
2. The eco-system approach to regional security-building is a long-term project and should be supplemented by initiatives that can help manage the most intractable and politically sensitive regional security challenges, such as arms racing dynamics and managing crises. Where it is not immediately possible to address these effectively at the Track 1 level, informal regional dialogue should be pursued via Track 1.5, Track 2 and civil society initiatives.

The following list of specific recommendations on improving security cooperation in Northeast Asia is based on these two broad areas of agreement.

Expand Track 1 Cooperative Security Mechanisms

- *Keep communication channels open*
Commit to maintaining high-level dialogue on sensitive issues, including through utilizing hotlines and other forms of communication. Numerous crisis mechanisms have been established in Northeast Asia over the past 25 years (including more than 30 hotlines between North and South Korea) but these are often cut when they are needed most, during periods of heightened tension. States in the region should make a joint commitment to keep political and military communication channels open at all times: to make effective use of those that already exist and to establish new ones to help prevent misunderstandings and manage strategic competition.
- *Boost cooperation on disaster relief*
Improve crisis communication in response to natural disasters as a basis for general improvements in regional crisis communications. Existing multilateral military exercises (such as the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) – the world's largest international maritime warfare exercise, which China has previously participated in) could be used to host disaster relief training activities that would boost their disaster resilience and improve crisis communication. This type of cooperation would also help cultivate a sense of regionalism and common security.
- *Launch a regional body to coordinate environmental action*
Create a new diplomatic initiative to facilitate regional dialogue and coordinate joint action on tackling environmental challenges, including climate change. Several regional bodies, including the North-East Asian Subregional Program for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC), the Northwest Pacific Action Plan (NOWPAP), the Acid Deposition Monitoring Network in East Asia (EANET), and the Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting (TEMM), all engage states in the region in practical initiatives to tackle environmental risks. A coordinating body could be set up to strengthen these and other relevant regional initiatives by seeking to increase their membership; extend their scope (including by covering areas such as greenhouse gas reduction and hazardous chemical management); clarify responsibilities; set targets (especially on reducing air and marine pollution); and increase funding for new collaborative projects.
- *Develop regional maritime cooperation mechanisms*
Develop a regional anti-piracy mechanism to help protect the region's complex maritime environment and vulnerable shipping routes. This could build on the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), which many states in Northeast Asia have signed. In addition, expand the

Western Pacific Naval Symposium to encourage regional maritime cooperation on avoiding collisions and other incidents at sea.

- *Expand public health infrastructure cooperation*
Improve Northeast Asian public health infrastructure cooperation to help countries tackle health crises and strengthen the region's health resilience. This could be achieved by building on the promising work being done by the Northeast Asia Cooperation for Health Security (NEACHS), which has held senior-level meetings and Track 1.5 exchanges during the pandemic.
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Expand Track 2 (and Track 1.5) Security Dialogues

- *Convene a Northeast Asia-based Track 2 dialogue on regional arms control, risk reduction and disarmament*
Convene informal discussions among security scholars and policy experts in Northeast Asian capitals on how to reduce the most pressing risks associated with arms racing and other competitive regional security dynamics. This forum could explore the relationship between regional and global security mechanisms and how to bolster them.
- *Support the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue*
Engage at senior levels in the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue Initiative on Northeast Asia Security – an inclusive, Mongolia-led initiative that has been underway since the 1980s and which was upgraded to become a Track 1.5 dialogue in 2017. This initiative promotes confidence building among states in Northeast Asia and is significant because it has facilitated dialogue with DPRK officials and has also attracted participants from Europe and North America.
- *Convene a Track 1.5 dialogue on Korean Peninsula security*
Revive diplomatic efforts to build trust and address insecurity on the Korean Peninsula via a new Track 1.5 dialogue, which could revive discussions that took place during the Six Party Talks process in a more informal, less politically charged setting.
- *Launch a Track 2 dialogue on 'functional spill over'*
Launch a new Track 2 initiative that evaluates the successes and failures of past and current multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia. This could draw on the work of past and current CSCAP Study Groups and other similar initiatives and could examine the concept of 'functional spill over' in theory and practice (the conditions under which functional security cooperation – for example, on nuclear safety or a similar area of shared, transboundary interest – spills over into higher level security cooperation).

Expand Expert Networks and Civil Society Peace Initiatives

- *Establish a next generation network of security and policy experts*
Provide support, including via sustainable funding from within the region, for a network of next generation Northeast Asian security and policy experts. This will help build trust and understanding between future leaders, and create regional epistemic communities that foster regionalism and a sense of shared responsibility for tackling the region's difficult security challenges.
- *Support and expand civil society peace processes*
Provide financial support from within the region for Northeast Asia-based civil society peace initiatives and provide a platform for them to engage in official dialogues. Initiatives such as Mayors for Peace and Peace Boat are working to promote peace and stability in Northeast Asia. They play important roles in raising public awareness of pressing regional security challenges, such as the danger of nuclear war, and in communicating human security concerns to political elites.
- *Expand city-to-city networks and cultural exchanges*
Create new networks, linking additional cities and expanding people-to-people connections across the region, including through cultural and scientific exchanges. Such activities could build on existing initiatives such as Mayors for Peace and the Strong Cities Network and help to counter disinformation and domestic threat inflation as well as play a more direct role in promoting regional security cooperation in Northeast Asia.

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