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.

**Signatories**

1. **YUZAKI Hidehiko** – Governor of Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan
2. **SHIOMURA Ayaka** – Member of the House of Councillors, Japan
3. **CHO Kyung Hwan** – Member of the Presidential Commission on Policy Planning, ROK
4. **LIM Sungnam** – Former South Korean Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to ASEAN, First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs
5. **KIM Sung-hwan** – Chairman of the East Asia Foundation, former ROK Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade
6. **KAWAGUCHI Yoriko** – Former Foreign Minister and Environment Minister of Japan, Former co-chair of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament
7. **Georgy TOLORAYA** – Former Russian diplomat, Director of Korean Programs at the Institute of Economy, Russian Academy of Science

8. **MOON Chung-in** – Vice Chair, Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, Chairman of the Sejong Institute

9. **NISHIDA Michiru** – Professor at the Research Center for Nuclear Abolition, former Special Advisor for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Policy Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

10. **SHEN Dingli** – Professor and former Associate Dean at Fudan University’s Institute of International Studies

11. **Alexey GROMYKO** – Director of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences

12. **UMEBAYASHI Hiromichi** – Former Director of the Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition, Nagasaki University

13. **Andrei LANKOV** – Professor, Kookmin University, Director at NK News

14. **Alexander NIKITIN** – Director of the MGIMO Center for Euro-Atlantic Security

15. **Andrey KORTUNOV** – Former Director-General of the Russian International Affairs Council

16. **KIM Joon Hyung** – Professor of International relations at Handong Global University, former Chancellor of Korea National Diplomatic Academy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs"

17. **LEE Sang-hyun** – President and Senior Research Fellow at the Sejong Institute in Korea, President of the Korea Nuclear Policy Society (KNPS)

18. **Seukhoon Paul CHOI** – Managing Director & Principal Advisor, StratWays Group

19. **SUZUKI Tatsujiro** – Former Vice Chairman of the Japan Atomic Energy Commission, currently a member of the Executive Committee and Council of Pugwash Conferences on Science and International Affairs

20. **KIM Won-soo** – Chair, International Advisory Board, Taejae Academy

21. **KIM Young-moo** – Director General, Asia-Pacific Research Department at The Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security

22. **JUNG Han-bum** – Professor, Korea National Defense University

23. **JUN Bong-geun** – Professor at the Department of Security and Unification Studies at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS), Korean National Diplomatic Academy

24. **PARK Jae-jeok** – Associate Professor, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

25. **LEE Sook Jong** – Professor, Sungkyunkwan University, Representative of Asia Democracy Research Network

26. **KIM Tongfi** – Professor, Brussels School of Governance

27. **MUKAI Wakana** – Associate Professor, Faculty of International Relations, Asia University
28. **ZHAO Tong** – Senior Fellow at the Nuclear Policy Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

29. **LI Nan** – Senior research fellow, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

30. **TATSUMI Yuki** – Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the East Asia Program and Director of the Japan Program at the Stimson Center

31. **Anastasia BARANNIKOVA** – Research Fellow, ADM Nevelskoy Maritime State University (Vladivostok)

32. **KWON Bo Ram** – Associate Research Fellow at the Center for Security and Strategy, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA)

33. **CHUNG Jae-Hung** – Research Fellow, Department of Security Strategy Studies, Sejong institute

34. **LU Yang** – Research Fellow, Institute of Belt and Road Strategy, Tsinghua University

35. **OTA Masakatsu** – Senior and Editorial writer at Kyodo News

36. **KUROSAKI Miyako** – Research Coordinator at Hiroshima Organization for Global Peace

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