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Beyond Six Party Talks:

An opportunity to establish a framework for multilateral cooperation in the North Pacific

Jack Pritchard  
Visiting Fellow  
The Brookings Institution

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Topic: Feasibility of establishing an organizational framework for multilateral cooperation in the North Pacific region based on the “Six-Party Talks”

**Multilateralism in Northeast Asia**

Asia in general and Northeast Asia specifically have been contrasted with Europe by the absence of and perhaps the inability to establish a regional security forum such as NATO or the Warsaw Pact. Asia’s version of what was feasible has included the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); the Committee on Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP); and the "ASEAN plus three," which has been held annually since 1997 with members of ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea. Other ventures such as the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD), a "track two" conference, and South Korea's proposed Northeast Asia Security Dialogue (NEASED), were never fully accepted and failed to develop into official level talks.<sup>1</sup> Rather than attempt to force common ground among pre-cold war foes and historic competitors by creating an overarching mechanism for security dialogue, the United States has opted for a series of bilateral relationships with key allies. The glue for this “hub and spoke” approach to security and stability in Asia has been the United States. But the dynamics keeping the spokes apart and focused on the United States are changing. The current nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula and the formation of the Six Party process to deal with the issue has given rise to the possibility that a more formal organizational framework for multilateral cooperation in the North Pacific could be established.

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<sup>1</sup> Chung Ok-Nim, Visiting Fellow, The Brookings Institution Center for Northeast Asian Policy *Working Paper*, September 1, 2000: “Solving the Security Puzzle in Northeast Asia: A Multilateral Security Regime”

## **Beyond Six Party Talks**

Meetings in plenary session and ineffective and sporadic working level meetings that have characterized the current Six Party process are not prescriptions for resolving a potentially urgent WMD crisis, but WMD aside, the near-continuous consultations that have resulted because of the six party process has spawned other possibilities. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 2, 2004, Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly indicated that the six party process was going well and he could envision an expansion of the talks to include other issues besides the current nuclear problem. He was specifically referring to the inclusion of conventional, missiles and humanitarian issues concerning North Korea – those issues that were identified as concerns when the results of the first Bush Administration North Korea review were announced on June 6, 2001. However, there is a danger that a permanent “trial” atmosphere in which a multilateral “jury” sits in judgment of the DPRK is a formula for collapse of the six party process much as the previous four party process collapsed in late 1998. The expansion of the current six party process by simply adding other issues that the United States and others may wish to address with the DPRK misses the larger opportunity to maximize the benefits of multilateral consultations created by the six party process and forge a new organizational mechanism to deal with broader regional security issues. That aside, it is highly improbable that the DPRK would welcome or participate in an expanded six party process the goal of which was to examine and correct its shortcomings.

In the fall of 2003, former U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Korea James Laney called for the establishment of a permanent forum in Northeast Asia to address security and other concerns. At the time it appeared premature to conclude that the current six party talks had the potential to evolve into a Track I Northeast Asia Security Dialogue (NEASD). Others, such as former

Ambassador James E. Goodby, have called for the establishment of such a mechanism years earlier, but it is the unforeseen and unplanned spontaneous development of consultations among the six parties on the margins of and during the critical intervening periods of actual Six Party sessions that give rise now to the possibility of the establishment of a more formal organization in the North Pacific.

One of the legitimate criticisms of the six party process is that it has focused almost exclusively on form rather than substance. But it is precisely the manner, or the form, of the development of the current six party talks that gives rise to the prospect that a NEASD could develop from a successful conclusion of the current talks. Should the talks end in failure or the current nuclear crisis slip toward non-peaceful resolution, the prospects for a NEASD would likewise come to an end. However, it is the robust, if somewhat mechanical, consultations that have taken place between six party meetings that give rise to the promise of a more permanent dialogue mechanism in Northeast Asia. The intense shuttle diplomacy begun in March 2003 by Beijing to gain acceptance of the initial three party talks and the equally intense shuttle diplomacy, again by Beijing, prior to each of the three rounds of talks to date have set in motion an almost continuous dialogue involving all parties to the talks. A more current example has been the regional consultations that have taken place at the foreign minister level, starting with the Chinese foreign minister's first trip to Pyongyang in five years, which took place March 23-25, 2004. This was followed by visits to Beijing by South Korea and Japan's foreign ministers – all designed to keep the dialogue on six party talks alive and take advantage of whatever momentum was achieved in February. It succeeded in paving the way for the June round of Six Party talks.

An example of an organizational success story is the sub-regional mechanism born out of a

desire to coordinate a common policy approach toward North Korea: the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG). The inaugural meeting was held in Honolulu, Hawaii in April 1999. Originally designed to be a quarterly gathering of senior officials from Japan, South Korea and the United States, it has evolved away from the formality that marked its origins to a more frequent, but informal consultative mechanism focused on the Six Party talks. It has served the United States, Japan and the Republic of Korea well over the last five years, but it was not a foregone conclusion that it would succeed. As a participant in the inaugural meeting, I expected a series of U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK meetings that would be loosely tied together by a plenary session marked by accommodation rather than genuine cooperation. Fortunately, I was wrong. In hindsight, the composition of the heads of delegation overcame any institutional reluctance to openly confide in one another and plan policy options for a common approach toward North Korea. The United States was led by former Secretary of Defense William Perry in his capacity as the Clinton Administration's Korea Policy Coordinator. The Japanese delegation was led by Kato Ryozi, now Ambassador to the United States, while the Republic of Korea delegation was headed by Lim Dong-won, Senior Secretary to the President for Foreign Policy and National Security. There could not have been three better people to initiate a process that has served the three countries so well for so long.

Standing in the way of a prospective NEASD is the mere requirement that the six party process conclude the current nuclear crisis successfully. While in theory that is possible, the pace at which the current Bush Administration has undertaken diplomacy places a substantive outcome in doubt. The lack of meaningful intersessional meetings also creates uncertainty as to the ultimate utility of the working group in advancing diplomacy prior to a possible next round of six

party talks.<sup>2</sup> While another round of Six Party talks could occur after the U.S. election, it is highly unlikely that any meaningful or serious dialogue will occur prior to February 2005 regardless of who wins the U.S. presidential election. Should Senator Kerry win, he will be not be able to field a team until after his inauguration in late January 2005 – at the earliest. If President Bush is re-elected, his policy approach to North Korea will also under go modification as new players in the keys positions of National Security Advisor, Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense join his second administration and begin to provide their own advice.

The prospect of establishing a framework for multilateral cooperation in the North Pacific is enticing and in the post-9/11 environment with the threats of terrorism, and transnational concerns such as SARS and the proliferation of WMD, the prospect of a serious forum among the nations where no forum has previously existed holds a promise for cooperation and stability that has not been thought possible before. ROK laser enrichment of uranium experiments of 2000 and plutonium experiments of 1982 are perfect examples of security-related issues that could be on the agenda if there were a NEASD mechanism. While there is primarily an international (NPT) aspect to the issue, a discussion at an informal NEASD meeting would be an ideal arena to clarify in a non-confrontational situation the facts to the satisfaction of the region even as the IAEA conducts its formal investigation and reports to the IAEA Board of Governors. This process would put sincerity to the efforts of transparency that would be one of the objectives of a NEASD organization.

In terms of rationale for countries to organize and participate in such a multilateral framework, there are only clear winners. Four years ago following the historic meeting between ROK President Kim Dae-jung and DPRK leader Kim Jong-il, Brookings Fellow Chung Ok-nim wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> Parts of this paper were originally published by the author in The Brookings Institution's *Brookings Northeast Asia Survey 2003-2004*, Richard C. Bush, Sharon Yanagi, and Kevin Scott Editors.

There are three major reasons behind South Korea's support for multilateralism: its desire for reduced tension on the peninsula, its need to engage the surrounding powers, and domestic imperatives. At a minimum, South Korea seeks the amelioration of tension on the peninsula. By pursuing modest goals, such as expanding trade and facilitating the movement of people between the two Koreas, a multilateral forum might foster an initial atmosphere of modest détente between the two Koreas.

South Korea also recognizes that its future security environment is inextricably linked to the vicissitudes in relations among the four nearby great powers: China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. By seeking the endorsement or implicit understanding by the surrounding powers, South Korea improves its security environment while enhancing the durability of any agreement on the future of the Korean peninsula. A multilateral regime on the peninsula, such as NEASD (Northeast Asian Security Dialogue), would not replace the current bilateral security framework, but instead supplement it by engaging Russia, which remains the only major party outside current multilateral regimes on the peninsula. A convenient venue for the South to deal directly with the North. The Korean public wishes to see the Korean issue resolved by the Koreans, while the big powers' interests and calculations are kept at a distance. In this regard, South Korea's initiative and the ultimate establishment of a multilateral security regime strengthen its diplomatic credibility, both at home and abroad. A successful new multilateralism, functionally oriented and issue-centered on Korea, would thus strengthen domestic support in South Korea for the unification process.

Finally, domestic politics is also an important reason behind South Korea's pursuit of sub-regionalism. Inter-Korean dialogue, in whatever manner, is a sign of success essential to South Korean efforts to build domestic support for its engagement policy.<sup>3</sup>

These reasons still hold true today in an environment that has changed from optimism following the 2000 Korean Summit to the concerns attendant with today's nuclear crisis. Each of the other participants has equally compelling reasons to participate in a North Pacific/Northeast Asia Security framework. Just as the TCOG did not diminish the separate bilateral relationships between the United States, Japan, and the ROK, a NEASD, likewise would not obviate the desire to maintain traditional alliances and ties.

The time is right to begin thinking seriously about establishing a framework for multilateral cooperation. One of the most important first steps in any attempt to organize such a framework is to learn the lesson of the TCOG inaugural meeting: choose the right people to lead the effort. The challenges, however, are formidable and the prospects for actually realizing a NEASD-like organization rest on the successful outcome (or minimally on the lack of failure) of the Six Party process.

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<sup>3</sup> Chung Ok-Nim, *Working Paper*.