

# Trust-building in Northeast Asia and the role of the EU

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As Northeast Asia, the world's most dynamic economic area, is threatened by North Korea's nuclear program and China's rise might destabilize the US system of alliances in the region, policy makers of the countries involved in the region question what would be the best path towards a secure future in the region. Based on this interesting topic have the Korea Foundation and the Istituto Affari Internazionali organized the meeting '*Trust-building in North East Asia and the role of the EU*'.

The conference focused specifically on the initiative program of South Korea, Japan and China to increase cooperation in the region by trust-building; known under the name *NAPCI* (Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation initiative). Beside the countries in the region there can also be a role for the European Union to support future security so far away from the European continent.

The conference was divided in three different rounds of discussion between government officials from South Korea, Italy and the European Union and the academic world represented by different professors from universities from South Korea, Italy and the United Kingdom. But the conference started first with welcoming remarks by the president of the IAI, the ambassador of South Korea and director general of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. The three of them stated that this conference will assess security in general, thereby mostly focusing on cooperation areas as the promotion of international knowledge, trust-building and the role of the EU on initiative building.

The topic *Trust-building and regional identity in North East Asia* started with the immediate agreement by all academics and government officials that the international community should stay united against North Korean aggression. Aggression by North Korea is understood from the perspective of rising tensions and hardening of national stance. Support by the EU for regional cooperation can be given here in two different forms with regard to identity. University education can be of use as it may enhance the construction of new identities. Also general international trust-building with the aim of finding common interest can enhance the formation of identity through increased openness by different parties.

Yet, South Korea and the European Union have to take in account to changing role of China. Being the major actor in the region, its presence and interests cannot be ignored. According to the traditionalist view does China see itself as a mediator, contributing to the regional structure. This in combination with China's stance through history, that it is against great power politics, implies that the EU should not be too overly present, as a high degree of foreign meddling is not appreciated by the region's most powerful actor. For example, China has a positive stance towards reunification of North and South Korea, if it would happen peacefully and most of all independently. So from China's perspective the two Korea's should try to match their goals.

Another important actor of the region that should be taken in account is Japan. Japan is an interesting case regarding identity as the country is in need of revising its constitution to get rid of pacifism. Rising tensions with North Korea demand that Japan should regain its sovereign dignity, as Japan's war past has designed a way by which others look upon Japan. Yet, if Japan wants to pursue that it gets regionally properly involved, it should (partially) abandon its pacifistic stance, as missile defense alone doesn't provide defense sufficiently.

Finally the regional cooperation initiative NAPCI has been covered. It is hard to say that NAPCI is successful as North Korea has broken all rules by its aggressive behavior. Yet it is important to avoid the security dilemma, as an arms race can possibly only worsen the regional situation. Therefore it is important that the different actors in the region keep getting involved in trust-building by initiatives like these. Probably in a different form with the presence of new actors, as the current form (NAPCI) has not worked well enough.

From this perspective the step towards a role for the EU in Northeast Asian trust-building is easily made. Right now the EU has influence in regional peace maintenance in Northeast Asia, as it is a participant in the *ASEAN Regional Forum* (ARF). The EU regards, just like South Korea, a common security policy as a win-win. So this is a strong base from which can be built further by the EU and South Korea.

Still the exact role of the EU in Northeast Asia is not completely clear. The EU can be seen as a normative power as its main activity is to be influential through its preference for multilateral talks. However, the EU could also be willing to use hard power through tools as sanctions and non-proliferation. On top of that is the EU not isolated from North Korea as different EU members have embassies in Pyongyang.

So although the EU has various stakes and different ways by which it can react to any change in the region, it can clearly be supportive by enhancing regional peace (especially through its experience in normalization of diplomatic relations) in the following ways:

- Support in diplomatic talks
- Support through economic engagement
- Providing aid by development projects
- Support in the implementation of any cooperative agreement
- Emphasizing the importance of human rights
- EU members have been willing to get involved in naval exercises in the region in the past
- Sharing experience on denuclearization based on past experience of EU member countries

As Kim Jong-un has been active using more missiles than his father did in his sixteen years' rule, security in Northeast Asia is a topic on the top of the international political agenda. An important difference between the EU and other involved actors from outside the region is that the EU is not present with an army in the region (for example the United States has an army of 30000 soldiers stationed in and near the Northeast Asian region). As North Korea and China perceive very active foreign military presence as a clear threat, the EU has an advantage as it will be perceived less aggressive than other actors. So from this point of view the EU can help foster cooperation based on the way it is perceived by China and North Korea, its diplomatic experience, and its strategic partnership based on mutual gain with South Korea.