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Working Group 6 Report: “Regional Working Group – East Asia”

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During the 61st Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs held in Nagasaki, Japan, Working Group 6 convened to address issues of regional security in East Asia. Specifically, this group of 15 participants from Japan, South Korea, China, the United States of America, Russia, Mongolia, Vietnam, New Zealand and Greece discussed the current state of relations in Northeast Asia and potential future frameworks for regional security. The working group also developed specific policy recommendations (included in this report) for improving regional relations in the short and medium terms.

The following report summarizes the key themes and topics covered by the working group, and concludes with a list of the working group's recommendations.

The current state: regional tension and mutual mistrust

Participants reviewed the current state of relations between Japan, China and South Korea, noting a destabilizing trend toward identity politics and “ethnocentric nationalism” within Northeast Asia. Despite increased economic interdependence, the relationships between Japan and its neighbors remain characterized by tension and mutual mistrust. For example, recent public opinion polls conducted in China and Japan indicate that over 85% of people in each country hold unfavorable impressions of their regional neighbor.

Until the underlying causes of this tension and mistrust are addressed, regional stability in the immediate future will remain contingent on the economic trajectories of each country. However, the very forces of globalization that drive economic growth are also contributing to destabilizing factors such as domestic economic inequality. China has overtaken Japan as the world's second largest economy, spurring national anxiety within Japan. The resulting socioeconomic rifts both within and among countries have led to crises of national identity, creating opportunities for increased adversarial nationalism.

For Japan, these trends have created a series of intractable conflicts with China and South Korea. The region has entered a vicious cycle of “competitive victimhood” in which each country seeks to emphasize different historical grievances (e.g., Japan's experience of atomic bombings in juxtaposition with its past imperial aggression). In this context of rising ethnocentric nationalism and competing historical grievances, policies such as the Japanese government's recent constitutional reinterpretation, which supporters highlight as representing modest changes in military posture, trigger and reinforce regional tension and mistrust.

The vision: a comprehensive regional framework

Efforts toward nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament in Northeast Asia should be pursued as part of a comprehensive approach to enhancing the region's stability and security. Participants examined several potential models for a regional security framework, including those proposed by organizations such as the Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition, Nagasaki University (RECNA), with a specific focus on the establishment of a regional Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ).

Taking the example of Mongolia's successful efforts to establish a "single-state NWFZ", participants reviewed the challenges faced by Mongolia and the combined unilateral, bilateral and multilateral measures taken to institutionalize Mongolia's "nuclear-weapon-free" status. Similar to the Mongolian example, a Northeast Asian NWFZ will not only have to define its geographic scope but must also address the presence of Nuclear Weapons States in the region by including binding security assurances and commitments from Russia, China and the United States.

Participants debated specific approaches for establishing a regional NWFZ, and in particular, whether such discussions must necessarily involve North Korea. The governments of Japan and South Korea may be unlikely to demonstrate interest in such discussions in the absence of a plan for dismantling North Korea's nuclear arsenal. However, one option for Japan and South Korea may be to spearhead such an initiative at a bilateral level, based on an agreement that any decisions or policy changes would only enter effect once certain conditions (including, for example, reciprocal engagement from North Korea) are met. Proactive initiatives from the governments in the region are required to improve relations and ensure that current tensions do not lead to armed conflict.

The path forward: Recommendations of the working group

Based on these deliberations of the current state of regional relations and potential frameworks for security, the participants of Working Group 6 developed the following policy recommendations for the governments of the region. These recommendations have been formulated to identify specific opportunities to improve bilateral relationships between the countries involved while simultaneously moving forward with a comprehensive approach to improving regional security.

1. Reconciliation and confidence-building measures are necessary to counteract rising nationalism in the region and provide essential underpinnings for improved security in Northeast Asia. As part of this, attention to textbook interpretations of painful historic memories, sustained interaction between people, for instance, by Track II meetings by NGOs and academic groups, restoring regular informal links among political leaders, and acculturating tourists before they visit neighboring countries can help prepare the ground for openly addressing the historical grievances of South Korea, China, and Japan.
2. Confidence building between Japan and China will be facilitated by Track II discussions among experts, perhaps under Pugwash auspices, regarding the reasons why Japan amassed its plutonium stockpile, at the same time clarifying the strategic intentions of China's nuclear weapons program, considering that China is increasing its civilian use of nuclear material. These should be accompanied by the development of crisis management mechanisms between the two governments.

3. Tension-easing between the US and China might be facilitated by Track II discussions among experts, perhaps under Pugwash auspices, of the technical capabilities and limitations of THAAD and other missile defense programs.
4. A moratorium on DPRK nuclear testing with a reciprocal constraint on a US-ROK joint-exercise might open the way to US-DPRK bilateral talks. In those talks, a suspension of missile testing, including satellite launches, and production of fissile material by the DPRK under inspection in return for a US commitment to begin a peace process on the Korean Peninsula to suspend some sanctions and reduce the size and scope of other joint-exercises might open the way to resumption of six-party talks.
5. Further steps to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula will require a comprehensive approach including four parallel negotiations as envisioned in the 2005 six-party joint statement:
 - a. Steps towards reconciliation between North and South Korea, such as family reunions, economic exchanges, and multilevel talks, including those between respective foreign ministries;
 - b. A peace process on the Korean peninsula involving the relevant parties;
 - c. Gradual political and economic normalization along lines envisioned in the Pyongyang Declaration, including a resolution of the abduction issue;
 - d. A regional security mechanism for Northeast Asia.
6. Inspired by Mongolia's nuclear weapons-free status, negotiation of a Northeast Asia Nuclear-Weapons Free Zone, which would be ratified only when North Korea joins, could serve as a catalyst and legal framework for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.