



NUCLEAR ENERGY COOPERATION IN NORTHEAST ASIA: IMPLICATIONS FROM THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

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Nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia is shaping up to be one of the key security issues for the region. Following elections and leadership transitions in China, the US, South Korea and Japan, a real and concerted effort must be taken to address the region's nuclear issues.

North Korea's Nuclear Crisis

Kim Jong Un's leadership transition has been more-or-less without incident. Yet many observers remain concerned about North Korea's nuclear program, which could inevitably bring dangerous uncertainty to the Peninsula and the entire region. Moreover, it risks opening the way for continued proliferation of nuclear weapons in the world, as North Korea is the only country to have left the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The North claims the uranium enrichment program is for peaceful energy development, but outside experts believe that it will give the country a new source of plutonium to make more deadly atomic bombs.

To quell North Korea's nuclear program, the international community has attempted many different approaches. There have, however, been no positive changes to North Korea's position as a result of international aid or sanctions. For example, the past multilateral discussion process, the Six Party Talks, failed to stop the nuclear crisis that North Korea's nuclear weapons program has explicitly developed. It seems that Pyongyang's final goal is to force other members to admit that North Korea is a nuclear nation. Thus, an obvious question will ensue challenging the "usefulness" of the negotiation regime, the Six-Party Talks. It might be necessary for the member countries to call for a reassessment of their past negotiation framework as there has been an increasing request for, and discussion about, alternative security mechanisms to deal with North Korea's nuclear issue.

As an alternative approach, future negotiation could include a wider range of regional nuclear security matters as areas of common interest for all countries in Northeast Asia since the North Korean nuclear issue is not the only source of instability in the region. Therefore in order to build mutual trust and confidence between parties, the purpose of this

nuclear energy-based multilateral framework is to integrate North Korea into regional cooperation in Northeast Asia.

Post-Fukushima Nuclear Issues in Northeast Asia

Northeast Asia is heavily dependent on nuclear power. It is the only region in the world where steady expansion of nuclear power is expected. According to the World Nuclear Association, Japan has two reactors under construction but another three which were likely to start building by mid 2011 have been deferred. South Korea plans to bring a further four reactors into operation by 2017, and another five by 2021. Meanwhile, in China, some 26 reactors are under construction and many more are likely to enter planning stages. However, the expansion of the region's nuclear reactors raises central issues regarding regional nuclear safety and environmental protection as seen by the nuclear disaster at the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan in March, 2011. In fact, nuclear disasters, which could spread radioactive materials across national frontiers, pose a significant threat to the region. It is estimated that Japan discharged 11,000 tons of contaminated water into the ocean during the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Nevertheless, Japan appears bent on maintaining the troubled Monju prototype fast-breeder reactor in Fukui Prefecture despite growing public reservations about the safety of nuclear energy.

Furthermore, Japan has recently revised the Atomic Energy Basic Act that some observers fear could be adapted for military use. There has been a growing opinion that Japan has to possess nuclear weapons against North Korea which threatens Japan with nuclear capabilities and long-range missiles. As nuclear development continues in North Korea, an increasing number of South Koreans support the creation



of a nuclear weapon development program, which is seen as the only option to deal with North Korea. In 2004, it was revealed that a government-funded research institute in South Korea had enriched uranium to a level just below the requirement for weapons production. Despite the destruction of the test and enrichment facility, a U.S. government report from 2008 described South Korea as a “threshold nuclear state,” defined as a state that has the capacity to develop and field nuclear weapons in just a couple of years. Meanwhile, China is already a nuclear weapon state as it tested its first nuclear device in 1964. Official US Defense Department sources put the size of the Chinese strategic arsenal at approximately 80 operationally deployed nuclear warheads. In this regard, it is highly likely that in the near future a nuclear arms race between Japan, China and the two Koreas will become the biggest threat to peace and security in Northeast Asia.

The European Experience

A security mechanism in Northeast Asia could possibly take its inspiration from post-war Europe. Similar conditions existed in Europe during the 1950s with a history of conflict and one that features both nuclear weapons states and non-nuclear weapons states when the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) was created. EURATOM created in 1957, was the European Community’s effort to regionalize the management of civil nuclear power. Its mandate includes a common market to insure free movement of nuclear commerce, nuclear safety standards, safeguards (beyond those of the International Atomic Energy Agency), ownership of fissile materials, non-proliferation policy, research, and negotiations with other countries on the import and export of nuclear materials.

Although both Europe and Northeast Asia regions display a history of war and competition of nuclear power among regional powers, the recent experiences of the two regions stands in sharp contrast to each other. In a sense,

there is a clear and increasing need for confidence building in Northeast Asia, which itself can justify the efforts to establish a regional scheme to deal with nuclear issues as was the case for the EURATOM. In particular, how might the experience of EURATOM benefit either the peaceful uses of nuclear energy or regional security in Northeast Asia? Accordingly, measures to solve nuclear issues in Northeast Asia should focus on beyond the details of the current nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula and it tries to shed some light on the question whether a regional approach could be applied for Northeast Asia to resolve other various problems.

Nuclear Cooperation in Northeast Asia

There is the reality of the strong effect of domestic situation in each country in Northeast Asia to promote regional cooperation in the area of nuclear energy sector. Realistically, not much can be done until the completion of the 2012 elections in South Korea, the US and Japan, as well as the Chinese leadership transition. However, a positive atmosphere could reemerge after the elections. Under the new leaderships possible cooperation in the nuclear energy sector will be expected to be on the table in discussions among Northeast Asian countries. There is a wide spectrum of options for nuclear cooperation in Northeast Asia, including areas of nuclear safety, joint management of spent fuel and plutonium, and collectively administered regional institutions. However, cooperation should be a gradual approach from modest collaboration, to promote the safe use of nuclear energy, to more ambitious regional security issues, such as the peaceful use of nuclear energy focusing on North Korea’s nuclear program.

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