

## **Regional Conflict Prevention and Conflict Management: The Need for China as the Driving Engine!**

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### **I. Introduction**

State-to-state relations in Northeast Asia have since long been under stress and limited attention has been paid to regional structures to handle political and military conflicts. The economic sector has been relatively successful in developing structures to handle economic disputes despite the poor political environment. However, this has not had any significant spill-over effects on the political and military environment. On the contrary, the political and military stalemate has probably affected the speed of economic integration negatively. In fact, Northeast Asia has seen an increase in military spending since the end of the Cold War that is unmatched in the rest of the world. Moreover, most interstate relations in Northeast Asia have seen a negative development since 1991, with the exception of Sino-South Korean relations, where political relations have seen an impressive respectively stable improvement.

The three most significant conflict lines all involve China. The first one runs across the Taiwan Straits, where the improved relations between Japan and Taiwan are frustrating China. The second is Sino-Japanese relations that could have severe economic implications even if not military. The third conflict line is on the Korean peninsula where China has a prominent role. In none of these conflicts, there is a great likelihood of a military conflict, even if the Taiwan Straits and the Korean

peninsula have the potential to develop into a militarized conflict of devastating proportions. In all of these conflicts, there has been an increasing amount of tension between the involved states and their allies. This has now reached a level where trade and diplomatic relations are directly affected and there is a growing realization that something needs to be done.

Whereas a great deal of effort has been invested in attempts to resolve the conflicts, this paper takes a more modest approach in that it argues for the management of ongoing conflicts, the preventing of new conflicts from erupting and the building of trust so that the issues of today can be resolved in the future. ① Currently, maintaining the status quo and slowly improving relations between the different actors seem to be the most promising strategies to handle conflicts. To meet this end, improved conflict management and prevention strategies are imperative. The International Crisis Group argues that it is virtually impossible to resolve the problems in Northeast Asia and that the focus should be on confidence building and institution building. ②

Since 1994 and the accession of China to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) China has been increasingly active in regional and international affairs. It has been argued that China has moved towards a constructive effort to co-manage conflicts in the region. ③ As a result, there have developed more regional cooperation in Northeast Asia; i. e. ASEAN + 3, and neighboring regions have seen organizations such

① Conflict prevention and conflict management are broad terms or methods and mechanisms used to avoid, minimize, and manage conflicts between different parties. Conflict prevention is a set of instruments used to prevent or solve disputes before they have developed into active conflicts. Conflict management is a theoretical concept focusing on the limitation, mitigation, and /or containment of a conflict without necessarily solving it. In contrast, conflict resolution has traditionally referred to measures attempting to resolve the underlying compatibilities of a conflict, including attempts to get the parties to mutually accept each others' existence. Swanström, Niklas L. P. with Mikael S. Weissmann, *Conflict, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Management and beyond: a conceptual exploration*, Uppsala & Washington: CACI & SRSP, 2005.

② International Crisis Group, *Northeast Asia's Undercurrents of Conflict*, Asia Report N. 108, December 2005, Brussels.

③ Zhao, Quansheng, *China's New Approach to Conflict Management: The Cases of North Korea and Taiwan*, Silk Road Paper, May 2006, Uppsala & Washington: CACI & SRSP, 2006.

as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in which China has taken a lead. Several ad hoc and specialized organizations focusing on a specific issue have been established, including the Six-Party Talks and ASEAN + 3. Despite these noteworthy initiations, these undertakings have been unsuccessful in preventing or managing conflicts and in many cases they have been nothing more than expensive discussion clubs.

## II. Why Has Prevention and Management Remained an Absent Strategy?

There are several reasons why conflict prevention and management has remained absent in the region. Some of the reasons are unique to the individual conflicts and have their roots in history, such as the Japanese occupation of China and Northeast Asia, or they are closely linked to the national interests of each of the involved actors. Others are more general in the approach and could explain some of the failure and, to a large degree, the need for new methods of prevention and management. The historical issues will continue to be a major stumble block in the relations in Northeast Asia, this especially with regard to Japan's failure to sufficiently acknowledge and bear responsibility for its past aggressions in the region.<sup>①</sup>

The question of leadership is infected and many, such as Rozman, have argued that Northeast Asia regionalism need to develop without a strong leader.<sup>②</sup> I would, on the contrary, argue for stronger leadership when it comes to regional conflict prevention and management. Northeast Asia suffers from the failure of individual states to take initiatives and move discussions forward. China is, despite the deep distrust other states feel towards it, well positioned to move regionalism and regional structures forward. Similarly as in the SCO there is much to be gained if China, together with the other states, created an agenda and a framework, but as in all cases of leadership there is much to be expected of China. First of all China

① International Crisis Group; *Northeast Asia's Undercurrents of Conflict*, Asia Report N. 108, December 2005, Brussels.

② Gilbert Rozman, *Northeast Asia's Stunted Regionalism: Bilateral Distrust in the Shadow of Globalization*, Cambridge University Press (2004).

need to be ready to take the first steps in confidence building and trust building which would entail that China takes the first steps in efforts to reduce tension in the region.

It is evident that the major problem in the region is the lack of trust between all actors, even if the South Korean and Chinese relations have improved in the last few years. Arguably, as the most important actor in the region, seen from population, military and economic development, China has to have the ambition to create regional solutions by enforcing adequate measures to show that it is not only trustworthy, but also ready to take a regional role in the creation of strategies towards prevention and management of conflicts.

This is made more problematic by the obvious lack of political motivation to encourage solutions that are regional and political-military in scope and perceived to encroach on national sovereignty. This is founded in the lack of trust between the national actors and in the zero-sum mentality that is engrained in the region. Improvements have been seen, but have in most cases been limited to the business sector.

Many governments also view the preventive and management mechanisms as either impossible or unnecessary due to a large degree of asymmetry in threat perceptions. This has made much of the work to create regional CBMs problematic and limited the political will to create regional solutions. Much of this is based in the perception that CBMs would decrease states' maneuver space and increase other actors' influence. This is not only wrong, but could potentially also endanger any possibility to manage regional conflicts and create trust.

To effectively implement prevention and management in Northeast Asia requires a broad set of measures encompassing political, military and socio-economic issues addressing both the formal levels as well as second track measures.

### III. What Can Be Done to Improve Regional Conflict Prevention and Management?

China has an important role in the creation of effective regional preventive and management mechanisms. The reason is not only that China is the single most important actor in the region, both militarily as well as politically, but also because of its sheer size, which has made all states insecure about the Chinese intentions. Chi-

na could provide the first steps in prevention and management in Northeast Asia as it has to certain extent done in Central Asia by working for a strengthened SCO. It is undoubtedly so that the SCO have introduced many positive and confidence creating measures that have not been reproduced in Northeast Asia. Without the direct involvement of China these measures will not only limit the practical necessity to continue working on this, but moreover it would increase the distrust for China.

Connecting communities will be essential in creating understanding and promote a sense of an intra-regional community. This should not only be limited to governmental initiatives, on the contrary contacts between private citizens are essential. Increased tourism, for example, would significantly improve the climate between private citizens that today generally look with skepticism towards other states.

Institution building to facilitate dialogues and confidence building exercises are imperative for future interaction. These institutions should be constructed to include all actors in the region. The level of these institutions and dialogues should range from track-one security discussion to business cooperation in the energy sector and track-three dialogues. Currently, Northeast Asia suffers from a lack of both institutions to facilitate dialogue as well as effective dialogues. One example is the problematic political stalemate between China and Japan that threatens to further deteriorate their political, and potentially also their presently sound economic, relations.

In the military field there is a need for transparency in security policy, troop movements and military spending. Insecurity creates further distrust and forces all states into an escalation of military spending and development. Transparency could be enhanced through exchanges of active and retired military officials, improved contacts between the different defense ministries and joint undertakings, such as in peacekeeping and regional exercises. Striking is that the military contacts are worse between Japan and China than between China and Taiwan. This needs to change, both to increase security but also to decrease military spending.

A great deal of the current tension is due to political misunderstanding and misperceptions but also a failure of the political elites to engage in the ongoing issues. The exchange of information, clarification of policies and development of personal relations between staff at the different ministries, not only the foreign minist-

tries, are essential steps. The political elites on all sides need to increase their understanding of other actors and the complexity of each individual state.

The economic sector has had a strong development, despite the weak political interaction (not including North Korea). However, there is a need to improve the legal framework and work to disband trade barriers in the region. This would also increase the likelihood of spill-over effects in the political and military sectors. The interconnectedness between different business communities should be improved and access to other markets could be simplified by minor actions such as visa regulations, decreased tariffs etc.

Some of the comparatively easy initiatives that many, if not all, actors could cooperate in are within the humanitarian field and include disaster relief, environmental issues, infectious diseases, and rescue operations. But also issues related to organized crime, and then especially narcotics and human trafficking that are increasingly becoming a problem for the region.

If different parties agree on specific measures this is not necessarily the most important result. The process is as important as the outcome and in many ways the process can even be the outcome. This as the process creates confidence and trust between the different actors. If China could convince some, or all, of its neighbors to cooperate over simple issues of exchanges of military and governmental staff it would create trust that would make it possible to act on more complicated matters. Unfortunately, there is neither an environment to resolve conflicts nor an environment to manage or prevent new issues from arising. The failure to create regional structures is a major security issue that should be dealt with using all possible resources available for each actor in the region.