
Security Conditions and Regional Competition in East Asia after the New Millennium: A South Korean Perspective

Chong Jin OH*

Abstract

Even after the new millennium, the Korean peninsula still remains not only the heart of the Northeast Asian security discourse, but also as the centre of global security concerns. The absence of visionary leadership in East Asia and North Korea's self-destructive survival strategy make it difficult to achieve peace on the Korean peninsula. Looking back at the last two decades of globalisation, the South Korean people have been embarrassed by the fact that although the country has been extending its reach as a meaningful global player economically, it has been struggling to contend with security issues such as the North Korean nuclear problem, revision of the South Korean-US alliance, Japanese militarisation, the rise of China, and so on. Thus, there continues to be many security concerns remaining for South Korea (also known as the Republic of Korea, or ROK) in the new millennium.

Key Words

South Korean foreign policy, Inter-Korean Relations, Northeast Asia.

Introduction

East Asia is perhaps the world's greatest military spending area; it is "ripe for rivalry" according to some experts on East Asian issues.¹ East Asian states are competitively building up military resources with which to coerce others and engaging in "head-to-head" economic competition. With economic and energy resources, they are coercing or inducing others to achieve their desired outcomes.² However, the incentives for cooperation among states have been growing since the new millennium. Recently, due to dramatic increases in trade and investment ties within the region, East Asia has come close to the European Union and North America not only in the size of its economy but also in its level of integration. These developments have led national leaders to realise that East Asia is becoming a crucial power, and that their fate is closely associated with the prosperity of the region. In the duality that the region presents, rivals compete over how to cooperate. While promoting cooperation in a regional

* Professor at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea.

institutional framework, they advocate different alliances, ideas, and role allocations. Each state is architecting a regional institution that would best position itself in the regional leadership stakes.³

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The upshot is that different regions have been selected by different states. For example, China has worked to embrace Southeast Asia under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Plus Three (APT: China, Japan, Korea), as well as Central Asia under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Japan is racing to connect the countries of East Asia under the proposed East Asian Community (EAC) that includes the APT countries plus Australia, New Zealand, and India. The United States has attempted to enlarge the functions of the economically oriented APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation). Finally, South Korea has pursued a Northeast Asian Community composed mainly of China, Japan, and South Korea. Many

of these groupings are incompatible with one another, and they compete for primacy. Thus, the conditions for projecting power have been dramatically changing recently as these powers play a soft power game. Accordingly, the resources that provide the best basis for power are changing these days.

Considering these development, this article examines the security conditions of South Korea in the new millennium, and will discuss the security conditions surrounding the Korean peninsula both internally and regionally. The security implication of the Six-Party Talks will be analysed. Lastly, this work will explore the competitive dynamics of pursuing soft power among the key regional states in East Asia. By doing so, it will try to provide an empirical account of regional competition from a soft power perspective.

The Security Conditions and Environment of Korea in the New Millennium

With the end of the Cold War the meaning of security started to differ from region to region, and the change in security conditions brought about by globalisation has also been different in places as a result of regional political and social restrictions. Compared to Europe or the North American region,

the East Asian international order has experienced a distinctly unique process of formation. Unlike the European case in which countries of similar economic development, social stability, etc., formed Europe's regional security order through a process of reciprocity, the state of international relations among East Asian countries could be seen as a result of the proliferation of the Western way of diplomatic relations. This sort of historical characteristic has influenced the uniqueness of the regional security order in East Asia. In East Asia, there still remains the Cold War tradition of resolving major security issues bilaterally.⁴ Such traditions have been institutionalised in the form of a "fragmented array of bilateral relationships" of which the United States is the centre of these relationships.⁵

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In addition, the astonishing economic development in East Asia is ushering in growing regional interdependence. Due to the outcomes of globalisation in the field of communication, transportation, networking, and civilian activity, distances are shrinking and the economies of the region's countries are becoming ever more dependent on

the well being of each other. To this new sense of regionalism, the so-called interdependence allows for a certainty of security aspects. Interdependence may reduce the risks of any serious troubles. Unfortunately, however, the development of economic interdependence does not easily bring any meaningful spill over effect into the security area.

The major limitation in East Asian regional security is fairly straightforward. The differences in power among different nation-states, unresolved historical issues, the existence of largely autonomous cultures unaccustomed to long-term habits of association and interaction with their neighbours, and the extraordinarily rapid economic and social change in recent years have all constrained the development of a more mature and stable regional order.⁶ South Korea, in particular, needs to pay greater attention to these factors more than any other country in the region due to its confrontation with North Korea. As previously mentioned, South Korea symbolises the security confrontation of the East Asian region in the new millennium. It is still a divided nation and also the neighbour to one of the most bizarre and unpredictable regimes in the world, North Korea. Regarding the security conditions of the Korean peninsula in the new millennium, the rise of China draws striking attention. China favours maintaining a peaceful

security environment in order to advance its own industrialisation. However, the rise of China has forced South Korea to ask itself two security questions. First, South Korea has to consider its relations with the United States, China, and Japan along with each state's status in the region. The United States is the regional stabiliser in a distance, and its security alliance with South Korea and Japan has been strengthened and transformed to suit the 21st century international security environment. However, as a consequence of increased Chinese power, maritime territorial disputes and historical territorial disputes continue to occur among China, Japan, and Korea. Thus, South Korea is more likely to pursue a balance-of-power approach in this region.

Problems with North Korea have become the most symbolic and significant issue among any other Northeast Asian regional security issues, primarily due to North Korea's continuous resistance to cooperate in the East Asian regional order.

The second security question is concerned with the G-2's (the US and China) global leadership in the region. There are contending arguments on

continuity and disparity between global and regional hegemonic influence. Since the new millennium, the United States and China have been contending for regional hegemony in East Asia. Although the United States asks for a harmonious partnership with China in order to maintain a more efficient leadership in the region, there are many unrevealed competitions and behind-the-scenes manoeuvring between the G-2 countries. Thus, South Korea's choices, regarding its security issues, are becoming more limited and complicated. To be sure, the full-scale rise of China and the beginning of the G-2 accelerated a new stage of international relations in East Asia. The East Asian security structure is characterised by the co-existence of strategic conflict and realistic cooperation. However, because the conflict between the United States and China has not yet intensified, and neither is it an open conflict, now would be an appropriate time to maximise South Korea's national interest, including issues concerning North Korea.

Thirdly, the most salient and enduring security subject in the East Asian region is how to handle North Korea. Although there have been many efforts made by the United States and South Korea to engage with North Korea over the last 20 years, the North Korean regime continues to pursue a nuclear weapons programme. Offers by the United States to North

Korea for its disarmament cannot credibly reduce the regime's fear for its survival. In dealing with North Korea, both the United States and South Korea have moved back and forth between policies of engagement and coercion, occasionally leading to contradictory policies and a lack of consistency on the part of both the United States and North Korea. Problems with North Korea have become the most symbolic and significant issue among any other Northeast Asian regional security issues, primarily due to North Korea's continuous resistance to cooperate in the East Asian regional order. As a result, many regional security difficulties, such as the US-Chinese conflict over the Korean peninsula, the underdevelopment of multilateralism in the region, and the arms race among East Asian countries, are far beyond solutions for peace in the East Asian region.

As mentioned earlier, the North Korean nuclear problem has lasted for almost two decades, filling the pages of East Asia's post-Cold War stories on security. Living under this nuclear threat has become a part of daily life for many South Koreans. As the problem continues to go unresolved, more and more of the general public as well as the policymakers in South Korea and the United States are beginning to become pessimistic about whether North Korea will ever give up its reckless pursuit of becoming a nuclear state. Such pessimism has led to the so-

called "South-South conflict" in South Korea, which has placed South Koreans into one of the two different camps: the pro-engagement camp that favours engaging with North Korea to bring about gradual reform and openness in the country; and the pro-regime-change camp, which advocates regime change in North Korea to completely stop Pyongyang's irrational behaviour.

Kim Jong-il might have believed that pursuing nuclear weapons is North Korea's only option for defending itself against security threats and for avoiding any loss of control over domestic politics. If North Korea is actually determined to be a nuclear state, then there is not much the international community can do. In short, the international community may simply sit and wait until North Korea reveals their nuclear weapons to the world and try to trade the weapons at an appropriate price. To avoid this worst-case scenario, two options are available. First, it is extremely important that both Seoul and Washington share the goal of completely denuclearising North Korea. However, since the Barack Obama administration came to power in the United States, there have been several indications that the United States may accept North Korea as a *de facto* nuclear power under the condition that Pyongyang does not attempt to proliferate.⁷ Although this indication may not reflect the US government's official

position, many Koreans are worried that Washington may compromise and complete a nuclear deal with Pyongyang due to other US security priorities.

However, the role of China has become the most crucial factor in the subject of the North Korean nuclear issue, China is critical in the negotiation process of the North Korean nuclear problem since it has the most leverage over North Korea. Due to the nuclear issue, both South Korea and China have been caught between the United States and North Korea. China has continued to emphasise economic relations with North Korea over the years, although there has been intense debate within China about the best way to deal with North Korea. Although an inseparable relation between the two countries exists, China must participate more actively in the international community to deal with the denuclearisation of North Korea. For a more prosperous and stabilised East Asia, South Korea, China, and the United States must find common ground to better understand each other's intentions in a constructive way.

Under such circumstances, a strategic alliance with the United States has become one of the important ways South Korea can maintain its security. The US-South Korean alliance spans a period of 60 years, and it is a valuable diplomatic asset for South Korea since it

allows it to pursue its national interests separately on the East Asian level as well as on the global level.⁸ As far as Korea's national security interests are concerned, the US-Korean alliance is the highest priority in the country's national security strategy. The future international order has been characterised as a complex network or complex transformation. In such an environment, a country like South Korea, surrounded by stronger neighbours, must pursue a strategy that exploits the benefits of the rich, diverse, and complex networks in all areas of national security. In that sense, the relationship with the United States takes top priority. However, Korea and the United States must work to reduce the negative implications associated with the term "strategic alliance", especially for China. Its alliance must not be seen as if it were preventing a rise of Chinese power in the region. Rather, both South Korea and the United States need to explain to their neighbours, especially to China, that their aim is to cope with the comprehensive security threats of East Asia in the future.

Considering South Korea's national security and national interest, stable multilateral diplomatic relations in East Asia is one of the most critical conditions for its security.

In this perspective, handling East Asian security issues in terms of the regional context has been carefully considered since the end of the last millennium. Institutionalised cooperation in the region is urgently needed for the long-term prosperity and peace in East Asia. However, the absence of an emergent collective identity in East Asia is a big obstacle. Moreover, East Asia has survived without any permanent multilateral security mechanism. The region apparently lacks a more or less enduring multilateral mechanism like the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). However, people in the region view the emergence of linkages in East Asia as being beneath the level of state actions. In recent years, East Asian countries have become considerably more interdependent, connected, and cohesive. This increased cohesiveness has been driven by developments in, among other things, trade and investment, cross-border production, banking, technology sharing, popular culture, transportation, communication, and environmental cooperation, as well as in crime, drug, and disease control. Previous South Korean governments all endeavoured to contribute to the creation of more or less lasting multilateral security arrangements in East Asia. The Kim Young-sam government proposed to create a Northeast Asia Security Dialogue

(NEASED) at the first ASEAN Regional Forum Senior Official's Meeting. The Kim Dae-jung administration has emphasised the importance of multilateral security cooperation in East Asia on many occasions.⁹ Truly, a long and hard way exists in order to accomplish such a mechanism in the region. However, in order for these efforts to succeed, there must be a region-wide consensus on the ideas and interests among the East Asian states. Thus, creating institutions for a multilateral security framework is crucial groundwork for future long-term cooperation.

Considering South Korea's national security and national interest, stable multilateral diplomatic relations in East Asia is one of the most critical conditions for its security. Thus, the South Korean government is supporting the development of a collective identity among East Asians which would be the base of a regional multilateral framework. However, countries in the region differ in their domestic values on many security issues, such as Japan's military build-up, China's rising power, North Korea's nuclear programme, and the US-centric bilateral alliance system. Regarding these subjects, different domestic security values among the East Asian countries are known as the most significant barriers to the emergence of a sense of collective identity. Thus, these barriers should be overcome by active interdependence

and convergence of each state's domestic values through multilateral dialogue. We may consider the creation of multilateral security dialogue, region-wide collective military exercises, and civilian discussion channels on East Asian military issues in order to create a permanent multilateral security mechanism in the region.

Regarding the security concerns of Korea, it is highly probable that the United States, China, and Japan will adhere to the policies of maintaining the status quo on the North-South Korean division. As a result, to remain as a meaningful actor in East Asia is not an easy task for South Korea. The Korean peninsula is a place of strategic importance, where territorial and marine forces collide, and Western and non-Western civilisations adjoin. Thus, there should be a consistent emphasis that, without peace and prosperity on the peninsula, East Asian regional security cannot be guaranteed. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the international relations of East Asia have developed into a complex security structure that depends on the following competing elements: the role of the United States as a balancer, the possibility of a hegemonic war between China and the United States, the US-Japanese alliance, and finding resolutions to the division of the Korean peninsula. Considering the change in the balance of power among the surrounding states,

continuous attention must be paid to South Korea's national interests.

The Security Implications of the Six-Party Talks

The Six-Party process has been in recession since 2008. Hence there is scepticism on whether the Six-Party framework can succeed in denuclearising North Korea. However, it seems crucial to explore the security implication of the Six-Party Talks, since the North Korean issue can be regarded as a good example of how security is being organised in East Asia in the post-Cold War era. According to Hemmer and Katzenstein, it appears to be highly unlikely that the East Asian region can easily establish a cooperative security regime because the region lacks both a collective regional identity and multilateral institutional experience due to its bipolar structure during the Cold War.¹⁰ However, the North Korean issue engendered the major regional actors to establish a multilateral security dialogue, the Six-Party Talks, to manage East Asia's regional security challenge.

The security implications of the Six-Party Talks are often analysed in terms of a concert of powers. Ness characterises the Six-Party Talks as "a four-plus-two security consortium" which can create a long-term security institution to remove instability in East Asia.¹¹ He adds

that if the major powers of East Asia, China, Japan, Russia, and the US, could commit themselves to cooperation, the Six-Party framework can generate “a security consortium” or “a formal concert of powers” for the region. Likewise, it is important to consider the long-term perspective of the Six-Party framework in tackling the issue of a security guarantee for North Korea. In this regards, the Six-Party framework can play the role of a concert-like diplomacy to build up regional cooperation for both the dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear programme and North Korea’s re-engagement with the international community.¹²

At this point, it is critical to examine China’s perception of the Six-Party Talks, since China has largely contributed to establishing and maintaining it. China also sees the Six-Party framework as a concert of powers system.¹³ Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing emphasised the role of the Six-Party Talks as “concert efforts” in arriving at peaceful resolutions of the nuclear issue in the Korean peninsula. Chinese State Councillor Tang Jiaxuan even went further, saying that the “implication of the Six-Party framework is the handling of regional security matters through dialogue to build a mutual trust when tackling disputes emerging in East Asia”. Compared with the earlier stage of the nuclear issue, it is apparent that

the Six-Party process now shows one significant difference from what it did at the beginning: the Six-Party framework now allows all of the major actors in the East Asian region to have a voice in dealing with a particular security issue. Specifically, the particular pattern of a multilateral forum is accepted by all of the countries involved. Despite the absence of any formal institutionalisation, it is clear that the Six-Party Talks has operated as an engine to solve common security concerns in the region.

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Recently, it seems fair to say that the Six-Party Talks basically resembles a concert of powers system since the key elements of the Six-Party framework can be examined in the same way a concert of powers would be. Also, China’s proactive engagement in the North Korean nuclear issue showed that a concert of powers system was valuable in preventing the breakout of major war between the members. China’s proactive engagement policy can be understood as

the attempt of a great power to prevent war. Ever since March 2003, when the United States intervened in Iraq, China has radically changed its stance from a “hands-off” attitude to an “engagement policy” on North Korean issues. Definitely, China doesn’t want a similar situation to play out in its backyard.

Although the Six-Party Talks was not a formal institution, it continued to play its role as holding a regular pattern of conferences dealing with particular security issues. Its establishment and maintenance showed that it has paved the way for a concert-like diplomacy not only by providing opportunities for regional actors such as the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea to take part in managing the nuclear issue, but also by offering a regular pattern of forums to discuss regional security issues. Nevertheless, there still remains a question of why the Six-Party process has not been functioning in recent years. In this respect, it is important to understand that despite its resemblance of a concert of powers system, the Six-Party Talks has some limitations. More or less, a concert of powers is a permanent framework for managing a broad range of international affairs rather than an *ad hoc* vehicle for solving a particular problem. The Concert of Europe sought to manage European politics in general. However, the Six-Party Talks was not born for the purpose of establishing

a permanent security architecture in the region, but instead established to deal with the nuclear proliferation issue. Thus, the Six-Party Talks has a limitation in providing a long-term general framework for governing East Asia’s security issues. Also, creating the common regional identity and political value in East Asia are still secondary to the balance-of-power political practice in the region. Nonetheless, it has somehow demonstrated the basic foundation for the creation of the multilateral security dialogue in East Asia. Although its process has been slow and marginal, its progress can be developed into a regional security organisation. As East Asian states have achieved remarkable economic growth and have played an increasingly important role as a trading partner in today’s world economy, many economic discussions, e.g., APEC, APT, and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM),¹⁴ have begun to extend their scope to security issues.

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Consequently, its security implication and the meaning in the region of the Six-

Party Talks cannot be ignored, because all the member states are directly involved in the regional stability in East Asia. The Six-Party Talks can play the role of a permanent channel for communication, while the member states maintain their existing bilateral relations with neighbouring states. The duality of the communication channels is essential given the complexity of each member state's political and diplomatic interests. The permanent establishment of the Six-Party Talks could promote both bilateral and multilateral relations which could enhance reciprocal communication among the member states. This can eventually stabilise regional security as a whole. In this sense, it seems to be better to have a leading group such as China, Japan, and South Korea to take the initiative in providing the new regional system with a sense of direction and objective.

Soft Power Competition in East Asia: A Korean Perspective

The economic crisis in 1997 made East Asian countries realise that they should protect themselves.¹⁵ Starting in the post-Cold War period, a series of multilateral institutions came into existence in East Asia: APEC was founded in 1989, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was held in 1993, and the first ASEM was held

in 1996. Most of them were designed to discuss economic cooperation which is less sensitive than politics or security. However, these institutions have often faced criticism due to their failure to meet earlier expectations. Some countries had not achieved full democratisation, and, moreover, some newly industrialised countries were not free from their government's protective policies and hence they could not take initiatives in regional cooperation without considering their national policies. Therefore, East Asian countries could not easily come to a conclusion on a common cause at the expense of their national interests. As Hemmer and Katzenstein mentioned, it was very difficult to expect a smooth operation of international organisations in this region.¹⁶ However, East Asian countries have been showing a slow but gradual progress in the development of a regional cooperation organisation since the new millennium. Also, leading countries in the region, such as China, Japan, and South Korea, are taking the initiative in providing a new regional system with a different direction and objective.

As mentioned earlier, the incentives for cooperation among the East Asian states have been growing since the new millennium. Rapid increases in trade along with investment ties within the region are making East Asia similar to the European Union not only in the

size of its economy but also in the level of integration. Thus, the conditions for projecting power have been dramatically changing as major East Asian powers start playing a soft power game. By the beginning of the new millennium, a new China had emerged on Asia's strategic horizon, shifting gears in foreign policy. China toned down its previous strategy of using military strength to intimidate its Asian neighbours through aggressive moves and calling on others to abandon their alliances, mostly with the United States. Instead, the Chinese leadership has focused on a proactive diplomacy in shaping a regional environment conducive to domestic economic development. China has tried to maintain peace and stability on its borders and has portrayed itself to others as a benign and constructive actor.¹⁷ China has also embraced regional multilateral institutions and pursued free trade agreements (FTA) with neighbours, and it aims to improve its image and influence through these new strategies.¹⁸ These new concepts and strategies were all devised to increase China's soft power.

By the early millennium, the term "peaceful rise", developed by Zheng Bijian, an important advisor to the Chinese leadership, provided the most important guiding principle of China's foreign policy. By claiming that China will not rise at the expense of others, it purports to allow the Chinese economy

to continue growing, undermining the perception of China as a threat. Additionally, China portrays itself as a benign, peaceful, and constructive actor in the world. A peaceful rise is a carefully constructed concept that would allow China to become a global power.¹⁹ Thus, China's soft power strategies aim at a larger national goal: leadership in Asia. While the response to China's soft power extends beyond Asia, for example it includes nations from Venezuela to Nigeria, its soft power strategies have focused on Asia, shifting influence away from the United States and Japan, and creating China's own sphere of influence in the region.²⁰

Given the rise of regionalism among the East Asian states, China believed that its future would depend on the stability and prosperity of the region, and decided to take the lead in constructing regional cooperative frameworks. Since the new millennium, China has developed subtle strategies to achieve this goal. One is establishing a leadership position in East Asia through proactive involvement in the APT. The other focuses on Central Asia through an initiative to develop the SCO. Accordingly, China has begun to enunciate a doctrine of "win-win" relations, emphasising that participants would benefit from their relationships with China. It also proclaimed a doctrine of non-interference, saying that it would listen to the needs and desires of other

nations without asking for anything in return.²¹ Both were in line with the broader strategy of a peaceful rise.

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On the economic perspective, China has pursued a soft power strategy in using FTAs as a strategic engagement tool. Sensitive to the fear of China's economic rise, the Chinese leadership reassured ASEAN countries by signing an FTA and making substantial trade concessions. To the surprise of many ASEAN partners, China offered a trade deal including an "early harvest package" that, even before the FTA came into effect, would reduce China's tariffs on some Southeast Asian goods. Apparently, this was a conscious strategy for earning goodwill from its ASEAN neighbours.²² It was also a strategy of engagement that uses economic means to ameliorate the non-status quo elements of a rising power's behaviour.²³ Backing up its trade and investment promises, China has also developed a substantial foreign aid programme. It now competes with the United States and Japan in the Southeast Asia and Central Asia regions. Again, the

way in which Beijing assists others is quite noticeable. Assistance is not explicitly targeted for economic development, but also for the cultural and language promotion, and aims to improve friendly cooperation between China and the other developing countries.²⁴

In addition to the economic perspective, China's cultural promotion is part of a broader effort at public diplomacy. China has made an effort to increase cultural exchanges with its neighbours, expand the international reach of its media, increase networks of informal summits such as a Davos-style world economic forum, and promote Chinese culture and language studies abroad. In particular, the establishment of Confucius Institutes (*Kongzi xueyuan*),²⁵ a "Chinese cultural-cum-language centre" responsible for creating enthusiasm about learning Chinese, is a case in point. In fact, Chinese language and cultural studies have soared in popularity around the world. South Korea is a good example. As China has become South Korea's largest trading partner, there has been a boom in interest in China. Since the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in Seoul in November 2004, 322 institutes had been set up worldwide as of October 2010. The number of Korean students studying in Chinese universities has also increased rapidly. The number of Koreans travelling to China have

skyrocketed and overtaken the number of Japanese visitors.

In short, China's subtle but persistent pursuit of a good neighbour policy, proactive economic engagement, and systematic promotion and dissemination of its own cultural values have all increased its soft power. By skilfully combining this with its rapidly increasing economic and military capabilities, China has successfully increased its influence in East Asia as well as in Southeast and Central Asia. China's central position in both the APT and the SCO proves its successful

efforts. The response to China's soft power now extends to South Korea and to the rest of the world. Indeed, China's soft power diplomacy has been impressive.

As Shambaugh says, "bilaterally and multilaterally, China's diplomacy has been remarkably adept and nuanced, earning praise around the region." As a result, many nations in the region now see China as a good neighbour, a constructive partner, a careful listener, and a nonthreatening regional power.²⁶ Kurlantzick calls the Chinese approach a "charm offensive".²⁷ However, China has yet to prepare an elaborate ideational or institutional framework under which Asians can get together. Also, a recent critical observation describes China's

limitation: "China's charming image might recede as the honeymoon period ends; the world will focus more intensely and critically on what China says as it becomes powerful".²⁸

The increase in China's soft power has had the greatest impact on Japan. Japan is also a country that has great soft power resources in the region. Japan was the first non-Western country to achieve modernisation and industrialisation in Asia. Thus, its economic and development model have been welcomed as an alternative model to the Western course

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of development by many Asian states. There is no doubt that an East Asian brand of modernisation and capitalism was created by Japan, and was then followed by

South Korea and other Asian countries. Japan has also used its soft power and organised its strategic importance. In attempting to implement soft power strategies, Japan made the most of its cultural traditions and assets. Japanese arts, music, design, fashion, and food have long served as global cultural magnets. In particular, Japanese popular culture, such as J-pop, manga, and animation, have become extremely popular among Asian youth. One Japanese scholar argued that Japan has been playing a key role in creating an East Asian middle-class

culture in Asia.²⁹ However, when there was a massive opportunity for Japan to take advantage of its overseas investment and aid, Japan walked away from Asia due to its self-defeating politics and economic management.³⁰ Japan's long recession since the 1990s has led Japan to focus on its own problems and its own economy. Also, Japan's political scandals and a society-wide decline in morality made its foreign policy passive; it became a secondary concern. Where foreign policy was concerned, strengthening its hard alliance with the United States was the primary goal.³¹

It was precisely in this context that China aggressively made inroads into Southeast Asia. When China signed the 2001 Framework Agreement on Economic Cooperation with ASEAN and the China-ASEAN FTA, the Japanese government was astonished. In 2006, the Japanese government proposed a broader East Asian Community (EAC). Within this framework, Japan proposed to hold an East Asian Summit (EAS) to pursue a community-based identity, as in the case of postwar Europe, that emphasises peace and democracy as its ideals. Japan suggested that East Asia should shape an identity that was directed towards freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and the market economy, so-called Western and universal values. By doing so, Japan tried to create the EAC by including the existing APT membership

plus Australia, New Zealand, and India. Japan thought that these countries could easily be identified as regional members since they share those universal values.³² However, in attracting the East Asian people to take part in the EAC, Japan defined its role in the EAC as a leader. Just as China has attempted to establish its sphere of influence beyond the scope of East Asia, Japan seems to have similar aims.

Japan's EAC proposal of open regionalism seems realistic and persuasive, given the presence of the United States as well as Australia and India as important stakeholders in the region.³³ Also, Japan's functionalist approach seems realistic, given the diverse, unequal, and often conflictual nature of the East Asian region, which renders the creation of an institutional whole, such as the European Union, almost impossible. In addition, an EAC based on the concept of a community was attractive because of the community's importance in the Asian tradition. In particular, the idea of the Chinese/Confucian civilisation, which idealises a *Gemeinschaft*-like world of obligation and harmony, was welcomed by many East Asians. The contents of the Japanese message seemed persuasive based on a realistic judgment of regional conditions as well as the use of knowledge, potentially attractive to the people in the region.

Given the resurgence of nationalism in both societies, which leads to their striving for leadership in Asia, any attempt to assume the leading role in the creation of a regional community is hardly trustworthy.

Japan's dilemma, however, was that the attraction of the message was likely to decrease when the source of the message was from Japan. For Asians, Japan's promotion of the community concept reminds them of Japanese's earlier attempt at establishing the "Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere" during the time of Japanese imperialism, an idea that was also embedded in traditional Asian values at the time.³⁴ Thus, given its imperialistic heritage, Japan is not a credible source for such message. In order to avoid Asians' doubt or fear, Japan has attempted to claim that a community's identity should be based on universal values such as democracy, freedom, human rights, rule of law, and the market economy.³⁵ The Japanese government labelled this as value diplomacy and promoted it as a key pillar of its diplomacy for the beginning of the new millennium.³⁶ However, when viewed in the Asian context, this message was not so appealing. The message sounds too American and, especially to

China, it suggests that Japan is too close to an American ally.³⁷

By far, the greatest challenge both China and Japan have had to face and will face is the question of nationalism. The credibility of a source is undermined when the source promotes an international position that clearly furthers its interests. Given the resurgence of nationalism in both societies, which leads to their striving for leadership in Asia, any attempt to assume the leading role in the creation of a regional community is hardly trustworthy. China's setback in the EAS proves this. Despite repeated commitments to multilateralism, when China's aspiration for a leadership role in an exclusive regional setting became apparent, Asians turned away. They warned that China seems to be using this multilateral institution as a cover, aiming to deter Japanese and American influence in East Asia.³⁸ Likewise, when Japan's drive for regionalism was seen as a clear balancing act against China's rise, its attractiveness declined. In addition, inherent in both Chinese and Japanese domestic politics is the problem that frequently their messages are for their domestic popularity, legitimacy, and even regime survival, which undermines their soft power in creating multilateralism in East Asia.

The best example is the historical dispute. Just as Japan has never fully

repudiated its past aggression, China also has not fully come to terms with its own imperial past. Both countries have been engaged in historical disputes with their neighbours.³⁹ For example, South Korea's recent dispute with China over the history of the Koguryo Kingdom has generated a sharp decline of China's popularity among Koreans.⁴⁰ The territorial disputes over the Tokdo islands, increased by the Japanese prime minister's official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, created massive popular resentment, putting Japan's popularity at its lowest in postwar history. These historical disputes and suspicions that remain in Korea and other post-colonial states in Asia limit Chinese and Japanese soft power to create multilateralism in the region.⁴¹

In the midst of these soft power contests between China and Japan, what are South Korea's options? What can South Korea learn from their practices? Situated at the crossroads of great powers, South Korea absolutely faces an apparent deficit in hard power. Therefore, a wise strategy for South Korea would be to fill this void by fortifying its soft power.⁴² This differs from a great power's strategy in which soft power complements military and economic might. South Korea should make greater investments in soft power than the great powers. Since South Korean foreign policy is struggling to solve the peninsula question, almost all of

its diplomatic tools and foreign assistance have been directed toward North Korea and the four great powers (the US, Russia, China, Japan).⁴³ Diplomacy and foreign assistance efforts outside the peninsula are largely understaffed, underfunded, and underused. They are neglected in part because of the difficulty of demonstrating their short-term effect on progress toward a peaceful peninsula. South Korean foreign policy has tended to view soft power as a cultural phenomenon. In this perspective, South Korea's soft power strategy lies in the field of cultural diplomacy. Recently, the South Korean government has been promoting Korean popular culture, the so-called "Korean wave", in the region in the name of public diplomacy. Korea is using the appeal of its popular culture to play a role in inspiring other Asian neighbours and to develop common Asian values. Thus, cultivating political ideas and values as well as performing skilful diplomacy are, perhaps, the crucial mission for the South Korean government at this point. In order to achieve this, decision makers in the South Korean government should understand what soft power means and what it can achieve on its own.

Despite its status as a latecomer in the region, South Korea has potential. Both China and Japan have recently created problems that undercut their own soft power. China has demonstrated an

increasingly offensive posture in the case of several territorial disputes (such as on the Senkaku islands and South China Sea) that contradicts its previously cautious charm offensive. China's suppression of human rights also undercuts its soft power. In a different way, indecisive and frequent changes in the Japanese leadership in its recent efforts to create an "Asian Shift" as well as its pursuit of an equal relationship with the United States are caught up with its internal political debate. It is not only hindering Japan's further progress in the region, but also weakening the Japanese voice in the international arena.

South Korea can take advantage of these two countries' mistakes to develop a strategy based on four principles. First, South Korea's soft power strategy must be appropriate to its position as a middle power in the global system. Judged from a hard power perspective, South Korea will not be able to determine the regional order. However, the biggest challenge is to decide between China and Japan/the United States. By improving its soft power, South Korea can play a constructive role as an arbiter or broker who helps to avoid a zero-sum game, or possibly a collision course, among the great powers in the region.

Secondly, South Korea's success in the arbiter's role will turn on its ability to win credibility from others. Both China and

Japan fall short in their credibility and ability to inspire hope and optimism. The core of the problem is that they are self-centred and nationalistic. In this sense, the key to gaining credibility is overcoming self-centred nationalism and establishing consistency in words and action.

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Thirdly, overcoming a myopic, inward-looking, short-term mindset is extremely important. Efforts that are only spent on the Korean peninsula (e.g., regarding North Korea or the Six-Party Talks) will not necessarily bring comparable improvement in South Korea's security and peace. South Korea's bargaining power with neighbouring states can be increased by efforts outside the peninsula. To be sure, this may not produce the desired outcomes immediately, and such efforts often work indirectly and may take years to bear fruit. Given South Korea's limited budget and the need for trade-offs among policies, it is difficult to invest for the good of the

region and the world. However, it would be wise to consider seriously such an option. The South Korean foreign policy should broaden its perspective to include regional and global dimensions.

Different domestic security values among East Asian countries on these subjects are known as the most significant barriers to the emergence of a sense of collective identity.

Lastly, South Korea should learn lessons from the Japanese and Chinese cases. The soft power strategies of both China and Japan have been very much government driven. As a result, governments have always taken the initiative in creating and disseminating soft power. However, many critical soft power resources are private. The key to success is to think of a soft power increase in terms of a connection of activities, linked through flows of potential resources into networks. Here, the role of the government is in providing an infrastructure and environment that allows creative experimentation by private individuals and groups, and establishing networks that constitute relational structures and processes in which creative actors interact.

South Korea was once the weakest nation in the East Asian region. However, today South Korea is categorised as a “middle power” that can assume initiative in international matters that are too sensitive or impossible for stronger states to engage in.⁴⁴ Moreover, compared to any of its neighbours, South Korea has achieved a dynamic and participatory democracy. Due to such democracy, South Korea has experienced amazingly rapid development as well as the development of a highly professional civil society. In addition, South Korea is at a contact point of continental powers (China) and maritime powers (Japan), and thus, South Korea is relatively better situated to develop a collective identity of East Asia. South Korea’s networking power will gain a competitive edge in the East Asian region.⁴⁵

Different domestic security values among East Asian countries on these subjects are known as the most significant barriers to the emergence of a sense of collective identity.⁴⁶ The systemic process should move forward the interdependence and convergence of each state’s domestic values. As the specific conduct of such systemic processes, we may consider a creation of multilateral security dialogue, region-wide collective military exercises, and civilian discussion channels on various issues.

Conclusion

This article explored the security conditions in East Asia in the new millennium, particularly focusing on the South Korean perspective. As a result, it discussed the security conditions surrounding the Korean peninsula both internally and regionally. Moreover, the research examined regional competition in East Asia from a soft power perspective.

Despite East Asian states' rivalry in political and military sectors, the degree of their interdependence is likely to be strengthened in East Asia. The major bilateral relations in the Asia-Pacific are mostly prosperous, although historical bitterness still remains in Japanese-Chinese and the Japanese-Korean relations, regardless of the increasing degree of economic interactions and cultural contacts. As mentioned throughout the paper, while maintaining the existing bilateral relations, multilateral relations should be developed. The establishment of security institutions with dense networking would lessen the tense rivalry among the key states.⁴⁷ Thus, the article has suggested the possibility of the current Six-Party Talks playing a crucial role in creating a multilateral institution in East Asia. It has been argued that this seems quite sustainable because the parties that are concerned are the US, China, Japan, Russia, plus the two Koreas. They are

directly involved in regional stability in East Asia, and therefore they should all be engaged in a regular contact point. More specifically, the Six-Party Talks can play a key role as a permanent channel of communication, whilst the member states maintain their existing bilateral relations with neighbouring states. The article emphasised that the duality of communication channels is essential given the complexity of each member state's political and diplomatic interests. Any possible deadlock in one channel can be dealt with by the other one. The permanent establishment of the Six-Party Talks would promote bilateral relations and vice versa. In this way, the reciprocal communication would stabilise regional security as a whole.

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Regarding the security concerns of South Korea, it is apparent that the United States, China, and Japan will hold on to its policies of maintaining the status quo of the North-South Korean division. If the North Korean nuclear problem is not resolved smoothly, this perspective will probably increase. In

this vein, to remain as a meaningful player in East Asia is not an easy task for Korea. The Korean peninsula is a place of strategic importance, where territorial and marine forces collide, and Western and non-Western civilisations border. Consequently, there should be a continuous emphasis on the phrase “without peace and prosperity on the peninsula, East Asian regional security cannot be guaranteed”.

Since the new millennium, East Asian international relations have developed a complex security structure that depends

on the following competing elements: the role of the United States as a balancer, the possibility of a hegemonic war between China and the United States, the US-Japanese alliance, and the discovery of resolutions to the division of the Korean peninsula as well as the Taiwan Strait issue. The course of history has a definite meaning. Considering the change in the balance of power among the surrounding states, South Korea should follow and understand the dynamic changes in the region in order to secure its own national interests.

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