

Policy Memo

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RE: Envisioning the Future Security and Peace Mechanism for Northeast Asia

As part of its broader multiyear effort to explore the contours of Asian institution building, the Stanley Foundation, in collaboration with the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, convened a workshop in Moscow in November 2007 to explore the way forward in the development of permanent Northeast Asian security architecture. Participants in the workshop, “Envisioning the Future Security and Peace Mechanism for Northeast Asia,” included analysts and government officials, acting in their private and personal capacities, from all six countries taking part in the six-party talks.

Regional Dynamics

Although the workshop included in-depth discussion of applicable “lessons learned” from institution-building efforts elsewhere in the world, such as the Helsinki process and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), it also concluded that a critical starting point for any effort to develop capable and enduring security architecture for the region must start with the specific characteristics and dynamics at play in Northeast Asia itself. It is a region with its own characteristics, traits, and drivers—a region where four of the globe’s major powers converge and where six very different governments intersect, all with different expectations, different perceptions of security needs, and different capacities—and although there are valuable lessons to be learned, simply borrowing institutional templates and processes from other regions and other experiences will likely lead to functional or sustainable solutions in a Northeast Asian context.

One of the key insights that emerged from the discussions was a sense that the mechanism best equipped to take on board the particular dynamics of the region and develop capable multilateral security architecture may well be the six-party talks. Indeed, assuming continued forward momentum in the six-party process for resolving the differences that separate the Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea (DPRK) from others in the region, there may be a particular challenge for institution building in transitioning from a six-party process to a peace treaty signed by four parties back to a six-party process for the creation of a regional security mechanism. There may be a temptation for all parties to celebrate a four-party peace treaty, and forget that the six-party process, as a process, also has value in itself.

Indeed, one clear value of the six-party process lies in its ability to generate legitimacy for the region, for diplomatic ententes in Northeast Asia, and for any security mechanism that may emerge. For example, as the process has gone forward the parties are increasingly invested in and have increasing faith in the ability of the six-party process to throw off other efforts—be

they bi-, tri-, and multilateral in structure, and/or addressing both traditional and nontraditional security issues.

Moreover, because of the nature of the security dynamics inherent in the region, there will also likely be a requirement for institutional flexibility, ad hoc improvisation, and thin institutionalization, at least in the formative stages of this undertaking, that plays to the strengths of the six-party process qua process. And, as any regional security institution-building effort, it will need to be able to adopt a “nesting” of institutional process within the larger context of other Asian-Pacific institutions and mechanisms building out a particular focus on defense and security in Northeast Asia without detracting from other institutions or efforts.

Domestic Constraints?

In looking at domestic political dynamics in the different six-party states, the Moscow Workshop discussion found that although there is good news in that there is no direct or significant opposition either in public opinion or elite circles to constrain the development of a regional security mechanism, there is also bad news in that there is likewise no significant public support or prioritization of this issue in the policy bureaucracies. For each of the six-party states more immediate issues will almost always take priority in the political and policy process.

For the United States in particular, however, there was recognition that although there are specific challenges to policymaking in each of the nations of the region, developing a regional security institution will require the United States to play a critical leadership role. US leadership alone may not be sufficient to assure success, but without active and sustained US engagement progress will be exceedingly slow and run a much higher risk of failure.

Keys for Institutional Design

In drilling more deeply into the question of institutional design for a regional security mechanism, as well as more specifically how to help develop proposals that could be of use to the Six-Party Talks Working Group on the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism (NEAPSM) under the chairmanship of Ambassador Vladimir Rakhmanin, the discussion identified several potential keys to success:

- **Establish Rules.** In thinking about a Northeast Asian security mechanism, it is important to recall that institutions, in essence, are “bundles of rules,” and that a necessary first step of the institution-building process is to agree on a set of rules and principles—a code of conduct, for example—that can animate the undertaking. These rules and principles can and should cover such issues as how to make decisions, how to reach objectives, the means to reach those objectives, and so on. For maximum (political) impact, a meeting of the leaders of the six parties to sign off on top-level principles—once agreed upon—would set down an important marker and provide a qualitative transition in the process from the six-party talks to the creation of a broader mechanism.
- **Use Different Baskets.** Picking up on the design of the six-party process itself, optimal design should seek to incorporate appropriate linkages—and appropriate space—between different baskets of issues to be addressed by any new regional security institution so that

even though different baskets can move independently, there will be no danger that “stuck issues” will upend the whole thing.

- **Seek Defused Responsibility.** A critical phase in institution building is in a movement away from specific responsibility and toward defused responsibility. Clearly at the front end of the process, there is a need to build trust and for specific reciprocity and specific responsibility as part of this trust-building exercise. As the process moves forward, however, a willingness of the parties to move away from specific reciprocity will be, in fact, a sign of success for the undertaking.
- **Tackle the Easy Issues Last?** Although some analysts suggest that tackling “easy issues” (such as nontraditional security issues) first might offer an optimal pathway to develop an institution by offering an agenda that is open to success, it was also suggested that tackling harder issues first may, in fact, be more effective—if for no other reason than issues assumed to be “easy” in fact often turn out to be hard.
- **Set—and Use—Benchmarks.** To build and create momentum, there is a benefit to be derived from making sure that opportunities entailed in achieving benchmarks are not missed. Issues that might merit the development of clear benchmarks might include such items as the adoption of a statement of principles, agreement on the denuclearization of the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program, and the normalization of relations between the DPRK and the United States and Japan.
- **Evolution, Not Revolution.** Although there is a great temptation to seek to develop and implement a security mechanism for the region from scratch, in this case doing so might well prove counterproductive. Although the six-party talks agenda is (by design) neither comprehensive nor complete, the process has provided a focal point for regionwide dialogue and, although the ultimate success of the process remains highly uncertain, appears to be paying dividends in terms of habits and byways of regional interaction and cooperation. An evolutionary approach also provides a space to allow the continued development of important bilateral relations among the members of the six-party talks in a way that does not create tension or friction between bi- and multilateral efforts. Building on the six-party process in an organic and evolutionary fashion may well provide the best pathway possible toward the creation of a Northeast Asian security institution.

To appreciate the possibilities of developing a fully articulated regional security institution out of the six-party process, it may be useful to recall that whales, after all, are descendants of land-living mammals. As one evolutionary biologist has pointed out, “In one sense, evolution didn’t invent anything new with whales. It was just tinkering with land mammals. It’s using the old to make the new.” Although it may be hard to imagine how one gets from a dog-sized hoofed mammal to a whale, it can be done; and in thinking about how one gets from the six-party process to a regional institution, there is perhaps a valuable lesson, somewhere, in that fact.

- **The Road Ahead.** Among the more specific recommendations offered for developing a roadmap toward the creation of a capable security mechanism for Northeast Asia were

suggestions to: regularize the frequency of meetings at every level of the six-party talks, while ensuring the proper level of representation at these meetings; seek to develop, in a Track II setting, a statement of principles that could then be transferred for Track I consideration; and, starting, perhaps at the Track II level first, seek to define agreed-upon and acceptable institutional rules of the road covering such institutional issues as the procedures regarding how meetings of an institution can be convened and the nature of the decision-making process, such as how votes are made and counted.

The analysis and recommendations included in this Policy Memo do not necessarily reflect the view of the Stanley Foundation or any of the conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward in the meeting.

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