Security Debates in East Asia since the End of the Cold War

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Over the past few years, the focus has always been on North Korea's nuclear issue when discussing peace and security in East Asia. But I don't think the security issue in East Asia only boils down to the North Korean nuclear issue. So today, I'm going to think about one of the important reasons for the lack of peace and the continuing tension in East Asia, the security concepts that East Asian countries have.

During the Cold War era, security issues in East Asia were relatively straightforward as a result of the East-West confrontation. However, with the end of bipolarity, security issues in the East Asian region have become more diverse and complex. Political order in East Asia is not just a matter of China, Japan, and Korea. Their bilateral relations with the United States, and Washington's East Asian policies exercise a strong, if not predominant influence in the region. Russia continues to be an important player in the region. Thus, the geopolitical and strategic situation of East Asia is unique and, for instance, quite different from Europe.

Still now, security policy in East Asia continues to follow the patterns set in the 19th century and during the Cold War.

Against this background Mun Chong-in, the special advisor of foreign and security policy for Moon Jae In, the President of South Korea, said once: "We had hoped that the end of the Cold War would bring peace to this region. Instead the situation became worse. As a result, insecurity in this region has increased significantly." Certainly, East Asia faces a 'security dilemma'. Even the danger of another war can-not be excluded, not just because of nuclear issues of North Korea. Tang Shiping, an international well-known specialist for international relations in China observed: "As long as Taiwan question is not resolved peacefully, there is a real possibility that the United States and China could go to war." As a result Chong Uk-sik, an activist in the peace movement in Korea, asks himself, whether East Asia's security problem can only be solved by military means.

In fact, policies and discourses in the region are still dominated by traditional concepts of security, even including the fabrication and projection of enemy concepts.

In the early 21st century the overall political situation in East Asia is characterized by competition and even conflict more than by cooperation. Between China, Japan and Korea, historical reminiscences are easily evoked. Various nineteenth century-style border conflicts persist today. Furthermore, with respect to security matters, the frame of mind of the political elites of these countries is set in rather traditional terms: States, military power, and the others as potential enemies.

The relationship between China and Japan is of paramount importance for the security of the area. Yet, China and Japan's fears of each other's potential military power apparently have become an element of central importance in their relationship. Wang Xiaoshu, a vice

president of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, puts the blame on Japan. It has "accelerated military modernization, which de facto led to a regional arms race". In fact, in terms of military expenditure Japan, China and Korea occupied among the first ten place respectively in the world. Taiwan spends annually more than 2 per cent of its GDP on military expenditure. In North Korea the size of the defence budget is not known, but there is no doubt, that it should be extremely high. East Asia nowadays is the most heavily armed region in the world.

Even though the arms race is less direct and severe than during the Cold War, opinion polls in East Asia show that large segments of the public see the ongoing build-up of arms as a threat to their own security. Instead of making efforts to dispel mutual resentments, the political establishments often foster mental constructions of the others as enemies. Hence uncertainty and distrust are even on the increase. What happens is that these countries push themselves into a security dilemma unless active confidence building measures and security cooperation are enforced

Furthermore, we have observed, that nationalism in all countries in East Asia is on the rise. In China, the defence budget increases year by year, while Beijing seeks control of natural resources in the region and elsewhere. This is accompanied by tides of nationalism, which also serve as a useful instrument to emphasize unity and to gloss over severe problems like unemployment, inequality and pollution. The Japanese armed forces are among the most modern and sophisticated in the world – and nationalism, even to the point of xenophobia, appears to be getting stronger. They are tainted with long-standing territorial conflicts and the struggle for natural resources.

It is precisely the lack of mutual trust that makes it so difficult to proceed in a multilateral manner. How could this situation of lack of trust, competing national interests and nationalisms be ameliorated? One possibility appears to be popular integration from below: Tourism among the countries in East Asia has been on the increas, popular culture is jumping borders easily and on a large scale, trans-Asian fan clubs have become a common phenomenon, translation machines are being used for transborder communication in the internet, and, of course, consumption patterns are getting ever more similar.

The other venue appears to be the emergence of trans-Asian intellectual discourses. East Asian intellectuals think in terms of a common consciousness of an East Asian identity. This identity has to part from the recognition of the diversity of East Asian cultures and traditions and from the idea of human dignity and equal rights. Because all are equal, they are respected. Here lies the base of a civil society that transcends the borders of states and nations. This, of course, could go hand in hand with popular integration.

It is uncertain whether the 21st century will become an age of the citizen, in contrast to the nation-states of the 19th and the 20th century. Yet, it is quite clear that the activities of local and national, regional and global NGOs along with growing numbers of progressive think tanks and media are gaining a certain prominence in East Asia. Through them longer-term, non-traditional issues have been and can be put on the peace and security agenda. These include cultural, economic, ecological, personal and social issues, as well as natural and technological threats to human development and security. In view of the rebound of

exclusive and antagonistic interstate relations it will be important for the future of East Asia to what extent citizens and civil society can have an impact on the policies of their governments.