



Enhancing the Northeast Asia Regional Security Eco-System: Issues and Approaches

Megan DuBois, Ankit Panda, Toby Dalton, editors

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

S. PAUL CHOI is a principal at StratWays Group, a geopolitical risk advisory in Seoul. He specializes in political-military affairs, international security, strategy design, and deterrence.

TOBY DALTON is a co-director and senior fellow of the Nuclear Policy Program at Carnegie. An expert on nonproliferation and nuclear energy, his work addresses regional security challenges and the evolution of the global nuclear order.

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MEGAN DUBOIS is a research assistant in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

VASILY KASHIN is a senior research fellow at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and an expert on China's military-industrial complex.

LI NAN is a senior research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of American Studies. His research mainly focuses on U.S.–North Korea relations and China–North Korea relations.

ANKIT PANDA is the Stanton Senior Fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

YUKI TATSUMI is a senior fellow and co-director of the East Asia Program and director of the Japan Program at the Stimson Center. She is an expert on Japanese security policy, the U.S.-Japan alliance, and U.S. foreign policy in Asia.

INTRODUCTION

MEGAN DUBOIS, ANKIT PANDA, AND TOBY DALTON

Amid an exceptional regional arms buildup, spiraling U.S.-China tensions, and the unfolding consequences of Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, Northeast Asian states are grappling with an increasingly complex web of perceived security imperatives. Meanwhile, the emergence of new military technologies and capabilities threatens to destabilize the already precarious status quo. Now, more than ever, arrangements to manage regional security and mitigate worst outcomes are needed.

Yet, bilateral efforts to address military competition have largely failed, and the broader challenges to institution-building leave the region without many multilateral venues for diplomacy, cooperation, or crisis management. In the absence of such venues, sources of insecurity have become more acute. Notably, attempts to reverse North Korea's nuclear weapons program through diplomacy have failed to yield sustainable progress toward denuclearization, historical and territorial disputes remain unresolved, and competing conceptions of sovereignty and security drive estrangement and friction among big powers in the region. Regional insecurity is also compounded by growing geopolitical friction, primarily between Washington and Beijing. The impending ramifications of Russia's war in Ukraine and changed role in the international order loom over all of these issues and will undoubtedly affect the prospects for any regional cooperation.

In this context, efforts to improve regional security will require additional modes of diplomacy, as well as a focus on a broader range of issues. **To address this need, regional policymakers could consider adopting the framework of a regional security architecture: an arrangement of formal and informal mechanisms to regularize dialogue, affirm norms of behavior, mitigate sources of tension, and temper crises before they escalate into military conflict.**

Given past failures and the many challenges involved in creating security institutions in Northeast Asia, creativity and flexibility will be key to designing a twenty-first-century architecture for the region. Models could vary in terms of their structure, formality, rules, membership, and sequencing. Previous proposals for security architectures in Asia often varied between prescribing formal, institutionalized means and more piecemeal, informal approaches. A potential middle ground approach could seek to build on the existing ecosystem of institutions, forums, and plurilateral arrangements, and could expand over time in issue areas where progress is feasible.

Potential architecture options each have their advantages and drawbacks. Models with a more formal, institutionalized structure could be empowered to tackle urgent hard-security challenges, but they would require significant, sustained, and risky political investment in institution-building—a rare commodity in today’s geopolitical environment. Informal models that rely on largely declaratory tools to address rising sources of tension are highly flexible and have a low institutional barrier to entry, but without stronger implementation and enforcement mechanisms, they risk being ineffectual in times of real crisis. Models built upon status quo institutions are feasible, inclusive, and holistic in scope, but may be seen as lacking urgency or as merely perpetuating the increasingly untenable status quo.

Beyond form and structure, a regional security architecture requires flexibility regarding the issues it could address. The great consequences of small- or large-scale military conflict in the region make focus on traditional security challenges a desirable goal. Yet the current political divides between states may preclude simple cooperation in these areas at first. One of the benefits of an architecture approach is its ability to engage with a wider range of issues, especially nontraditional security issues. Addressing common interests like public health and climate change could avoid the political tensions that bedevil cooperation in other areas, while building trust and cooperation that could translate into progress in other domains in the future.

Making meaningful progress on any of these issues will not be simple; neither will reaching consensus on the prioritization of elements among member states. Policymakers must be prepared to address many potentially thorny questions. For instance, how should an architecture account for sharply divergent threat perceptions and differing conceptions of sovereignty in the region? How should a new architecture relate to existing alliance structures in the region? To what extent can an architecture formally incorporate crisis management and other guardrails to mitigate the possibility of war, including nuclear war?

These questions, among many others, require serious and innovative exploration. To this end, we present the following papers as a fruitful starting point for further discussion. Here, four regional experts offer perspectives on the questions that could inform the shape, sequencing, and structure of any future regional architecture. These papers are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to provide an overview of the elements and issues that policymakers would need to consider as they develop a new security architecture. These papers were conceived prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, yet the issues they raise remain central to the future of regional security in Northeast Asia.

Given political tensions in the region, it is unsurprising that many scholars—including those whose perspectives are included here—find utility in the framing of a new or second cold war. This is a historically nuanced term that could have a wide range of meanings depending on the context. Here, we understand this to broadly describe the tense competition—ideological, political, military, and economic—between the United States and both China and Russia. Unlike the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the effects of this intensifying competition are both mitigated and complicated by high economic interdependence and functional cooperation on an array of issues that cut across the divides of existing security alliances.

Despite the many likely challenges to achieving a new regional security architecture, without a broader, more inclusive mechanism—or set of mechanisms—in place to address the competing concerns of regional states, Northeast Asia faces a growing risk of conflict. Regional policymakers should contend with these questions with urgency.

CHAPTER 1

MANAGING COMPETITION: ARMS LIMITATIONS AND BEYOND

S. PAUL CHOI

How could a new regional security architecture promote formal and informal arms control measures to manage military competition in the region?

Northeast Asia, described once as “ripe for rivalry,” is now careening toward conflict. A new regional security architecture is needed to advance cooperation and limit competition if potential confrontation is to be avoided or at least controlled. This architecture should address security beyond the military domain and help define the parameters of twenty-first-century strategic competition, including the rules that govern behavior across sectors, domains, and the time-intensity spectrum of conflict. Critically, it should also aim to bridge emerging divisions of alliances or blocs.

Such a regional architecture could promote formal and informal arms control measures. In particular, behavioral arms control measures could shape domestic and international social conditions in ways that limit how and when certain capabilities are employed. Further, a new architecture could facilitate dialogue to reduce misperceptions and promote a shared understanding of security developments, including the respective rationales for each country’s changing force postures and the way in which states view emerging technologies. Emphasis in the near term should be on reducing political tensions that exacerbate the multipolar regional security dilemma and limit the potential for productive engagement.

The security architecture, which should include representation by nongovernmental organizations, could also ensure sustained attention to advance cooperation and publicly message areas of common interests between states such as public health and countering climate change. Even if such cooperation remains limited to these areas, it ensures relations are not defined solely by military competition and may mitigate domestic pressures to dismiss arms control efforts, or worse, prematurely use military force.

What sorts of quantitative or qualitative arms limitations are both desirable and feasible? And, what sorts of conventional and/or weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities should be subject to limitations?

Amid increasingly tense China-U.S. relations and North Korea's advancing military capabilities, geopolitical and technological realities challenge the feasibility of any traditional arms limitations. The regional architecture should therefore adopt a realistic agenda that acknowledges the likely continuance of regional force development programs. A nontraditional interpretation of "limiting" arms is most likely to succeed. The most probable sort of arms control is behavioral. It would be in the collective interest of all to shape political conditions in ways that discourage the decision to employ certain types of arms in particular ways. This includes strengthening mores against the use of nuclear and other WMD, as well as establishing common principles to govern the use of emerging technology such as autonomous weapons. These two examples are noteworthy given the trend toward fielding low-yield nuclear weapons and leveraging ambiguity regarding nuclear-conventional integration, as well as actual use of chemical and biological weapons this past decade, despite generally accepted principles against them. Common concern for the increased potential for conflict could be leveraged to promote greater transparency and exchange of information than has been the case in the past.

At the great power and nuclear levels, the new security architecture should explicitly acknowledge China-U.S. mutual vulnerability, recommit China to a "no first use" doctrine, and have the United States adopt a loosely defined "sole purpose" or "existential threat" declaratory nuclear policy—though much of this may depend on improvements in the regional political environment and geopolitics. Such positions, even when they belie force development and postures, would support norms that add to the burden of use. Socialization of such norms can influence strategic cultures and domestic political environments to help restrain the actual use of such arms during conflict. Messaging along these lines would also reinforce the January 2022 P5 statement on nuclear weapons.

The new architecture must then also address the increased risk of conventional conflict inspired by greater confidence in stability through mutual vulnerability at the nuclear level, and of a perceived weakening of U.S. extended deterrence guarantees by non-nuclear U.S. allies. In this context, it is important that force postures be analyzed holistically based on the threats they pose rather than aggregated simply by type. It is unrealistic and irresponsible to expect non-nuclear states to limit qualitative and quantitative conventional arms development when already forgoing nuclear means in a multipolar nuclear environment. Thus, it may be necessary to acknowledge the need of non-nuclear states, such as South Korea and Japan, to advance their conventional missile capabilities and avoid an oversimplistic framing of such armament as fueling an "arms race" with states that pose nuclear threats.

Finally, limiting competition in already-existing capabilities—such as hypersonic weapons—will be challenging, not least because of the dual civilian-military nature of these capabilities. Even the production of autonomous weapons is already too [accessible](#), with the cost of production reportedly as little as \$1,000, their parts purchasable online, and their code available for open-source download. Efforts should be made to subject the use of advanced technology, such as artificial intelligence, in weapons to certain limitations. States are unlikely to abandon their ongoing pursuit of integrating technology to more quickly close

“[kill-chains](#),” and may differ in their propensity to remove humans from the decisionmaking loop. The potential for automation to effectively enhance the lethality of conventional weapons into a platform of mass destruction could inspire a universal agreement on new rules of engagement or parameters for strike approval authorities when employing such technologies. Such an agreement could build on [ongoing work](#) by the UN Institute for Disarmament Research on lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS).

How could inter-Korean military limitations nest within a set of broader regional arms control measures, including those that would seek to temper U.S.-China military competition?

North Korea’s evolving nuclear and missile capabilities introduce specific challenges to inter-Korean military limitations and broader arms control measures. Specifically, advances in its capabilities that can increasingly threaten U.S. territory, and advances that portend a shift from a nuclear posture focused on deterrence to one that includes warfighting, together cause strains on U.S. extended deterrence guarantees. Relatedly, as a nuclear power, North Korea often views the United States—not South Korea—as its preferred counterpart for discussions on military limitations.

As South Korea continues to restrict its force development to conventional means, additional military limitations are more likely feasible if designed to address threats perceived by North Korea and South Korea or emanating from the former and perceived by Japan, rather than if the limitations are focused on any inter-Korean rivalry. Thus, while the United States works to address the increasing challenge to the credibility of its extended deterrence guarantees, it may agree to forgo options such as the redeployment or new deployment of low-yield nuclear weapons or certain intermediate range missiles on the Korean Peninsula, which in turn might help temper China-U.S. military competition. Although this will likely only strengthen the need for South Korea and Japan to develop and field new conventional capabilities, and increase demands to change other aspects of U.S. strategic operations (for example, planning with allies), these developments are arguably less tension-driving than a greater U.S. military footprint.

What are the main sources of crisis instability on the Korean Peninsula today, and are there shared perspectives on this in the region that should be addressed through a new architecture? And, how can crisis management mechanisms be incorporated into a new architecture?

The main sources of possible crisis on the Korean Peninsula today are potential domestic instability in North Korea and the escalation of inter-Korea conflict resulting from North Korean aggression, whether in the form of a traditional kinetic attack or one in the cyber domain. If there is at all a shared perspective on these contingencies it is merely that a common understanding of escalatory dynamics is nonexistent and that all states, including allies, are likely to have differing interests and priorities. At a more macro but fundamental level, these sources of crisis instability are derived from the lack of transparency and shared situational awareness regarding conditions in North Korea.

The uncertain domestic situation in North Korea, resulting from the pandemic and increasingly dire economic conditions, coupled with the potential perception of a distracted and constrained United States—polarized domestically, focused on China and on responding to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and now having to consider the direct threat North Korea poses to the continental United States—exacerbates this risk. A new architecture is needed to establish ready and practiced lines of communication among all states.

There is a dearth of engagement (and thus exposure and contact points) that could make any crisis more dangerous, including a domestic crisis in North Korea that might inspire intervention by external states. In addition, the two potential sources of crisis instability on the Korean Peninsula may be used to facilitate a more strategic regional discussion on how escalatory dynamics are perceived, particularly regarding cross-domain actions, and on changing doctrines regarding the use of military force and other national assets that pose security challenges to other countries.

A new architecture can incorporate improved crisis management mechanisms in its design by ensuring more varied agency representation and built-in multilateral pressures to maintain active channels of communication. Increased activity in the cyber domain, in addition to other gray-zone activities conducted by actors that may not formally be affiliated with the military, place a premium on crisis management mechanisms expanding beyond traditional military-to-military hotlines. Further, as states deliberately conduct activities in ways that allow them to deny culpability but that can trigger rapid escalation, it is imperative that they be compelled to maintain hotlines even when rejecting involvement.

Should these efforts largely be consultative; or should an architecture seek to promote, regulate, or prescribe a stabilizing military balance between regional players?

These efforts should aim at a minimum to be consultative bodies, seeking also to promote and regulate a stabilizing military balance between regional players. The former, more limited aim, however, is urgently needed, and its importance should not be dismissed. Given the rapid pace of defense modernization and increasing atmosphere of distrust, there is greater risk of misperceptions and misunderstanding.

The most fundamental question critical to the success of this architecture is whether regional actors can agree to a stable status quo. Unfortunately, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a devastating example of what can result from the absence of such an agreement. Further, like Russia, China and North Korea arguably perceive current system conditions as in need of revision. How confident is the People’s Republic of China, and Xi Jinping in particular, about the prospect of a peaceful reunification or absorption of Taiwan? Given the increasing proclivity of people in the Republic of China (Taiwan) to identify themselves as different from those in the People’s Republic and desire a fate different from that of Hong Kong, will Xi feel the need to upset any military balance to ensure the ability to forcefully take over Taiwan? For North Korea,

is the mere existence of South Korea a threat to Kim Jong-un's regime? How does North Korea perceive the increasing calls in South Korea and Japan for strengthening of U.S. extended deterrence, as well as advancing South Korean capabilities to counter North Korea's nuclear and WMD threat? Finally, is the United States willing to accept a modus vivendi based on mutual vulnerability and competition with China and forgo seeking military superiority or dominance? These political questions will likely dictate the extent to which an architecture can facilitate a stabilizing military balance more than the design of the architecture itself.

Should a regional security architecture seek to promote deterrence stability? If so, how?

Despite contentious political issues, a regional security architecture can undoubtedly seek and even promote deterrence stability, even if only in limited ways. First, it could facilitate exchange to make communications clearer about how actions are or will be perceived and whether they cross “redlines” that would trigger a level of response greater than expected. Deliberate ambiguity to avoid inviting challenges up to these redlines, while intended to be strategic and have deterrent effects, have in the region more often merely invited actors to explore, test, and search for these thresholds. A more inclusive regional architecture can help create bridges at least in dialogue between emerging adversarial blocs. Additionally, as states become more confident in the capabilities they are developing, they may be more open to exchanging data on significant weapons tests that could serve the dual purposes of deterrence signaling and risk reduction via greater transparency. Further, the architecture can address the increasing integration of conventional and nuclear means in the doctrines and force postures of regional actors, in addition to the increasingly interconnected nature of systems across domains, which complicate normally disaggregated approaches to deterrence—whether across domains or conventional-nuclear levels of conflict—and now introduce heightened uncertainty and instability. Relatedly, as states and their militaries increase activities in space and cyber sectors—often with differing approaches and governing principles—the regional security architecture could promote deterrence stability by fostering a common understanding, specifically of how activities in these areas are perceived as destabilizing or strategic threats. Military exercises such as the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) should be expanded to these other domains to increase transparency and exchange in ways that temper other, more provocative intelligence collection activities that only fuel greater suspicion and challenge stability.

CHAPTER 2

BROADENING THE SCOPE: SECURITY BEYOND MILITARY DOMAINS

VASILY KASHIN

Can shared interests in the region pertaining to nontraditional security challenges (including trade, food security, climate, and public health) facilitate trust-building and cooperation toward a new regional architecture? How?

Although it would be desirable to expand security cooperation beyond traditional domains, that expansion is highly unlikely at this time. In recent years, we have seen both the United States and China weaponize trade and economic interdependence as tools for coercion. The United States started a trade war against China in 2018, followed by a massive, rapidly escalating sanctions campaign against China in 2019 with clear intention to derail Chinese industrial policy and the global expansion of Chinese high-tech companies such as Huawei. China, meanwhile, conducted a large-scale sanctions campaign of its own against South Korea in 2016 and 2017 over the deployment of the American THAAD missile defense system on the Korean Peninsula. This campaign, while successful in limiting South Korean defense cooperation with the United States, has resulted in the rapid rise of anti-Chinese sentiments in South Korean society and politics. Later, in 2020 and 2021, China also carried out retaliatory measures against the United States and unleashed a sanctions campaign against Australia.

Both superpowers are engaged in economic warfare against each other and are increasingly using instruments of economic coercion against smaller countries (for example, Chinese sanctions against the Philippines and South Korea, or U.S. sanctions against North Korea and Myanmar). Smaller countries have also sought to weaponize economic interdependence, as seen in Japan's use of punitive export controls against South Korea in 2019. Although nonmilitary forms of conflict seem preferable to outright war, they can make it more difficult for parties to cooperate on traditional security issues. In this context, even cooperation on public health now looks difficult, since vaccines are being used as foreign policy tools, while Washington and Beijing continue to trade unhelpful allegations related to the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus.

In sum, the current foreign policy goal for the United States is to achieve maximum possible international isolation of China and Russia, who, in return, are boosting their cooperation to weaken and undermine U.S. influence as much as possible. These are the realities of the new cold war, which are defining today's whole international system. The ongoing military conflict between Russia and Ukraine—along with the corresponding blockade of Russia from much of the global economic system—threatens to sever U.S.-Russian diplomatic relations entirely.

Possibilities for new cooperation may reemerge if this new cold war enters a period of relative détente, like the Soviet-American relationship in the 1970s. In such a situation, environmental protection, climate change cooperation, and combating cyber crime may be promising areas for collaboration.

What are the divergences in the region today on economic matters, including trade and development? To what extent should economic considerations and a shared interest in regional development and growth be built into a new architecture?

We are at an early stage of economic fragmentation within the region, which will likely go on for much of the 2020s and result in the emergence of two blocs centered around the United States and China, with some nonaligned countries. More and more states will be forced to choose between China and the United States, in both economic and security dimensions, even if they try to avoid such a situation. While Japan is likely ultimately to end up in the U.S. camp and Russia in the Chinese one, South Korea is seen by China as a battleground country that can be influenced by Chinese economic diplomacy.

Economic considerations still play a productive role in relations between the Northeast Asian countries. However, that cooperation will be increasingly affected by Chinese and American economic practices including economic coercion, import substitution, and protection of supply chains. China, in spite of its public rhetoric in support of free trade, is turning inward with a [“dual circulation strategy”](#) aimed at prioritizing the internal drivers of economic growth. Increased productivity based on the current large-scale investment is supposed to be one such driver, while increased consumption should be the other. Both elements of this strategy depend on the success of current Chinese industrial policies, which is far from guaranteed, especially taking U.S. pressure into account.

The existing system of trade agreements and the robust economic ties between the countries of the region will make the process of decoupling and fragmentation rather slow and gradual; still, they will not change the general trend.

Which nontraditional security issues are likely to hold the most promise for fostering the broadest multilateral cooperation in the region?

Climate appears to be one of few issues on which all players are ready to cooperate. Such cooperation will have its limits, however, because of the ongoing technological war between the United States on one side and China and Russia on the other. The United States is currently trying to isolate China from sources of Western technology by limiting scientific cooperation with the Chinese, sanctioning certain high-tech exports to China, and monitoring Chinese investments into certain sectors.

China has set ambitious climate goals in its fourteenth Five-Year Plan and has shown great commitment to the restructuring of its energy sector, which contributed to its [energy crisis](#) in autumn of 2021. Chinese leaders apparently see energy sector reform as an important part of their general modernization strategy. The [agreement](#) reached by the chief climate negotiators of the United States and China, John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua, contrasts with other aspects of U.S.-China relations.

Russia is also getting increasingly serious on climate issues, which suggests this area could be a uniting platform for trilateral cooperation. Russia is currently developing green financing platforms and plans to increase its solar and wind generation as part of its long-term goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, Russia is trying to find international partners in developing the production of renewable energy equipment at home. However, the ongoing military conflict between Russia and Ukraine has completely collapsed most areas of cooperation between the United States and Russia. Despite urgency and incentives to work together on climate issues, there are likely no prospects for any kind of multilateral cooperation with Russian participation for the foreseeable future.

To what extent are competing economic interests between regional players likely to hinder efforts to establish a new architecture?

The China-U.S. economic and political conflict appears to be unreconcilable and may persist for the long term. The increasing economic isolation of Russia—by the United States, the European Union, and several Asian actors—deepens this division, leaving China as Russia's only possible major partner in the region. At the same time, there has been a separate but rapid expansion of the use of sanctions machinery by China, including Beijing's first use of secondary sanctions, which were imposed against Lithuania in late 2021 and early 2022. These trends could lead to increased economic fragmentation and exacerbate the ongoing arms race in the region; thus, they will likely be defining factors for any new architecture.

The main issue here is the incompatibility of the current Chinese economic model and the models chosen by the United States and some other developed countries. The Chinese economic model relies on large-scale public investment and subsidies of domestic high-tech industries, which are supposed to achieve dominating positions on both the domestic and global markets. Programs such as Made in China 2025 are distorting the global market and may ultimately lead to massive losses for U.S. corporations. The United States is trying to prevent this development by waging economic and technological war against China.

Chinese economic and trade policies pose a threat to other developed industrial economies as well, but to a much lesser extent. Russia does not see a major threat from Chinese expansion, being predominantly a commodities exporter with relatively small and highly specialized high-tech industries, which at some point may be included in common production chains.

South Korea and Japan are likely to be caught in the U.S.-China economic war and be subject to extensive economic pressure from one side or the other, depending on their political choices.

What role should human factors, including human rights, have in shaping a new architecture and cooperative approaches to security in the region?

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Human factors are a deeply divisive issue in the region, since the United States uses human rights issues to pressure its geopolitical adversaries, while China and Russia see any human rights agenda as a threat to their security and sovereignty. However, even in this context, there are positive examples of cooperation on some issues related to human security, specifically on law enforcement. The police and security services of regional countries continue to cooperate on combating cyber crime, human trafficking, and the illicit drugs trade. Such cooperation should be maintained and preserved to provide a starting point for future reestablishment of ties.

U.S. attempts to build a legal case regarding China's responsibility for [the genocide in Xinjiang](#) might make any human rights dialogue highly unlikely. Recreating the success of the Cold War's Helsinki Process is possible, but it would have to wait until a period of relative détente in relations between the United States, China, and Russia. Notably, in the Helsinki Accords, human rights issues were interconnected with territorial integrity and security issues. That might be impossible as long as the Taiwan issue is not resolved or deescalated.

To what extent should a new architecture seek to promote multilateral scientific and technical cooperation on common global challenges, including, but not limited to, climate change and pandemics?

A new architecture should promote such exchanges and attempt to weaken the current trend toward technological nationalism and egoism. Climate change remains the main dimension of possible cooperation. There is significant possibility of struggle over the technological standards concerning 5G and other advanced technologies, and cooperation should be aimed toward limiting the fallout from this rivalry. Notably, China and the United States, countries which are key providers of critical technology and production components for the rest of the world, and Russia, as a major provider of energy, agricultural exports, and some other critical industrial commodities, could discuss a code of conduct concerning technological and economic warfare in areas related to healthcare, climate change policies, or other relevant issues.

CHAPTER 3

CHOOSING PRIORITIES: A FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO SEQUENCING

LI NAN

Can a new security architecture help transform geopolitically tense bilateral relationships (for instance, U.S.-China, U.S.-Russia, U.S.-North Korea, South Korea-Japan, China-Japan), or can a new architecture only be realized as a result of better bilateral relations between its constituent states?

The United States and China are engaged in what could be called a new cold war. Despite the two states' long-standing diplomatic relationship, high degree of interdependence, and continued cooperation and exchanges in the economic, social, and cultural fields—even somewhat in the area of military security—they are engaged in unequivocal strategic containment of each other.

This new era of cold war thinking has contributed to increasing tension in the region, prompting fears of arms-racing behavior and possible military escalation. This competition also stifles cooperation among other powers in the region, who must carefully balance security and economic relationships with the United States and China against each other.

For progress to be made at the regional level, a resolution of larger geopolitical competition must first be reached to achieve some sort of détente between the United States and China. Major powers in Northeast Asia—the United States, China, and Russia—should abandon this new cold war and instead seek a new model of coexistence that accommodates competition while promoting cooperation in areas where it is feasible. Instead of exacerbating their strategic and ideological divergences, the United States and China should instead focus on building functional cooperation in areas that serve each country's national interest. A secondary goal of this cooperation would be to demonstrate to other countries in the region that the interaction between China and the United States does not preclude collaboration on important functional issues.

[Joe Biden's administration](#) defines the China-U.S. relationship in terms of [strategic competition](#), and it [prioritizes its alliances](#) over any relationship with China and Russia in the region. Given the cluster of bilateral alliances that exist in the region, the question inevitably arises: How will the future Northeast Asian security architecture relate to existing alliances? There are currently three bilateral alliances, namely the U.S.-South Korea alliance, the U.S.-Japan alliance, and the unofficial China-North Korea alliance, or “Traditional Friendship.” A Northeast Asian security architecture may not replace existing alliances, so the coexistence of bilateral and multilateral regimes seems a desirable option.

This raises other questions: What is the relationship between the hub-and-spoke structure and the network structure? Will there be tension between them? In order to ease tensions, the bilateral alliance must be restrained in some way to limit its potential negative impact on regional peace and security. U.S. power in Northeast Asia, however, largely relies on the U.S.-South Korea and U.S.-Japan alliances. The United States' continued buildup of military capabilities within these relationships has spread strategic distrust throughout the region. As a result, both North Korea and China are increasingly unwilling to diplomatically engage with the United States, instead preparing for confrontation with the United States in the long term. In the context of China-U.S. competition—given that the United States keeps building up its alliances through military means, even making progress on trilateral cooperation between its allies—the tension between these alliances and possible multilateral regimes will grow, leaving no space for the multilateral.

In this environment, a viable Northeast Asian security architecture will have to include the creation of new and effective rules, norms, and institutions.

What are the key ideational divergences among states in the region on sequencing? Do these differences tend to be philosophical or more practical?

There are three core divergences among states in the region. The first pertains to the new cold war and understandings of the world structure. Even though both [China](#) and the [United States](#) have publicly said that they will work to prevent a new cold war, their relations have entered a cold war–like phase, from each other's perspective, as North Korea has officially [acknowledged](#). As a U.S. ally, South Korea shares this concern about a new cold war and worries that it will be forced to choose between its security cooperation with the United States and its economic relationship with its neighbor, China.

Relatedly, a second divergence concerns the U.S. role in the region, where countries have sharply different views. From a Chinese, North Korean, and Russian perspective, the United States is trying to seek hegemonic power by building up its alliances, which is destabilizing the region. But from the South Korean and Japanese perspective, the United States has played a constructive role since the Second World War, stabilizing the region through its alliances and the spread of democracy. For North Korea, diplomacy with the United States has always been a top priority in its foreign policy, yet the United States' continued economic pressure, coupled with its increased military support for regional allies, has made any prospect of diplomacy difficult.

A third divergence concerns China's development. Where will Chinese foreign policy go as it rises? Will China become another hegemonic power or a peacebuilding partner? Will the traditional "tribute" system return to the region? Naturally, the United States and China have sharply divergent views on this.

Finally, there are sharp divides in the region concerning territorial disputes and historical issues. These issues are difficult to address because of their emotional resonance within these countries. Every state involved in a territorial or historical dispute approaches these issues without compromise, resulting in totally divergent views regionwide.

Given domestic political constraints, existing geopolitical realities, and threat perceptions in the region, what sort of sequencing is desirable and feasible?

Several principles should guide the sequencing of any regional security architecture. The most feasible way of making progress would be to start with the easiest, least politically contentious issues, build trust among actors, and gradually expand to more ambitious cooperation.

In this process, parties should maintain flexibility when it comes to sequencing. They can pursue cooperation in multiple issue areas simultaneously; there is no need to separate issues according to strict priorities. However, functional issues should take precedence over the institutional in order to advance cooperation. Institutions and norms do not need to be constructed at the outset; rather, they can emerge naturally over time, but this approach will require serious efforts to foster mutual understanding of each other's concerns and common interests.

Without great power cooperation or coordination, the likelihood of a security architecture emerging and succeeding is not high. The failure of the [Four-Party Talks](#) serves as a cautionary example. These talks, held from 1997 to 1998 between North Korea, South Korea, China, and the United States, were intended to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula and lay the basis for a formal peace agreement to end the Korean War. At the talks, the United States provided no specific road map for North Korean denuclearization, and China was reluctant to involve itself with negotiations between the two states. As a result, China and the United States were unable to find a path for cooperation on the North Korean nuclear issue, and the Four-Party Talks ended in failure.

Although it is necessary for great powers to set the tone for cooperation, it is important that other parties in the region, like the Koreans or Mongolia, play a more active role in actual cooperation at the functional level.

Based on the logic of this sequencing, what concrete steps might be attempted first and what other notional steps could follow? What issues and elements should be addressed in the near term as regional efforts toward a new architecture might proceed? Which issues should be addressed later in such process?

Policymakers should seek to address nontraditional security issues first, as they are the least politically contentious and thus the easiest on which to reach consensus for all parties.

Historically, the top-down process of hosting summit meetings has been effective for the inter-Korean relationship and the fastest way to achieve inter-Korean confidence-building. Early in the architecture building process, people-to-people exchanges, especially in the academic and artistic fields, could help to improve the emotional ties and mutual understanding between states.

As trust builds between the two Koreas, cooperation could expand to include transportation, infrastructure building, and immigration, as well as environmental governance on issues like smog, dust storms, and climate change, which inherently affect all states in the region. States could also seek cooperation on emerging technology issues, especially those aimed at improving quality of life, since these areas could be particularly attractive for North Korean involvement.

Finally, the Korean Peninsula is witnessing a serious arms buildup, and reducing the tensions associated with an arms race is a critical issue that all countries in the region should want to address. When enough trust and consensus has been built, countries can expand cooperation into more traditional areas, including militaries, arms control, territorial disputes, and historical issues.

CHAPTER 4

STRUCTURING COOPERATION: NAVIGATING EXISTING INSTITUTIONS

YUKI TATSUMI

To what extent should a new regional architecture for Northeast Asia be formally institutionalized, and what role can existing institutions in the region play to facilitate a new architecture? What sorts of bilateral, trilateral, and plurilateral arrangements can complement a new regional architecture?

Proposals for Asian architectures have often varied between prescribing formal, institutionalized means and more piecemeal, informal approaches. Despite the appeal of more structured cooperation within the region, a formal regional security arrangement in Northeast Asia is neither practical nor feasible for the time being, for several reasons. First, the region remains burdened by the legacies and historical grievances of World War II, particularly seen in Japan’s bilateral tensions with South Korea, China, and Russia. Furthermore, the region is encumbered by post–Cold War tensions as the strategic competition between the United States and China intensifies and states continue to grapple with North Korea’s nuclear ambition. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the different responses by the countries in the region—Japan and South Korea stand with the United States and Europe, while China and North Korea give at minimum tacit support for Russia—will likely have a lasting impact on the regional dynamics, including countries’ willingness to establish a security architecture in Northeast Asia. Finally, the status of Taiwan in such an institution would likely be highly sensitive, making it even more challenging for participants to agree on the terms on which a formal regional institution would be established.

For these reasons, a new regional architecture for Northeast Asia might be most appropriate if it were confined to more informal arrangements that include, but are not limited to, regular consultations across multiple levels of government, from working-level to ministerial-level. Such arrangements could also include issue-specific working groups.

Fortunately, the region has several existing frameworks that provide valuable precedents to consider and possible foundations on which to build further informal cooperation. One is the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Inaugurated in 1994, the ARF was established “to foster constructive dialogue and consultation

on political and security issues of common interest and concern” and “to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.” The ARF is led by the ASEAN chair, which rotates each year and has a permanent unit within the ASEAN secretariat that supports its management. In addition to its annual ministerial-level meeting, the ARF holds a series of regular consultations across different levels of government, as well as issue-specific study groups, workshops, and trainings [throughout the year](#). These issue-specific initiatives encompass a wide range of areas, including disaster relief, urban search and rescue, sustainable fisheries, youth and cultural exchanges, conflict resolution, confidence-building measures, and preventive diplomacy.

Another useful example is the [Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat \(TCS\)](#), which was established in September 2011 with a vision “to promote peace and common prosperity” between China, Japan, and South Korea (CJK). The TCS’s secretary general and two deputy secretaries general rotate among the three countries, and four TCS departments support the management of trilateral activities: Political Affairs, Socio-Cultural Affairs, Economic Affairs, and Management and Coordination. The TCS manages various [programs](#) that focus on facilitating people-to-people exchanges among the three countries in six broad categories—youth exchanges, media, environment, culture, economy, and smart city. The activities offered by these programs include the Young Ambassadors Program, the Trilateral Journalist Exchange Program, the GREENA Program, the Trilateral Common Vocabulary Dictionary project, and the CJK Free-Trade Agreement Seminar. While many of these initiatives were launched [within the last five years](#), some of them are older; the Young Ambassadors Program, for example, has been held annually since 2013, despite the tension among Tokyo, Beijing, and Seoul at the diplomatic level.

Finally, the Quad (the United States, Japan, Australia, and India) has recently emerged as an additional potential cooperative framework for Northeast Asia. Originally launched in 2007 as a strategic dialogue grouping at foreign ministerial level, the Quad was revitalized in 2017 after a long hiatus. During Joe Biden’s administration, the Quad has expanded beyond a framework for regular ministerial consultation, with summit meetings occurring at an accelerated pace. Moreover, the four countries have now identified [seven specific areas](#) for intensified policy coordination: responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, including vaccination production and distribution; combating climate change; promoting infrastructure; fostering educational exchanges; and partnering on initiatives addressing emerging technologies, cybersecurity, and space. In addition, similar to the ARF and the TCS, it appears that the Quad countries will rotate hosting of the summit meeting among themselves: Japan will host the [next](#) Quad Summit in 2022, followed by India in 2023 and Australia in 2024.

If formalized, what kind of rules, procedures, and memberships make most sense for a new regional architecture?

These three frameworks have a few elements in common that contribute to their success as regional institutions. One is the patience and flexibility with which they were established. None of them were born out of concerted diplomatic efforts to institutionalize cooperation among the participating countries. In the case of the ARF, even though the framework for the dialogue itself was launched in 1994, it was not until 2004 that the ARF Unit was created to support the management of various activities conducted under the auspices of the ARF. In the case of CJK cooperation, it took three years after the CJK summit was first convened for the TCS to be established. Similarly, the deepening of Quad cooperation has been built over time through consultations among the participating countries, highlighted by the first in-person Quad Summit held in Washington, DC, on September 24, 2021.

The ARF and the TCS also share the style in which their supporting organizations are managed. While their secretariats (the “unit” in the case of the ARF) are established in one of their participating countries, leadership of their secretariats rotates at a regular interval, as does the responsibility for agenda-setting. While the Quad does not yet have a secretariat-like organization, its established patterns in rotating between host countries for meetings and consultations are similar to the methods used by the ARF and CJK. In a region where any cooperation is difficult to maintain, the stability and longevity of these institutions are notable.

However, despite their successes, each institution faces serious challenges, and relying on any one of these frameworks as the foundation for a regional security architecture will not necessarily produce instant, tangible results. Specifically, all three organizations rely on consensus-based decisionmaking and agenda-setting processes, which prevents them from tackling more ambitious targets, including those that would have a direct impact on participants’ national sovereignty. For instance, the ARF has not even been able to agree on a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, let alone proactively tackle more concrete challenges related to the issue.

However, these institutions can still help foster an environment conducive to progress by building habits of cooperation and providing venues for communication among actors. For instance, the TCS has been successful in keeping the programs that are nonpolitical, such as the Young Ambassadors Program, operational despite the diplomatic tensions between Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing. The ARF, as well, has been able to convene working-level dialogues and workshops on [topics](#) such as preventive diplomacy, counterterrorism, arms control, and confidence-building.

If a regional cooperative framework in Northeast Asia is to be formalized, it makes most sense for such an organization to include all regional players—China, Japan, Mongolia, Russia, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States. The challenge for such a formal institution would be the status of Taiwan. Any new architecture in Northeast Asia would need to have buy-in from all the major players in the region to be effective. In other words, it would be best for the framework to adopt consensus-based decisionmaking and agenda-setting.

In this context, China's wary response to the Quad needs to be kept in mind. Tensions will likely continue to rise between China and Russia's "[no limits partnership](#)" on one side and the United States and its partners and allies on the other. In addition, the status of Taiwan—including whether it should be allowed to participate in the framework—could present a significant challenge. China can be expected to oppose Taiwan's participation in such an architecture in any capacity (including observer status). However, Taiwan's contribution could be important in many potential areas of cooperation—including pandemic response and disaster relief—and therefore its participation should be allowed, even if only on a case-by-case basis.

What elements of an architecture are best managed through informal arrangements, and which best lend themselves to formal institutions? Which elements would be most feasible for an architecture to address?

Given the complex regional dynamics among the key players in Northeast Asia, any architecture in the region would be most productive if the formal arrangements are kept to a minimum. For instance, the new architecture could follow the model of CJK and have a relatively lean secretariat, staffed by officials from the member countries with leadership roles rotating at agreed-upon intervals. In fact, the TCS may be a useful foundation to build on by expanding membership to include Russia, Mongolia, and North Korea, with Taiwan preferably allowed to participate as an observer. The purpose of a formalized arrangement is to ensure that all players can be represented in the institution, have equitable opportunities to hold leadership positions, and play roles in the agenda-setting and management of the institution. Importantly, this structure can help to instill in stakeholders a sense of shared responsibility, which contributes to the longevity and effectiveness of the institution over time.

The actual substantive cooperation can be either left to informal arrangements or nested within the architecture in the form of working groups or expert-level dialogues focused on the issues, building upon the ongoing cooperative arrangements that already exist. Education, people-to-people exchanges, public health, regional trade and economics, disaster relief, maritime safety, aerial and maritime accident prevention, codes of conduct in case of accidents, counter-crime (including human trafficking), and pandemic response are some of the issues that all the major players in the region can agree necessitate cooperation. While some may argue that the Quad's areas of focus—particularly on emerging technologies, cybersecurity, and space—are aimed toward countering China, one can still make an argument that they are topics of shared concern not only among the Quad countries but also in the broader international community.

The three aforementioned existing frameworks all predominantly focus on facilitating cooperation on issues that are less politically sensitive. In other words, these institutions choose to focus on the areas where there is relative consensus among participants and stay clear of trying to resolve more controversial issues, such as territorial disputes, disagreements over historical grievances, and human rights practices. The same should be the case for any architecture in Northeast Asia if it strives to be inclusive of all the major players in the region, limiting its purpose to build habits of cooperation among the countries in the region.

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