

Concluding Thoughts

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The contributors of this volume have set the stage for continued research and policy efforts to integrate conflict prevention and management into the political reality of Northeast Asia. The long-term goal of the project "Conflict Management in Northeast Asia", of which this volume is a part, is to integrate policy needs and theory development into a functional structure that can reduce tension and prevent future military conflicts. This volume has outlined some of the potential problems and opportunities, as well as the differing positions of the political entities in the region. This has been accomplished by first defining conflict prevention and management, and then by looking into a few practical attempts of how to handle and prevent conflicts. Finally, the focus has been on the individual political entities' perception of prevention and management. In his chapter, Professor Kimura pointed out that Northeast Asia is characterized by diversity, and, indeed, this diversity is mirrored in both the perceptions and usage of prevention and management measures to address conflicts. In many ways, this discrepancy complicates future undertakings in this field and a regional culture of prevention remains a rather remote goal. Indeed, additional to the multitude of ongoing older conflicts, new conflicts continue to form between the regional actors. This, in combination with the ongoing arms race, has made Northeast Asia the single most militarized region in the world today.

However, several positive factors have also been noted in the different chapters. These are factors that, on a more general level, facilitate regional integration and help bring about an understanding in Northeast Asia that prevention and management is essential to reduce tension in the region. One positive example is the successful economic integration in the region.

Despite the lack of political cooperation, and in some cases even political conflicts, between regional entities such as Korea and Taiwan, South and North Korea, Japan and China, they all trade significantly with each other. Positive development can also be seen in the field of energy cooperation. This development and the different aspects of the energy situation have been addressed by several of the authors in this volume. Extended cooperation is, however, made difficult by the political distrust between the different actors and the failure of regional multilateral organizations in Northeast Asia. In this volume, it has been suggested that both informal networks and private capital could help bridge these cleavages. However, in reality, the political will to integrate further seems to be absent. Nevertheless, the lack of consensus on how to integrate, and the political unwillingness is not decreasing the relevance of looking at the region from a management and prevention perspective. On the contrary, it increases the importance to prevent further tension, and even potentially prevent the outbreak of military conflicts (intentional as well as unintentional conflicts). Finally, it increases the importance to raise awareness of the need for preventive and management mechanisms.

Perceptions of the concepts do not only differ *between* the different political entities, but also *within* them. Indeed, sub-national actors, such as the military, political and economic entities have different understandings of these issues. The perceptions of conflict prevention and management range from structural prevention, in terms of economic cooperation and integration, to military crisis management. There are also great differences in perceptions when it comes to the relative weakness and strength of the actors in military and political issues. Actors that perceive themselves as weak tend to be more reluctant than their stronger opponents to adopt measures of cooperation, prevention and management. This is primarily based on a lack of trust and confidence between the different political entities and their leaders. Consequently, this has led to a situation in which the relative inequality in military and political power has prevented the establishment of preventive and management mechanisms. A similar tendency can be noticed regarding the relatively stronger states that see very little reasons to “give up” their positions. The economic sphere seems to function very differently from the political and has showed high levels of

informal integration between all actors regardless of position in the region. Economic cooperation is at an all-time high in the region with increased trust among the economic actors as a result. The differences between political and economic interaction could not be more pronounced and in certain way they contradict each other.

Despite the obvious stalemate when looking at regional structures dealing with conflicts, there is a large degree of optimism in the region. Most contributions to this volume have discussed ways to break the stalemate, prevent further escalation of conflicts, and increase the engagement with the opponent. Several practical suggestions on how to deal with this stalemate have been put forward. These include confidence building, cooperation within the energy sector, informal and formal cooperation, aid, measures to address different kinds of regional asymmetry, and non-proliferation. Most of these suggestions have drawbacks that have been acknowledged by the authors. It is clear that few practical attempts to extend conflict prevention and management are fully accepted by all involved regional entities. The reasons for this seem relatively straight forward when reading the different chapters in this book.

The Need for Conflict Prevention and Conflict Management

Faced with the situation presented in this book, the initiation of conflict prevention and introduction of conflict management mechanisms seem highly difficult to materialize at the political level. This gives rise to two important questions. First of all, is prevention or management at all necessary? Second, is it possible to implement? Conflict prevention is, by any standard, urgently needed in a region so militarized and with so few regional structures to handle conflicts. Most regional actors aim at preventing further military confrontations, even if this tendency is greater in the relatively weak states than in the relatively strong ones. Stronger states simply perceive the need to be less urgent as they have the political and/or military strength to withstand the smaller actor's demands. It should also be noticed that the different understanding of prevention and management is greater than the perceived need for mechanisms to deal with

military conflicts. This complicates the situation and increases the risk that the actors talk past each other.

In sum, evidently all actors in the region would like to see mechanisms installed to prevent current and future conflicts and minimize their unpredictability, especially mechanisms that assign greater power to the regional actors themselves. Sadly, it is equally apparent that the conflict lines in the region are characterized by a lack of conflict management and conflict prevention.

To create regional structures to deal with conflicts in the region would first of all require increased trust and confidence. This, in turn, could be achieved through interactive structures and positive experiences in handling disputes. The implementation of structures and building of trust goes hand in hand, even if trust seems to be more important in the initial stages. The lack of trust among the political actors is not a problem to the same extent in all contexts. For example, the business and academic settings experience much higher degrees of trust and confidence than any other sphere. This has been achieved gradually over the past 30 years and is the result of extended economic ties and increased educational exchange. Despite these positive signs, the overall political and military relations in the region are plagued with problems and a lack of cooperative structures which has impacted the mechanisms for handling conflicts negatively.

As mentioned above, the economic sector has experienced a most impressive integration. In the short-term, much can be gained by improved relations and a decreased conflict potential. First, it could decrease the military expenditure in the region. Second, it could lead to decreased transaction costs which open for increased economic interaction. On the negative side, continued tension and the lack of structures to handle conflicts will force economic actors to require a higher security premium. They are also forced to operate below their full economic potential which is limiting the prospects for economic gains. In addition, a conflict in the region would be devastating for regional as well as international trade. It is thus financially unsustainable (both short and long term) to accept this high conflict intensity and the absence of cooperative or management structures to mitigate conflicts.

The intraregional economic integration is well developed, as is Northeast Asia's economic integration into the world economy at large. This has been made explicit in the chapters written by Professor Hong and professors Zha, Itoh and Ivanov. They illustrate that the energy sector can provide effective tools to prevent and deal with conflicts, but also that it can give rise to conflicts and, potentially, militarized violence. Moreover, the chapters written by Ambassador Kiesow and professors Yao, Lee, Ding and Kimura note the high levels of interconnectedness between the actors, regardless of conflict lines.

Regional military security is made more complicated by the current arms race that threatens to decrease the relative openness between the actors. In a region of distrust, less economic, military and political transparency can be perceived as an asset. In the military field, this is illustrated by the reluctance to cooperate and increase openness regarding exercises and military capability. This is a direct reason for continued conflict, decreased trust and increased tension in the region. As has been noted in the various chapters, the realist mind frame of the Northeast Asian leaders manifest itself in a reluctance to disarm or even decrease military pressure on their opponents. The lack of trust and political will to compromise and the urgently needed structures to handle military problems illustrate the necessity to continue the work in this specific field.

Politically there is a growing and direct need to decrease the mistrust and tension since without improved political relations it is only possible to further improve relations in other fields marginally. Much of the increased tension in the region is directly related to the political field and the subsequent failure to compromise and create cooperative structures. In addition, the political relations also seem to be the most difficult relations to improve, although not impossible. Nevertheless, the improvement of the political climate should be given highest priority since it would lead to improved relations in virtually all other sectors. So far, nothing clearly indicates that the opposite holds true, i.e. that economic integrations leads to improved political relations.

In many cases, the political establishment is, through restrictions on contacts and limitations on implementation of practical measures, directly

obstructing further prevention or management measures despite a direct need within the economic and military establishments.

At an individual level there is a need to improve the relations in all above mentioned areas and several more as tension increases military costs, decreases economic development and creates and insecurity that directly affects the individual citizens. If the ongoing conflicts continue, they risk becoming militarized which would have devastating effects on the economic sector, or even making it collapse. It could potentially lead to large scale conventional battles, or even the use of nuclear weapons, at extreme social costs.

Globalization, regionalization and interdependence have made it crucial for all actors to work together in an effort to stabilize the region. If this fails, the military, economic as well as political security will be affected. Without cooperation in the region, the instability will be prolific, the economic development will decrease, and the social tension may grow in some states. It becomes more and more apparent, even for the most isolationist state that no state can continue to prosper and increase its national security without international interaction, integration, and the creation of effective conflict prevention and management mechanisms. Northeast Asia has increasingly become integrated into the international arena, but much needs to be done in terms of integration *within* the region. This has to be improved if security is to be maintained in Northeast Asia. However, there is a much to be done before this can be accomplished and at the current stage there is not even a clear agreement of the concepts involved.

The Concepts

Traditionally, conflict prevention has by many practitioners been interpreted in military terms, i.e. as crisis management and preventive strikes and limited resources have been invested in structural prevention like regional cooperation and economic and political integration. This has changed and today there is a growing consensus regarding the need for prevention and management mechanisms, both in the economic and military fields. Despite the differences in interpretation, there is a shared basic understanding of the concepts. The common understanding focuses on

the need for early deployment of mechanisms to deal with potentially militarized disputes to reduce economic and social costs and CBMs.

Prevention and management has often been regarded as two different strategies. However, the situation in Northeast Asia clearly illustrates that conflict prevention and management, in fact, is different sides of the same coin and in many cases inseparable. One example is cases where the ongoing conflict is contained and dealt with through bilateral or multilateral frameworks. At the same time as the ongoing conflict is managed, it is essential to prevent further conflicts from erupting and tension to increase between the parties. The division of a conflict process into core issues and minor issues makes sense as measures should be designed to address specific problems. Issues that need more work could be left outside the process. Certain conflicting issues could be prevented from escalating in the first place and others could simultaneously be managed. It seems evident that the current division of concepts is artificial and in many cases even problematic. It is also clear that the concepts need to be more integrative and inclusive. New aspects, such as informal mechanisms need to be included. The discussion on the different processes within governmental and other initiatives also needs to improve, especially as the distinction often is unclear.

Moreover, as have been mentioned, Northeast Asia suffers from the lack of regional structures that could deal with military conflicts. The region has emerged as one of the few regions without any regional structures for regional interaction. ASEAN+3 was created to reduce this deficiency, but few concrete results have been seen. Moreover, ASEAN+3 is a trans-regional organization rather than a regional. This lack of regional structures is, at large, due to the distrust between the different actors and the limited political will to interact in multilateral forums. The regional states have been reluctant to implement formal regional structures and there is a need to create mechanisms that could deal with conflicts, both informally and formally without necessarily solving them. This not least as many conflicts in the region are perceived as impossible to solve due to internal as well as regional reasons. Many actors are primarily interested in containing a conflict without making any *visible* concessions. The informal structures are

highly needed in regions where trust is low and animosity fierce, just like in Northeast Asia.

On the positive side, the stalemate has created a window of opportunity for a collaborative effort to further develop the concepts of prevention and management in the region. This is especially true since there are positive signs both in the academic and the economic sector that cooperation is the future trend, despite the lack of political trust and official tension. Prevention and management has increasingly been accepted as vital tools for foreign and internal policy development, even if the concepts still are relatively underdeveloped in the policy sphere. However, this is not only a problem for Northeast Asia, but for the world in general.

Northeast Asia's CP and CM Mechanisms

The situation in Northeast Asia clearly illustrates an urgent need for conflict management and prevention. However, regional cooperation is limited and there are few mechanisms to deal with conflicts, such as the economic dispute resolution system that works satisfactorily in most states but is based on international standards, among others WTO. Multilateral structures that could deal with political and military security are, in essence, non-existent even outside formal cooperation. Despite an increasing need and innovative suggestions from regional scholars and policy people, there is little hope that the governments will implement such structures without a prior crisis. It has been noted in many of the chapters that further mechanisms are needed if militarized conflicts are to be contained in the future.

As noted by some authors, the formal mechanisms are limited and the informal structures that exist within these mechanisms have been far more effective than the formal resolution mechanisms in for example ASEAN and possibly its extension ASEAN+3. In many conflicts, it is evident that the focus has to be moved from resolving the conflict at all costs, to managing and preventing an escalation of the conflict. Such an approach is needed to reduce tension, save face and increase cooperation between the actors in Northeast Asia. The goal would be much more modest, but far more reachable in a conflict with such a high level tension. This shift of

focus can be accomplished by increasing contacts at the informal level, either by contacts at the academic level or between officials in their private capacity. These contacts have to be made outside the official room since the intra-state political situation often places constraints on the actors. The drawback to this is that it does not bring about any rapid improvements. Rather, the improvements will take the form of slow structural changes that do not necessarily threaten any individuals or states.

Despite the multitude of potential conflicts presented in the book, there are no early warning systems in place in the region that could raise awareness of a potential dispute at an early stage. The lack of such mechanisms forces the actors to engage in crisis management, a mechanism that is both costly and insecure. Regional early warning systems that integrate all involved political entities would not only increase security in the region, but also increase trust, cooperation and openness in Northeast Asia. In addition, the actors do not have access to accurate information about potential adversaries and decisions are often based on perceptions of the opponent – perceptions that can be subject to gross misinterpretations. Transparency, even regarding the most basic political and military interaction, is limited. When it exists, it is often a calculated strategy to increase ambiguity and thereby the opponent's cost of political and military action.

Regional Challenges to the Implementation of CP and CM

The security situation in Northeast Asia is further complicated by a history of animosity and a highly threatening arms race sugared with economic concerns despite the existing cooperation. Most governments have, on top of this, been supporting nationalism and campaigns against “national enemies”. Examples include the state-sponsored anti-Japanese campaigns in the other Northeast Asian states. As a result, the general public in these states are, in many cases, more nationalistic and less inclined to compromise than their governing bodies. This is evident in both China and South Korea where the population often has a more negative and aggressive attitude towards Japan than their respective government. This has made compromises a political minefield and partly explains why the national governments have been reluctant to compromise in intra-state and

“secessionist” conflicts. Moreover, the need to save face is important for all these states, even if it should not be exaggerated, something which calls for solutions where all involved are perceived as winners.

This has made prevention and management difficult, and in some case almost impossible to materialize. Although the core issues of the conflict will have to be addressed at some stage, confidence building and cooperation in non-politicized issues are of great interest initially. What is needed, apart from a common language regarding conflict prevention and management, is a change of perception and focus of the governments and officials in the region. A more holistic approach to conflict prevention should be adopted according to which conflicts are seen in a wider perspective. These basic changes are needed if the implementation of these measures is to be successful.

The time aspect of the undertaken measures also needs to change. There needs to be a move from the relatively short crisis perspective where time is lacking and decisions are taken under duress and with limited resources, to an earlier stage where conflicts can be prevented structurally or managed with peaceful means. This is not to say that structural and direct prevention will be sufficient in all situations, crisis management will always be necessary. However, the focus of Northeast Asia should be on the early stages where intervention is less costly, both politically and financially. Crisis management is, in many ways, an old fashioned strategy that rejects structural and direct prevention and disregard economic and political means as tools when dealing with conflicts. One of the results of this volume is the identification of non-military tools in preventing and managing conflicts. It is thus apparent that a wider definition of conflict management and prevention does, in fact, already exist in the region. This definition is continuously strengthened in the economic sector and to a certain extent informally between political and military actors.

Actual management and prevention is not possible without a toolbox of strategies and mechanisms. The skills to utilize and implement such a toolbox need to be taught and distributed to all levels of the political and military establishment. In this regard, it is not enough, by far, to adopt the already existing theories of conflict management and prevention – theories that, at large, are designed following a Western interpretation of how

conflicts should be dealt with. In regard to Northeast Asia, the cooperative structures at a regional level need to be taken into consideration, as well as how political or economic organizations can bring about increased cooperation. One suggestion is to establish an Asian Oil and Gas Union that could oversee energy issues and not only make interaction more effective but also increase trust between the different actors. In the regional setting, there is a need to look closer on how informality and consensus works, especially since these aspects are not prioritized in the current research and since they tend to differ from region to region and, in most cases, even from state to state. The greatest difference between the Western and Eastern conflict management and prevention systems can be seen in their respective view on what is to be accomplished. The approaches to medicine can serve as an example in this regard as was noted by one of the participants. Western medicine attempts to cure the disease, whereas the Eastern medicine attempts to restore balance by structural means without directly addressing the illness itself. Following this, the first approach tends to define conflicts individually and design solutions to each and every one of them. The second approach looks more to the structural problem and views the problem at hand as one of many resulting from imbalance. According to the first approach, there is one illness and one cure, which can be traced back to the very legalistic perspective adhered to by the West, according to which we strive to know who is guilty and who is innocent. The second approach is less concerned with the guilt of individual actors and more with how it affects the balance of the individual (region). Strategies are not designed to resolve this very imbalance, but to restore the order in the body (region) at large. Designs of this kind are able to function at the informal level and leave out the legalistic aim of defining the guilty and not guilty actors. Consequently, Northeast Asia would be very well positioned, from an intellectual perspective, to implement structural prevention.

When it comes to regional organizations in Northeast Asia, they have proved particularly ineffective in creating preventive or management mechanisms, or even trust. The six-party talks on the Korean Peninsula, for example, have in many ways decreased trust and confidence. ASEAN+3, on the other hand, is a promising initiative but is still relatively new and untested. In addition, there are several smaller organizations that have

proved interesting, but the involved states have not yet shown political will to build on these. Therefore, these organizations have been kept outside the political processes.

There is, without doubt, a need to increase and incorporate more actors in this traditionally state-centered region. Actors such as NGOs and IOs could serve as a well needed complement to the GOs that currently dominate the scene. Further actors are not only needed to bring in new ideas, but also, and more importantly, to broaden the contact space and create possibilities for informal work outside of the public eye.

The Way Forward

There are several important challenges that need to be addressed in future research on Northeast Asia. The first is to establish a regional toolbox and regional mechanisms to deal with conflicts. Such tools are non-existent today and, in addition, the existing regional structures such as the ASEAN+3 and the six-party talks have so far had limited success. This is, at least partially, due to the fact that they are both dominated by external actors. The creation of different kinds of regional structures is a first step towards integration. The economic cooperation has paved the way for Northeast Asia and now the political and social spheres have to take up the challenge and work for deeper integration. However, this can not be accomplished without addressing many of the historical and security issues that all states, to varying degrees, feel strongly about, as well as the political inability to bridge these and other differences. Such issues need also to be acknowledged by any theoretical framework targeting Northeast Asia.

The evolution of a regional framework and its impact on conflict prevention and management is fundamental. As mentioned above, there are very few promising organizations that could constitute the fundament of this, but regionalism and regionalization is needed if a more peaceful environment is to be created. Trade has shown to be the single most integrative form of interaction in Northeast Asia and this is where new structures first could be initiated and then spread to other sectors. ASEAN+3 has emerged as a potential candidate for this task. If the organization will limit its activities

to economics or if it will start act politically, either informally "a la ASEAN" or formally, still remains to be seen.

Since the volume has focused on the maybe most pressing problems in the region, i.e. the political status of Taiwan and the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula, it is difficult to point to any real achievements in this regard. Due to the devastatingly low levels of trust in the region, progress is limited and will take time. The maneuverability has been restricted due to the weight of the conflicts and the highly formal attempts to deal with them. A new view of conflict prevention and conflict management is needed, one that separates between core issues and less important issues – issues that can either decrease or increase tension in the overarching conflict. Focus needs to be moved from the core issues to issues that can be prevented, managed and possibly even resolved. This would create trust between the different actors in the region and increase the likelihood that the core issues could be resolved or managed in the future.

At this stage, the low levels of trust in the region undermine any attempts of creating a culture of prevention in Northeast Asia. This can be reversed by increasing informal contacts, focusing on "easier" and smaller problems, and advocating cooperation in fields of common interest, such as energy. Several positive steps have been taken in the region, but many issues of more devastating character still remain. What is needed is a change in the political establishment and increased willingness to compromise over issues for the good of the region and each individual political entity. This has partly been accomplished through several informal, and increasingly formal, settings of which this project is but a small piece that hopefully will contribute to a regional culture of prevention and thereby a more peaceful Northeast Asia.