

Conflict Prevention and Conflict Management in Northeast Asia

Conference Report

Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and the
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Beijing, China, November 26-28, 2004

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Introduction

This conference was organized by the Program for Silk Road Studies at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University as a part of the project on Conflict Management in Northeast Asia, initiated in January 2003. Through its research, the project aims to bridge the gap between academics and policy makers on issues of conflict prevention and conflict management, and at the same time develop findings customized for the region under investigation. At the core of this project is the ambition to facilitate cooperation on issues of conflict prevention and conflict management; to make knowledge and results readily available and suited for implementation; and to assist in the development of a culture of prevention in Northeast Asia.

The first stage of the Conflict Management in Northeast Asia project will be completed in December 2005, and the conference serves as a forum for discussing the direction of the continued collaborative research project as well as the expansion of the research network. The conference was made possible through sponsorship from the Asia Foundation, the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, the Folke Bernadotte Academy and the Swedish Research Council.

- The conference was organized as part of the project on Conflict Management in Northeast Asia.

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The Purpose of the Conference

The conference had three main aims. First, participants presented articles and shared the knowledge gained in their research. This was part of the collaborative effort of constructing a theoretical and empirical framework for the development of conflict prevention and management focusing on the regional context. Second, the conference served as a forum for discussing and planning an expansion of the ongoing research collaboration with researchers from China and Taiwan. The future collaboration will include additional members from Northeast Asia, such as Japan, North Korea and South Korea, and the United States. Third, and linked to the expanding collaboration, discussions on the initiation of a new project focusing on the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Straits took place. The idea to initiate a new project that utilizes the methodological and theoretical findings from the current project in order to concretize tools for conflict prevention and management for the region has surfaced during the course of the Conflict Management Project.

In addition to this conference report, the output of the conference is available as a joint volume focusing on the development of the theoretical understanding of conflict prevention and management with regard to Northeast Asia, as well as on the practical implementation of these theories. The inclusion of regional participants in the theory development ensures that their perspectives are given a prominent role. The local participation in the research process is thereby guaranteed, which maximizes the possibility for successful implementation in the region.

- The three aims of the conference were:

- To construct a framework for conflict prevention and management in Northeast Asia

- To discuss the expansion of the ongoing research collaboration

- To initiate a new project focusing on the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan Strait.

- The output of the conference is available as an edited volume.

The joint volume has three parts. The first outlines the theoretical framework; the second presents the regional perspectives; and the third looks at the integration of theoretical and empirical aspects of conflict prevention and management in Northeast Asia.

Outline of Proceeding

The conference followed the same logic as the edited volume described above. Hence the proceedings begin with two sections discussing the theoretical and practical aspects of conflict management and conflict prevention. Thereafter, regional perspectives on conflict management and prevention are discussed. The fourth section addresses future collaboration and research direction as discussed during the conference. The actual presentations are not reviewed in this proceeding. They have been reworked into chapters and are included in the edited volume. This volume is available on the Program's home page www.silkroadstudies.org.

Theoretical approaches to conflict prevention and conflict management

Purpose of the session

In order to base coming discussions on a theoretical framework, the conference begun with three presentations that provided an outline of the status of contemporary research within the field of conflict management and conflict prevention. The presentations focused both on generic theoretical frameworks, as well as models targeting issues in Northeast Asia. The purpose of these initial presentations was to provide the participants with a foundation on which the discussions and comparisons of conflict prevention and management in Northeast Asia could rest.

- The edited volume outlines the theoretical framework; presents the regional perspectives; and investigates the regional integration of theory and practice.

- The proceeding has the same structure as the edited volume.

- The conference papers have been reworked for the edited volume.

- The first three presentations outlined the status of contemporary research on conflict management and prevention.

Content of Discussion

The participants pointed out that prevention is taking place at early stages of the conflict cycle and that it is more cost-efficient than actions taken later on. The cost argument was followed by a suggestion that prevention should continue throughout the whole conflict process to prevent aspects of the conflict from escalating. It was also generally agreed that conflict prevention is more important than conflict management. This is, at least partially, due to the catastrophic consequences outbreak of violence in the Korean peninsula or across the Taiwan Strait would have. On the Korean peninsula, such a scenario would possibly lead to regional nuclear proliferation, as well as great regional chaos.

In the Taiwan Strait, outbreak of violence would undermine the economic development not only on the Mainland and in Taiwan, but in the region as a whole and possible even beyond. It could also trigger a conflict between China and the US, which would be devastating all states in the region. Consequently, conflict prevention is, at least in theory, the rational strategic choice and preventive diplomacy has an important and effective role to play.

It was also suggested that conflict prevention is, in fact, not about preventing a conflict, but about managing, change and channeling conflicts into peaceful procedures. Thus, it has more to do with preventing the outbreak of violence.

The discussion on theory also contained debates regarding definitions of key concepts and terminology. Below follows the concepts that entered the discussion:

- The discussion evolved around the benefits of prevention as compared to later actions.
- Conflict prevention was argued to be more important than conflict management, both in Korea and across the Taiwan Strait.
- It was suggested that conflict prevention is about managing, changing, and channeling conflicts into peaceful procedures.
- The discussion on theory included the definition of key concepts.

Definition of crisis, conflict and dispute

The main focus of the discussion was on the definition of “conflict”, “crisis” and “dispute”. The discussion circled around what the differences between the three terms are and how they should be defined. The question was raised whether the participants should agree on one specific definition for the purpose of the conference. Yet it was agreed that the conference had other aims and that such an undertaking, although useful, would undermine that purpose of the conference. However, the importance of at least a working consensus on key definitions is needed in the future to facilitate the continued collaborative research project.

As follows, it was decided that a workshop with the purpose of exploring the possibilities and hopefully reaching working consensus should be arranged. A preliminary decision was taken to hold the workshop in Uppsala, Sweden in spring 2005. In awaiting the outcome of the planned workshop the participants agreed to use broader, more inclusive, definitions of conflict, crisis and disputes.

Preventive Diplomacy

The concept of preventive diplomacy was also discussed in relation to the session on theory. The imagery of preventive diplomacy as preventive medicine was put forward and made applicable to states as well as individuals. It was noted that for China, preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention are new concepts and new theories. For instance, Renmin University’s School of International Studies in Beijing is the only university in China, which has offered a course on “conflict prevention and conflict management”, and this was done in cooperation with Dr. Swanström and the Silk Road Studies Program.

- It proved difficult to agree on a working definition of "conflict", "crisis", and "dispute".

- It was decided that the terminology issue should be further discussed at a workshop, in Sweden in 2005.

- It was noted that concepts like preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention are rather new to the research community in China.

Even though being a new area, Chinese scholars have done a substantial amount of research on the topic. In Chinese research, preventive diplomacy refers to diplomacy used to prevent conflicts between nations and states, while conflict prevention is used as a wider concept.

Conclusion

With regard to the definition of key concepts and terms relating to conflict management and conflict prevention, it was decided that a workshop should be organized aiming at obtaining a working consensus on these definitions.

Practical approaches to conflict prevention and conflict management

Purpose of the session

The focus of this session was three specific approaches and issues within which practical measures of conflict prevention and conflict management can be utilized. The following three approaches were presented and discussed: regional cooperation, informal networks and energy security.

Content of Discussion

Following the presentations, the discussion focused on issues considered to be preconditions for measures of conflict prevention and management. In addition, specific regional characteristics that potentially could influence methods of conflict prevention and management were discussed.

Regional Co-operation

There was a consensus among the participants that increased cooperation is needed in the Northeast Asian region.

- In Chinese research, preventive diplomacy refers to diplomacy used to prevent interstate conflict, while conflict prevention is used in a wider fashion.

- The second session looked at the utilization of conflict prevention within regional cooperation, informal networks and energy security.

- The discussion evolved around the necessary preconditions for conflict prevention and management.

Trust and co-operation

During the discussion, the relationship between trust and cooperation was highlighted. The relationship between the two components was described as dialectic where trust can be seen as necessary for cooperation, yet where cooperation can be seen as creating trust. It was established that trust is difficult to quantify and that the issue of trust is further complicated by the fact that people (and states) always are preparing for an unknown/uncertain future. In the discussions, Sino-Japan relations were taken as an example to illustrate the relationship between trust and cooperation. In the aftermath of the Second World War, trust between China and Japan was virtually non-existent. After a long time period of cooperation on economic and cultural issues, trust between the two countries increased.

It was also pointed out that trust building could be used in the initial phases of a relationship and at the beginning of the cooperation. Thereafter, further cooperation could be promoted by confidence building measures. It was also argued that common values promote trust and that the development of such common values may foster cooperation.

Asian core values

Following this reasoning, it was argued that Asian “core values” differ significantly from such values in the West. Nationalism, which is considered a core value in China, was used as an example in this regard. However, it was also noted that there sometimes is a major discrepancy between how the general public and the government/leadership define core values. This, it was argued, was especially noticeable in China.

- The discussants agreed that more cooperation is needed in Northeast Asia.

- The relationship between trust and cooperation was described as dialectic.

- Sino-Japanese relations in the post-WWII era were used to illustrate the linkage between trust and cooperation.

- It was also argued that common values promote trust.

- It was argued that core values differ significantly in Asia and the West.

Conclusion

- Although the exact relationship between trust and co-operation was not established, the mutual reinforcing and interlinking character of the relationship was recognized.
 - The regional characteristics regarding core values were also recognized as well as their impact on measures of conflict prevention and management.
 - The subjectivity of morality was recognized and the need for a common regional understanding of morality was advocated.
- In order to develop a common understanding of key concepts, different regional perceptions of conflict prevention were discussed.

Regional perspectives on conflict prevention and conflict management

Purpose of the session

This session allowed the participants to explore and discuss the different views and perceptions of conflict management and conflict prevention. This is seen as an important step towards the development of a common understanding of the concepts and, over the longer term, the development of conflict management and prevention measures applicable to the region. Presentations were given by representatives from all political entities in the region, the United States and the European Union.

Content of Discussion

To a large extent, the discussions circled around what was identified as the two most critical issues in the region – the Taiwan Strait and the Korean peninsula. The issue of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the problematic Sino-Japanese relationship was also mentioned but did not constitute the main focus of the discussion. Despite falling outside the main topics of

- The discussions focused on the region's two most pressing issues: the Taiwan Strait and the Korean peninsula.

- The importance of Sino-Japanese relations was also acknowledged, as was the dispute in the South China Sea.

discussions, the importance of Sino-Japanese relations is not to be underestimated and will have to be addressed at future conferences. Equally important is the case of the South China Sea, which was excluded due to the conference's strict regional focus on Northeast Asia.

The Cross-Strait Issue

During this discussion, the participants emphasized the 1992 Hong Kong dialogue. Participants emphasized that the dialogue between the Chinese Communist Party and the present Taiwanese government differ significantly from the dialogue that Beijing had with the former Kuomintang government on Taiwan. The former Kuomintang government accepted the validity of the “one-China” principle over the long term, although its definition of this principle was not identical with the interpretation made by leaders on the Mainland. This is to be contrasted with the position of the current Taiwanese government, which does not accept the concept of “one-China” at all. Some of the conference participants argued that around 1992, the two sides had achieved a verbal agreement about the definition of “one-China”, but that this consensus now has been replaced by a divide between the two parties.

The participants disagreed on whether multilateral mechanisms were suitable or not to resolve the Taiwan issue. By some of the participants the EU was suggested as a model to deal with the issue, while others argued that multilateral mechanisms, including the EU model, were not suitable for the specific issue. It was suggested that Taiwan needs to obtain some space in the international arena, although the views were divided as to what this would constitute. Here it was noted that both pro-independence and

- In the discussions on the Taiwan Strait, the 1992 Hong Kong dialogue and the "one China" principle was emphasized.

- The participants disagreed on the suitability of multilateral mechanisms to resolve the Taiwan Strait issue.

- The participants agreed that a peaceful solution needs to be found to the nuclear crisis in Korea and the related energy supply issue.

pro-unification scholars in Taiwan share the feeling that Beijing's policy does not give any space for Taiwan.

The Korean Peninsula

The participants shared the view that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) needs to find a peaceful way to resolve the current nuclear crisis, as well as the related energy supply issue. There was also an agreement among the participants that the DPRK's position needs to be comprehended if the nuclear crisis is to be resolved. Many participants believed that a dialogue can be effective most of times. It was noted that the DPRK cancelled the Six-Party talks in order to await another opportunity, but that this does not equal an abandonment of the strivings to find a peaceful solution to the crisis.

The government of the Republic of Korea (ROK) has softened its policy towards the DPRK in order to let DPRK freeze its nuclear project. Such an approach is adopted despite the fact that the DPRK poses a military threat to the ROK and could, in theory, launch a surprise attack against South Korea, including a bombing of Seoul. It was said that the ROK government's softened policy is an attempt to persuade Pyongyang to freeze its nuclear plan and go back to the track of negotiation. However, even if negotiations resume, the manoeuvrability of the South Koreans is restricted due to the involvement of the United States. Indeed, it is difficult to find a balance between the interests of South Korea and the United States.

- ROK's softened policy was seen as an attempt to persuade the DPRK to abandon its nuclear program and return to negotiations.

- The manoeuvrability of the South is limited due to US involvement on the peninsula.

Collaboration and Future of Research

Purpose of the session

In addition to sharing research findings and discussing the issues of conflict prevention and conflict management, the conference also had the purpose of outlining future cooperation within the project. Questions regarding the structure of future activities and the direction of research were raised for discussion.

Content of Discussion

Participants agreed on the importance of continuity and regularity of research activities and it was decided that the project should organize regular conferences and workshops within the subject area. One annual conference followed by one workshop was seen as an agreeable structure by all participants. From the discussion, it was deduced that the participants want the conferences to be rather theoretical in focus. The workshops, on the other hand, will provide time to reflect upon the practical implications of the issues discussed at the annual conferences. A workshop, that would address key concepts and definition, was planned for spring 2005 in Uppsala. This workshop would also serve as a forum for taking more detailed decisions regarding the next-coming conference and workshop. During the discussion, the participants suggested new topics that could be addressed at future conferences and workshops. These suggestions will be taken into consideration when designing the project's coming Five-Year Plan.

- Another purpose of the conference was to outline future cooperation within the project.

- One annual conference followed by one workshop was seen as an agreeable structure.

- The conferences should have a theoretical approach whereas the workshops should be more reflective activities.

It was also decided that a Steering Committee should be formed, consisting of one participant from each partner country (China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, United States, Sweden). The participants also agreed that North Korea should be included in the project and ways of doing so will be explored.

Concerning the research, it has so far resulted in the development and implementation of conflict management and prevention tools customized for the region. This included the development of a curriculum for a course on conflict prevention and conflict management that was tested in China in the autumn of 2004 and will be finalized in 2005. It was suggested that this course should be taught at universities in all partner countries and ways for making this possible will be further investigated.

The continued research and the new project(s) will benefit from, and build on, these findings and the discussions from the conference. In the future, the emphasis on interaction between regional academics and practitioners from the political and military elite will continue and the findings from coming projects will have great disseminating effect and contribute directly to the decision making process within policy circles. This said, the conference has revealed a need for more in-depth theoretical research on conflict prevention, management and resolution in Northeast Asia, including the problems related to lack of consensus in the terminology which is the starting point of all research.

- A workshop was planned for 2005 and a steering committee was formed.

- The research has so far resulted in the development of conflict management tools for Northeast Asia.

- This includes a curriculum for a university course on conflict prevention and management tested in China in 2004.

- The emphasis on interaction between academics and practitioners will continue.

Conclusion

- the project should aim at holding annual conferences.
 - the project should aim at holding two workshops per year and these should address the practical aspects of the issues discussed at the conferences.
 - the project's research should safeguard accumulated knowledge and maintain continuity.
 - the project should continue to bridge between academics and practitioners
 - the project should actively seek to disseminate its research findings in various settings.
- The conference has revealed a need for more theoretical research on conflict prevention, management and resolution in Northeast Asia.
 - The project should safeguard accumulated knowledge and actively seek to disseminate its research findings in various settings.

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