

Conference report: 6th NEAR International Forum 2014

This report was written by Dr. Bernhard Seliger, Representative of Hanns-Seidel Foundation in Korea

Under the motto "One Northeast Asia Region, One Community", around 150 delegates and participants met on August 27-29 in Khabarovsk in the Russian Far East to discuss the challenges and opportunities for regional governments, convened by the Association of Northeast Asia Regional Governments (NEAR). NEAR is a regional cooperative organization composed of regional government (states, provinces, prefectures, aimags, and metropolitan cities) from the People's Republic of China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, DPR Korea, Mongolia and the Russian Federation. Since its founding in 1996, NEAR has been joined by 71 regional governments from these countries, encompassing 446 million people and a regional GDP of 2.9 trillion USD.

In the 6th NEAR International Forum 2014 in Khabarovsk, Dr. Bernhard Seliger, representative of Hanns-Seidel-Foundation in Korea, talked in the session on environmental cooperation about the opportunities of environmental cooperation in the "Golden Triangle" between China, Russia and Korea, in particularly with regard to the protection of migratory birds at the Tumen river estuary and the potential of eco-tourism in the region.

While today the region encompassing NEAR it too big for one-size-fits-all solutions, the greater cooperation and the sharing of information and networking allowed by NEAR events is more important than ever, in a world where regional tensions are unresolved and sometimes erupting into smaller or larger crisis. The 6th NEAR International Forum was an ideal place to achieve these challenging tasks.

Opening session of the NEAR 6th International Forum

In the opening session Kim Jae-Hyo, Secretary-General of NEAR, took the opportunity to compare Northeast Asian and European integration approaches. While Northeast Asia was still institutionally weak, by now it has a dense network of more than 1050 bilateral regional agreements. Congratulatory remarks by Alexander Borisovich Levintal, First Deputy Chairman of Khabarovsk Government as well as Lee In-Seon, Vice Governor of Gyeongsangbukdo and Cho Jin-Lae, Vice Governor of Gyeongsangnamdo, followed. Chung Tae-Ik, President of the Korea Council on Foreign Relations and former South Korean Ambassador to Russia, spoke of the importance of more (sub-)regional cooperation in the wake of international crises like the Russian occupation of Crimea and the crisis in the Middle East. In particular, tripartite cooperation between China, Russia and DPRK, but also potentially North and South Korea and Russia (on energy and logistics, i.e. the pipeline and railway projects) could defuse international tension and achieve closer cooperation. Finally, Michelle Sabban, president of R20 Regions of Climate Action, talked about the potential of the green economy for local and regional sustainable growth. R20 Regions of Climate Action, a network at the regional level, concluded an MoU with NEAR.

Session I of the NEAR 6th International Forum: Unity between Eurasia and Northeast Asia Region

The first session of the conference dealt with the linkages in Northeast Asia and beyond, in particular through logistics networks in Eurasia. It was chaired by Alexander Borisovich

Levintal, First Deputy Chairman of Khabarovsk Government for Economic Affairs. Sung Weon-yong, professor of Northeast Asian Economics at Incheon National University, Korea, talked about the new Korean "North policy" and "Eurasian policy". The New North Policy (NNP) differs from its predecessors in reaching beyond North Korea alone and encompasses a spatial concept for the whole region. Dorj Shurkhuu, Director fo the Institute of International Studies at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, expressed Mongolian support for the Eurasian policy. He highlighted the recent and upcoming visits of the Russian and Chinese presidents to Mongolia, showing the importance of Mongolia in this concept. Xu Chun-Long, Deputy Director of Dongning Huaxin Industry and Trade Ltd., Heilongjiang Province in China, looked at the long history of agricultural cooperation between Russia and China, in particular Heilongjiang Province. Imamura Hiroko, Director fo the Center for Far Eastern Studies of the University of Toyama in Japan, pointed out the many different ongoing integration processes in the region, including the Eurasian initiative of Russia (looking to some extent like a Soviet revival), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN-China relations and various initiatives in Northeast Asia. Victor Kalashnikov, Deputy Chairman of Khabarovsk Krai government, while acknowledging the importance of the South Korean New North Policy, also saw it still in an infant and largely rhetoric stage. He pointed out that from the Russian side, in particular the Far Eastern region, several important and potentially complementary initiatives have been issued in the last twenty years.

Session II of the NEAR 6th International Forum: Seeking for New Growth Engine in the Region; Sub-region of Pan-East Sea/ Sea of Japan

Pavel Minakir, Director of the Economic Research Institute of the Far Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, chaired the second session, which dealt in particular with economic prospects of cooperation in Northeast Asia. Wu Hao, Vice Director of the Northeast Asian Studies Academy of Jilin University in China, reviewed the success of the development of the Chinese Northeastern regions and their external economic relations through the so-called Changchung-Jilin-Tumen (Chang-Ji-Tu) development plan, which combined infrastructure development and economic opening. While being potentially the core of a greater Pan-East Sea (Sea of Japan) region, it also faces many political hurdles. Mimura Mitsuhiro, Senior Research Fellow at the Economic Research Institute for Northeast Asia, Niigata, Japan, a renowned expert on the North Korean and Northeast Asian economy, called on the regional governments to improve central governments' policies with their regional knowledge regarding infrastructure, customs problems etc. Prof. Won Dong-wook from the College of International Studies of Dong-A University in Busan, South Korea, worried about the effects of closer North Korea - China and North Korea-Russia cooperation on the prospects for Korean unification and called on the South Korean government to create a framework, in which economic cooperation with third parties is seen as a potential for future joint cooperation. Jamiyan Battur, Prof. of international relations at the National University of Mongolia, stressed that cooperation in Northeast Asia has to be based on tangible advantages of cooperation projects for all sides. Victor Kalashnikov, Deputy Chairman of Khabarovsk Krai government, drew a positive conclusion that, if regional efforts persisted, central governments would finally also agree and adopt advantageous policies.

Session III of the NEAR 6th International Forum: Action for Climate Change and Environmental Issues in Northeast Asia Region

The third session of the 6th NEAR International Forum dealt with action for climate change and the environment in Northeast Asia. Already the signing of an MoU with R 20 - Regions for Climate Change during the conference showed the interest of Northeast Asia in dealing with climate change, though the consequences of climate change might be quite variable for the regions and no unified policy is either desirable or possible. The session was chaired by Cho Yong-sung, Prof. at the Dept. of Food and Resource Economics, Korea University, Seoul, Korea. Park Hwan-il, Research Fellow of Samsung Economic Research Institute, Seoul, Korea, reported on trends in climate in the last decades for various Asian cities and regions. Bernhard Seliger, Representative of Hanns-Seidel-Foundation in Korea, reported on environmental cooperation as a way to engage DPRK (North Korea), which otherwise is rarely engaging the surrounding states. The example of a wetland and migratory birds assessment in Rason, DPRK, in March 2014, jointly by UNESCAP (through the NEASPEC programme of subregional environmental cooperation in Northeast Asia) and Hanns Seidel Foundation shows the possibilities of such cooperation. NEAR could have an important role in a follow-up to these measures. For China, issues of climate change and, in particular, desertification and its ramifications, were of utmost importance, as Chen Yingzi, Prof. of Northeast Asian Studies Academy, Jilin University, China, claimed. However, burdens of fighting climate change should be fairly distributed. Okimura Tadashi, Prof. of the Faculty of Policy Studies, University of Shimane, Japan, looked into climate change issues from the point of view of one of the countries heavily affected by a greater variance of weather, with increased damages from tropical storms, Japan. A.K. Tulokhonov, Member of the Federation Council of the Russian Federation, cautioned against an overly simplistic discussion of climate change. For Russia, results of warming would be considered not entirely negative, as the example of the Northern passage through formerly frozen seas shows. He encouraged however, greater sharing of insights and policies on climate change, and also, as a member of the Federation Council, encouraged greater legislative cooperation on environmental issues.

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