

Report: 2018 HUFJ JMCE International Conference – NAPCR and EU-East Asia Relations

On April 27th, 2018 the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence (HUFJ JMCE) hosted an International Conference about the North East Asia Plus Community of Responsibility (NAPCR) and EU-East Asia Relations. In total, 18 academics and experts from East Asian as well as European organizations and universities were coming together to discuss about a “Platform for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia” and the nuclear issues on the Korean peninsula. In the first part of the conference it became clear that an exchange between European and East Asian experts and reciprocal prosperity in EU-East Asia relations are expected to be beneficial for both sides: With its experiences regarding integration and forming a union of states Europe might be able to support a process of a community forming in North East Asia and such a process could lead to new approaches to solving recent problems that the EU is facing nowadays. In the second part of the conference it was then discussed if multilateral solutions are possible in the case of nuclear issues on the Korean peninsula and what the respective viewpoints of America, China, Japan and the EU are.

In the opening ceremony Michael Reiterer, Ambassador of the EU delegation to Korea, stated that the EU is ready to support a process on the Korean peninsula. North Korea would make it difficult for South Korea to connect to Eurasia, so he was hoping that this might change soon with the summits. Sang Yoon Ma, Director-General for Strategy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then stressed that Korea aspires to shape an East Asian community and in order to do that it wants to expand its multilateral relations in East Asia. The recent changes in East Asia and especially on the Korean peninsula provide a new impetus for forming a community platform in North East Asia. He said that the EU is an example of a cooperation that is needed in East Asia.

Session 1 was focusing on the “Northeast Asia Platform for Peace and Cooperation”. The first speaker, Tae Hwan Kim from the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, said that it is important to turn exclusionary politics into inclusionary politics. Geopolitical competition and domestic reproduction often led to exclusive nationalism and to spacial and security exclusivism. In order to successfully form a North East Asian community platform, we need to raise the question about how narrowly or widely we want to draw the identity boundaries of inclusion or exclusion. A shared vision/identity of a peaceful and prosperous Northeast Asia, non-threatening and inclusive identities, a shared role in promoting peace as well as a cooperation with ASEAN and India will be the foundation for a North East Asian cooperation platform. Kim suggested that North Korea needs to be part of the cooperation, too.

The second speaker, Nicola Casarini from the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome, was stressing the benefits of a cooperation between the EU and East Asia. He said that the EU is willing to support East Asia in forming a platform more than the US. The EU already has agreements with North East Asian countries, so they can be a good mediator, especially when it comes to the not clearly determined maritime borders in North East Asia. The EU has a lot of experience in establishing a dialogue so that could be a starting point. Casarini then said that the EU might be able to learn from the progress in North East Asia in order to solve recent problems in Europe, for example the rising of populist ideologies. He concluded that a platform for peace and cooperation in East Asia would receive a boost if Seoul and Brussels succeed in advancing cooperation. Ramon Pacheco Pardo from the King’s College London and the Korea Chair at VUB Brussels agreed to his predecessors and stressed the importance of an institutionalization of cooperation. He added that a platform for cooperation and peace in North East Asia needs to adopt and apply international law, implement regulatory frameworks and institutionalize public-private community channels.

Session 2 was focusing on nuclear issues on the Korean peninsula and on possible, multilateral solutions. Robert Kelly from Pusan National University started this session by explaining US president Trump's summitry on North Korea. He emphasized Trump's unpredictability by saying that he campaigned on restrained, but bombed Syria and send US troops there, 'ramped up' in Iraq and Afghanistan, continues supporting Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and uses extremely bellicose rhetoric. Therefore, Kelly considers the 2018 National Security Strategy as irrelevant as a meaningful guide. Trying to estimate the outcome of possible talks between Trump and Kim Jong-un, Kelly sees Trump's personality as a crucial factor and not his actual 'doctrines'. Furthermore, he assumes that Trump would be underprepared for a summit with Kim Jong-un and that the risk of a collapse of the summit would be too high, so he suggests cancelling the summit. If this should not be possible then a trilateral summit together with Moon Jae-in would be the best, especially for the ROK.

Xiangfeng Yang from the East Asia International College of Yonsei University was then talking about the Chinese perspective regarding nuclear issues on the Korean peninsula. He explained that in China the relation to North Korea is understood as something in between a 'blood alliance' and a 'normal state-to-state relationship'. Nevertheless, China had implemented its own, independent sanctions against North Korea, which, on the other hand, made it easier for China to approach North Korea with a summit between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping. After the meeting it seems that China is friendlier towards North Korea with a deeper, supportive involvement in North Korean issues. Results of the Kim-Xi summit, as Yang explains, for example, are a winding down of the domestic debate about the DPRK and the re-affirmation of a 'mutual' relationship. In a broader context, China wants to proceed in the drawn-out negotiations over denuclearization and retaliate the tensions to Washington. To China a nuclear-armed DPRK is still better than a hostile one. And in the case of a collapse of North Korea, China would have to face a bigger influence of the US in the region, what shall be prevented. Both countries can benefit from a cooperation, so Yang assumes that China and North Korea might be tilted towards engagement again.

Michito Tsuruoka from Keio University then talked about Japan's approach on North Korea. Japan sees in North Korea a possible threat, so Tokyo's priority is the disarmament or a peace treaty. But in Tsuruoka's opinion Japan might have a limited leverage so it tries to strengthen the alliance with the US in order to be able to exert 'maximum pressure' on North Korea. In parallel, Japan is consolidating the domestic security structure and is enhancing its ballistic missile defense capability. Tsuruoka considers the US-DPRK as well as the ROK-DPRK framework as the key for solutions. Nevertheless, Japan tries to be involved in multilateral solutions to possibly negotiate its personal agreements after a denuclearization, if necessary.

Tsuruoka was followed by Tereza Novotna from the University of Brussels. In her presentation she was focusing on the EU's contribution to the North Korea Crisis. She sees the EU in the role of an independent mediator in a multilateral approach. The EU is following the sanctions of the United Nations against North Korea but at the same time it shows an engagement in 'targeted econ/human assistance' in North Korea which displays the general willingness to help. For East Asia, the EU can be important as a military actor, as an economic supporter and as a negotiator and by forming a (counter)-balance to the US, in Novotna's opinion, the EU can be a key player regarding possible solutions on the Korean peninsula. Already existing links to South Korea, China, Japan and perhaps Russia can mean a big advantage for every State involved.