East Asian Community Proposal and Security Architecture in East Asia

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It may not be a right question to ask if an East Asian community will someday become a "security community" in the European-style. Although the notion of the political and security cooperation was around in the documents proposing an East Asian community, an East Asian community idea has not had much real impact on security issues in the region. That reflects the reality that the region has much outside connection in terms of security, and the sentiment of nationalism is still strong among the countries in the region.

The regional security framework began to be built in early 1990s in the form of official multilateral settings in the Asia-Pacific. The establishment of the APEC in 1989 and the start of the head of the state meeting in 1993 marked a significant innovation. The ASEAN regional forum also started in 1994 as the first forum where political and security matters can be discussed at a multilateral setting. This burgeoning framework was based upon an optimistic notion of deepening interdependence and the victory of the liberal democracy in the Cold War make the security issues relatively easy and technical agenda.

That optimism was betrayed in the mid-1990s and the relative influence of the APEC and ARF declined since then. Two alternatives appeared. One was the reaffirmation and redefinition of the America-centered hub and spoke alliance system. Japan took the lead in this, and South Korea and some Southeast Asian countries also followed. The other was the rise of the ASEAN plus three (APT) framework.

Roughly speaking, security agenda in Northeast Asia is so-called traditional security, where the US, Russia, China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan plays part. There is still possibility of state-to-state war. Here the military might and the balance of power notion still counts. By contrast, in Southeast Asia, security agenda is largely non-traditional. Internal instability, international crimes such as piracy or dug-trafficking, spread of international terrorism, and medical issues such as avian flu or socio-economic issues constitute major security concerns. Here, the ASEAN based framework has accumulated various arrangement.

Given diversity of security situation in the region, an East Asian community is something to be built upon a set of security architecture which involves countries beyond the region. It is possible to identify 4 pillars of architecture: America-centered hub-and-spoke system, regional hegemonic system by China or Japan, ASEAN-style multilateralism, and regional balance of power involving the US, China, India, Japan, Russia, and others. Each of the pillars have some merit, but also have serious deficiencies. Therefore, it is necessary to have 4 pillars together, complimenting with each other.

Based upon this architecture, an East Asian community can flourish more peacefully. And the notion of "East Asia" itself has some symbolic value, combining the regional aspirations of the Northeast Asian countries and the room for diplomatic maneuver for the Southeast Asian countries under one umbrella. In the long-term future, when Southeast Asia becomes a more unified entity and Northeast Asia overcomes traditional division and rivalry, we may be able to talk about an East Asian security community.