New opportunities and strategies for multilateral economic cooperation in the Northeast Asia region

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Due to geographical proximity and the unique conditions of the economic development and endowed resources, the interdependence of elements of production (such as resources, labor, capital, and technology) is considerable in the Northeast Asia region, with its huge market and great potential for further development. In other words, the economic conditions for multilateral economic cooperation are clearly present. Economic cooperation in the region, however, continues to be led by bilateral investment and exchange (China-Japan, China-Republic of Korea (ROK), China-Russia, and China-Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)); multilateral economic cooperation is extremely limited.

One of the key elements responsible for this weak multilateral economic cooperation has been the Cold War structure that continues to leave its mark on the region, the conflict between the ROK, Japan, and the DPRK is the main reason for the continuation of this Cold War structure. Since the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 1953, the Korean Peninsula has continuously witnessed conflict between the DPRK and the US-ROK Military Alliance and the US-Japan Security Treaty, which has had considerable effects between China, Japan, Korea, and Japan, and Russia and Japan, along with differing viewpoints on historical issues (such as the Japanese colonial occupation of the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Invasion of China) have also resulted in discord within the region. As a result, security arrangements have yet to be firmly established. At the same time, the US has been able to utilize its military alliances with the ROK and Japan as well as the strong dependence that the economies of China, the ROK, and Japan have on the US economy, to maintain its strong influence in the region.

Recently, however, the region has started to experience significant changes. In April 2018, the DPRK government proclaimed that its ‘Economy-Nuclear Parallel Development Policy’ had fulfilled its historic task, and that the capabilities of the party and the entire state would now be focused on an ‘Economic Development Policy’ the aim of which is to establish a socialist economic system. Based on economic theory, the examples of successful economic development by developing countries, and the nature of its endowed resources, it is clear that in order for the DPRK, with its small-scale economic system, to achieve sustainable economic development, the nuclear issue must first be resolved. UN sanctions must be lifted through improvement of international relations, and exchange and cooperation with the global economic system must be strengthened. Given that the DPRK’s motivation for nuclear development is to ensure security of the regime, there is plenty of reason to believe that once the regime’s security has been ensured, the DPRK will achieve denuclearization and focus on economic development. Indeed, following Kim Jong Un’s 2018 New Year’s address, attempts were made to improve international relations by holding summit meetings with China, Russia, and the US.

Bordering the Tumen River area, the DPRK is located in the center of Northeast Asia. In the past, there was not only competition but also cooperation between the two Koreas and the ROK, and Japan have on the US economy, to maintain its strong influence in the region.

Its markets, then, will be possible to establish a land route (consisting of roads and railways) connecting the Korean Peninsula, the Northeast region of China, Russia’s Far East, and Mongolia. With the development of infrastructure, such as highways and high-speed trains, travelling between the aforementioned regions in a single day would become possible, resulting in the formation of a huge international market. The opening of the ports of Ncejin, Chongjin, and Wonsan would also act to provide Japan with a gateway to the Northeast region of China and Mongolia. What makes the DPRK attractive for investors is not only its labor force and natural resources but also the size of the market and its potential for long-term growth, both of which are also dependent on the formation of a wider international market (at the core of which is the Tumen River area) and its active growth.

More recently published novels dealing with the ‘Korean Dream’, however, have aimed to overcome the contradictions between the ethnic Koreans of China and the South Korean people. These novels are full of considerations on the issue of ‘ethnic identity’ and contain a great deal of love and humanism. They also show that the authors from the Tumen River area have come to arrive at the understanding that both groups share a mutual agency and are now able to show sympathy for the South Korean people as well. In particular, through reflections upon their own ethnic community, the ethnic Korean authors have come to form a philosophy that maintains that only on self-examination, self-love, and self-reinforcement will it be possible to reach true equality and frank dialogue, and co-exist in harmony with the South Korean people. It can therefore be said that the horizon of novels by the ethnic Korean authors of the Tumen River area is further expanding.

Upon reading Korean Dream by the ethnic Chinese author Hyun-sun Lee, the South Korean novelist Wonsan Park voiced frankly that “It is painful to see that we are sometimes perpetrators or in the position of being the one that oppresses and exploits”. This shows that the image of the South Korean people depicted in the novels of ethnic Korean Chinese authors provides much inspiration for multilateral economic cooperation at the Tumen River area but also the people of South Korea. The governments of China and South Korea should also take note of such images. For the South Korean government, in particular, it is imperative that they obtain (through these novels and other forms of media) an understanding of the experiences and mindsets of the ethnic Koreans of the Tumen River area as well as the ethnic Koreans of the two Koreas, which will hopefully take place in the future.