

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

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Due to geographical proximity and different conditions of 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 two Koreas being 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 Military Alliance. Territorial conflicts between China and 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 come 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 the 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, the ROK, and the US.

Bordering the Tumen River Area, the DPRK is located in the center of Northeast Asia. In the instance that sanctions are lifted and relations with the ROK improved, allowing the DPRK to open its borders and reform



Above: The North Korean city of Namyang, located on the other side of the Tumen River from the Chinese city of Tumen, as seen through a tourist monocular. Picture taken by Ilhong Ko.

its markets, then it will become 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 Najin, 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.

It is therefore clear that multilateral economic cooperation in Northeast Asia is dependent on an improvement of international and military relations throughout the wider regional sphere, as well as economic integration. As such, the DPRK's efforts towards change represent a valuable opportunity that must not be wasted; the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the replacement of the armistice agreement with a peace treaty must be achieved in order to ensure the stability of the region and to open the doors for multilateral economic cooperation. In addition to this, attempts must also be made to establish the framework and institutions that will allow multilateral economic cooperation to take place. The integration of China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) and the ROK's 'New Economic Map Initiative' can be an example of this, resulting in the formation of a Trans-Eurasia trade route that can facilitate the smooth exchange of elements of production and goods. Multilateral economic cooperation should particularly be focused on that which is beneficial to all parties involved, such as tourism, energy, regional development, environmental protection, and sustainable growth.

The Tumen River Area, due to its geopolitical location within the Northeast Asian world, presents an ideal backdrop against which such new efforts and strategies for multilateral economic cooperation may manifest themselves. The area also has the potential to become an incubation ground for a new system of labor division, a new type of value chain, and the development of a platform for ecommerce that may contribute to the development of the region's small businesses. Ultimately, this might also lead to the realization of a FTA between China, the ROK, and Japan. As such, it is possible to argue that the Tumen River Area may be one of the places where the key to long-term peace, prosperity, and multilateralism in Northeast Asia may be found.

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## Contradictions, communication, and reconciliation between the ethnic Koreans of the Tumen River Area and the South Korean people

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Many ethnic Koreans from the Tumen River Area have made a second home for themselves in South Korea. In 2014, there were approximately 400 thousand ethnic Koreans from China residing in South Korea. Prior to 1988, they mainly came to the 'motherland' to visit relatives and were met with warm greetings and showered with gifts. However, the ethnic Koreans from China soon came to realize that South Koreans were willing to spend heavily on traditional medicinal ingredients from China, such as deer antler, and stimulated by the transition to a market economy that was taking place in China at the time, they began to regard South Korea as a place where money could be made by selling illegally smuggled traditional medicinal ingredients. This phase, from 1988 to 1990, is known as the 'medicine peddler phase' of ethnic Korean migration. Following this phase, the ethnic Koreans from China began to (illegally) provide much needed labor for the South Korean economy, but it is only from September of 2003 that they gained the right to remain in Korea as legal economic migrants. This is, in short, the historical background of the 'Korean Dream'.

The experiences of these ethnic Koreans in South Korea are represented in the novels of authors from the Tumen River Area, published

in literary journals such as *Yanbian Literature*, *Doraji*, and *Jangbaeksan*. The early novels that deal with the 'Korean Dream' present a relatively negative view of South Korea, as a place responsible for taking away wives and breaking down happy and peaceful families, eventually bringing about misfortune to the local community. In reality, however, much more was achieved than lost through the 'Korean Dream'. So what may have led to the formation of such a demonic image of South Korea in these early novels? Differences in the cultural consciousness of the two groups, stemming from differences in ideology and the socio-political system, may have certainly played a part. However, the limited experiences of these ethnic Korean writers in South Korea must also be taken into consideration. For these writers, South Korea was a place where they worked as low-wage employees (or even as illegal immigrants) and it is likely that they would have come into contact and experienced friction with people at the bottom of the South Korean social ladder.

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 agony 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 based on self-esteem, 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 Korean Chinese author Hye-sun Lee, the South Korean novelist Wanseo 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 not only to the ethnic Koreans of 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 and how they perceive the South Korean people, for this has important implications for future interactions and reconciliation between the peoples of the two Koreas, which will hopefully take place in the future.

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Above: The major literary journals publishing works by ethnic Korean authors of the Tumen River Area: (from left to right) Jangbaeksan, Doraji, and Yanbian Literature.