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Change in Northeast Asia's
Regional Security Architecture**

Andrew Yeo

Catholic University of America

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The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D, 310-68 Euljiro 4-ga
Jung-gu, Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683
Fax 82 2 2277 1684



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At the height of the Six Party Talks (SPT) in 2005, the continuous stream of dialogue and consultations among Northeast Asian states generated a sense of optimism about the creation of a permanent regional multilateral security forum. Moreover, the rapid expansion of inter-regional linkages throughout the 2000s made Northeast Asia look ripe for community-building rather than rivalry as predicted in the early 1990s.¹ Despite this optimism, the momentum towards Northeast Asian community-building had come to a temporarily halt by the end of the decade. North Korea declared the Six Party Talks (SPT) dead in 2009. The sinking of the *Cheonan* and North Korea's artillery barrage against Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 only hammered this point home further. Tensions in U.S.-Sino as well as Sino-Japan relations in late 2010 also tempered growing multilateral ambitions for Northeast Asia.

Despite increasing economic interdependence and a growing sense of Asian regionalism, one is left wondering whether East Asian multilateral initiatives have actually reduced mistrust or curbed nationalist sentiment in Northeast Asia. East Asian governments rhetorically speak the language of a growing "community" but continue to hedge and balance against their least trusting neighbors.² Can regional institutions form the basis of peace, cooperation, and security in Northeast Asia? Is it possible for multilateral institutions to transcend the default bilateral hub-and-spokes system? Noting the trend towards greater Asian multilateralism, how do we explain the institutional processes leading to change in Northeast Asia's regional security architecture?

Adopting a case-oriented research approach, I examine the Six-Party Talks on North Korean denuclearization as a basis for understanding the prospects of Northeast Asian multilateralism and change in the regional security architecture. As a starting point, I assume a position

* Please do not cite without permission. Comments and suggestions are welcome.

¹ Aaron Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia." *International Security* 18, no. 3 (1993/94): 3-33.

² Michael J. Green and Bates Gil, *Asia's New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition, and the Search for Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 24.



consistent with other East Asian commentators skeptical about the growth of multilateral institutions in East Asia, much less the development of a Northeast Asian community. The basis of this skepticism is rooted in the postwar institutional choices and ensuing development of Northeast Asia's regional architecture. Additional dispositional factors such as historical animosity, political and socioeconomic differences, and the regional distribution of power further complicate the path to greater institutionalization. Therefore, I argue that rather than shaping policy outcomes towards its intended direction, the SPT as a multilateral forum more often reflects the power, identity, and status of member states making it difficult to achieve cooperation on multilateral initiatives. Despite this initial skepticism about the prospects of further regional institutionalization, I suggest how multilateral arrangements can still foster the notion of a regional community in a very loose sense. In particular, shifts in the security environment will open opportunities for greater multilateral cooperation in conjunction with current bilateral alliances through a process of *institutional layering*.

This paper is organized into two parts. The first part provides a brief overview of existing scholarship on East Asian multilateralism and the historical roots of the bilateral hub-and-spokes system. I then present my theoretical framework, grounding the empirical evidence for growing multilateralism in the historical institutional literature. The second part highlights the Six Party Talks (SPT). I use the SPT to examine the process of institutional layering and the prospects of establishing a more permanent multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia. I conclude by summarizing my key arguments and offering brief comments on regional identity and the idea of an East Asian community.

From Bilateralism to Multilateralism

East Asian Multilateralism

At the start of the post-Cold War era, Aaron Friedberg noted the “thin gruel” of Asian regional institutions in contrast to Europe’s “thick alphabet soup.”³ Asia’s soup still needs to “thicken.” But one will definitely take note of more floating alphabets today compared to the early 1990s. These include the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN + 3, ASEAN + 6, and the East Asian Summit (EAS) to name a few. Other regional institutions such as the Korean Economic Development Organization (KEDO) or the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) have come and gone, either dissolving or evolving into some other institutional arrangement.

³ Aaron Friedberg. "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia." *International Security* 18, no. 3 (1993/94): 3-33, at 20-21.



Recent scholarship also attests to the growth of East Asia multilateralism over the past decade. These volumes vary in their outlook regarding the prospect of multilateralism in Asia. Scholars optimistic about Asian regionalism highlight the potential growth of an East Asian regional community.⁴ This community is not necessarily based on formal institutions, but through informal ties and networks. Production chains, network ties, and shared norms all contribute to the formation of a regional identity.

Others take a more functionalist approach and see multilateral institutions as a product of specific needs arising from crises or evolving structural conditions in East Asia.⁵ A functionalist or utilitarian approach takes greater stock of formal institutionalization. The number of multilateral institutions has certainly increased over time. This fact alone is noteworthy given the continued reliance on and legitimacy of bilateralism as the basis of regional security. Even Beijing, which suspiciously eyes bilateralism as a constraint directed against its rise, acknowledges U.S. military presence as a stabilizing force.⁶ Realist-functionalists do see an increasing role for multilateral arrangements as the regional environment evolves or as new issues and crises emerge. However, they fall somewhere between ambivalent and skeptical on the question of an emerging East Asian community, particularly one rooted in multilateral institutions. Realist-functionalists do not rule out the future growth of a more permanent regional security institution. However, Asia's new multilateralism "is still at a stage where it is best understood as an extension and intersection of national power and purpose."⁷ In the foreseeable future, the regional security architecture will be characterized by overlapping multilateral institutions layered on top of the hub-and-spokes bilateral system.

Establishing Bilateralism

When explaining the lack of regional institutions in Asia or weak multilateralism, students of East Asian politics almost always refer back to the postwar settlement in Asia. Asian states dabbled with multilateral possibilities through the Pacific Pact, first proposed by the Philippines in 1949

⁴ Peter J. Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraiishi, *Beyond Japan: The Dynamics of East Asian Regionalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006; Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Amitav Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

⁵ Kent E. Calder and Francis Fukuyama, *East Asian Multilateralism: Prospects for Regional Stability* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Green and Gill 2009; Vinod Aggarwal and Min Gyo Koo, "An Institutional Path: Community Building in Northeast Asia." In *The United States and Northeast Asia: Debates, Issues, and New Order*, edited by G. John Ikenberry and Chung-in Moon, 285-308 (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

⁶ Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁷ Bates Gill and Michael Green, "Unbundling Asia's New Multilateralism." In *Asia's New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition, and the Search for Community*, edited by Michael J. Green and Bates Gil, 1-29 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 3.



and supported by South Korea and Taiwan.⁸ However, the United States, opposed the Pact for two primary reasons. First, the U.S. feared entrapment by allies such as South Korea and Taiwan which were willing to engage in aggressive behavior for the sake of unification. Second, the U.S. preferred bilateral arrangements which not only supported a containment strategy against the Soviets, but also maximized control over potential “rogue allies.”⁹ Thus, U.S. policymakers were fairly noncommittal about sustaining multilateral organizations in East Asia. The United States did draft an outline of the Pacific Pact in early 1951. However, the Korean War effectively blocked any further efforts in building East Asian multilateral institutions as U.S. planners opted instead for strengthened bilateral alliances.¹⁰

Although by no means pre-determined, the adoption of the bilateral San Francisco system was heavily conditioned by overriding structural and cultural factors. Realist perspectives point to “extreme hegemony” or the asymmetric nature of U.S. power relative to other Asian states at the end of the Cold War.¹¹ Japan, temporarily governed by the U.S. military, was in no position to resist U.S. authority. South Korea lay in ruins following the devastation of the Korean War. Meanwhile, the Republic of China was forced to retreat to the island of Formosa. Given that U.S. policymakers such as Secretary of State Dean Acheson or John Foster Dulles preferred bilateral arrangements as Cold War lines began to harden, vast power differentials between the United States and potential Asian alliance partners would have made it difficult to persuade the U.S. to commit to multilateral arrangements.

Furthermore, U.S. perceptions of Asians and differences in collective identity between Asia and the West also steered U.S. policy planners towards bilateralism rather than multilateralism. Although U.S. policymakers viewed European allies as “members of a shared community,” potential allies in Asia were “seen as part of an alien and, in important ways, inferior community.”¹² Indeed, State Department officials expressed doubt and reservations over the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and U.S. multilateral efforts in Southeast Asia. As Hemmer and Katzenstein argue, U.S. officials often depicted Asian allies in racially and culturally inferior terms.¹³ The absence of common identity did not necessarily preclude the formation of alliances. But to the extent that it bred mistrust and uncertainty in the reliability of alliance partners, the lack of common identity did create additional hurdles to multilateralism.

⁸ Kent E. Calder, “Critical Junctures and the Contours of Northeast Asian Regionalism.” In *East Asian Multilateralism: Prospects for Regional Stability*, edited by Kent E. Calder and Francis Fukuyama, 15-39 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

⁹ Victor D. Cha, “Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia.” *International Security* 34, no. 3 (2009): 158-96.

¹⁰ See Calder and Ye 2010, Ch. 3.

¹¹ Donald Crone, “Does Hegemony Matter? The Reorganization of the Pacific Political Economy.” *World Politics* 45, no. 4 (1993): 501-25 at 503.

¹² Peter Katzenstein and Christopher Hemmer, “Why Is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism.” *International Organization* 56, no. 3 (2002): 575-607 at 575.

¹³ Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002, 591-94.



Identity and power are often pitted as alternative variables when explaining the trajectory of bilateralism in Asian security.¹⁴ This debate is less relevant for the purposes of my argument. What is important is that both material and cultural antecedents made the option of strong multilateral institutions highly unlikely in postwar Asia. Dominant structural and normative conditions shaped the strategic options of U.S. policy planners and Asian leaders alike. Hence, the United States established bilateral mutual defense treaties with the Philippines and Japan in 1951, South Korea in 1953, and Taiwan in 1954. In each of these cases, bilateralism offered the path of least resistance in meeting the burgeoning threat of Soviet expansionism and internal communist insurgencies. Of course, bilateral ties were intertwined with broader regional economic relations. But for the most part, it was bilateral alliances rather than “soft” multilateral economic relations which provided the region a structural foundation and institutional stability.¹⁵

Periods of alliance crisis and management have resulted in alliance change and transformation over time. For the most part, however, the hub-and-spokes alliance system in East Asia has remained robust for numerous reasons. First, the hub-and-spokes system established a regional security architecture which has largely worked for several decades. The current bilateral system keeps in check Sino-Japanese tension. It also provides additional measures of restraint on the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan Straits. The bilateral alliance system also enables the U.S. to retain significant troop levels in Asia and function as an off-shore balancing force in the region. Second, the hub-and-spokes system has generated its own institutional assets and sunk costs helping explain its persistence. For instance, institutional mechanisms ensuring close integration and coordination between the U.S. and Asian alliance partners - including joint training exercises, integrated command structures, and inter-operable weapons systems - have helped keep the hub-and-spokes system intact. Third, and related to the previous point, creating new institutional mechanisms, much less an alternative security arrangement entails significant costs. Establishing a new form of regional architecture would likely meet resistance from those individuals, institutions, and states which currently benefit from the existing system.

Historical Institutional Approaches

Is weak multilateralism and the persistence of robust bilateral alliances in East Asia a result of the same initial conditions which led postwar planners to select bilateralism in the first place? Does the persistence of bilateralism present obstacles to greater regional institutionalization and the development of a Northeast Asian community? Rather than focusing on existing realist, institutional, and ideational arguments, my initial skepticism towards an emerging East Asian security community is grounded in the literature on historical institutionalism. Path dependent processes in the development of Asia’s hub-and-spokes security architecture present challenges to

¹⁴ For an overview of different perspectives explaining bilateralism in Asia, see Acharya 2009, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.



the development of a Northeast Asian regional security institution. However, processes of institutional layering do enable actors to compromise on or circumvent multiple, competing (and often entrenched) interests and create new multilateral security initiatives without abandoning the hub-and-spokes system.

Scholars have borrowed concepts from the historical institutional literature to explain East Asia's developing regional architecture. For instance, Kent Calder and Min Ye adopt the concept of critical juncture and path dependence to explain the initial choice of the San Francisco system and East Asia's subsequent bilateral trajectory.¹⁶ Path dependent arguments suggest an element of choice or agency at the moment of institutional innovation. However, once chosen, a particular path becomes locked in as "relevant actors adjust their strategies to accommodate the prevailing pattern."¹⁷ Choices made earlier in time or history generate self-reinforcing processes and positive feedback loops within a system making it increasingly difficult to diverge from the initial path. In other words, actors face rising costs of reversal over time as they adapt their behavior in ways that both reflect and reinforce the status quo.¹⁸

In the case of East Asia's regional security architecture, coordination and learning effects stabilized actors' expectations about the optimal regional security design. Actors both within and outside the U.S.-centered hub-and-spokes system states adapted to and relied on bilateral ties for regional stability and security.¹⁹ The hub-and-spokes system eventually became entrenched, making it harder to simply do away with bilateralism.

Political institutions are often described as "sticky"; they are difficult to overturn. Paul Pierson presents two reasons for this phenomenon. First, those who design institutions may attempt to bind their successors to reduce problems stemming from political uncertainty. Moving from the context of domestic political institutions to East Asian security, U.S. policy planners preferred a system which would effectively contain the communist threat but also maximize control over their allies while minimizing the possible emergence of a rival political leader or institution. Second, often times political actors are "compelled to bind themselves" to create "credible commitments."²⁰ Although the United States sought to avoid entrapment – hence avoid multilateral alliances – it did establish a series of bilateral mutual defense treaties to facilitate cooperation and demonstrate greater commitment to its allies' national security as well as regional security.

The concept of *asset specificity* best captures the "lock-in" mechanisms sustaining the hub-and-spokes system once bilateral spokes are set in place. In his study on alliance persistence, Jae-Jung Suh notes that military alliances sustained over a period of time begin to generate their own

¹⁶ Calder 2008.

¹⁷ Kathleen Thelen, "Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics." *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2, (1999): 369-404 at 385.

¹⁸ Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 10-11.

¹⁹ Signs of abandonment during the Nixon and Carter Administrations served as reminders to U.S. allies the security value of bilateral alliances.

²⁰ Pierson 2004, 43.



asset specificity.²¹ This includes “consultation mechanisms, military planning and command structures, common infrastructure, joint exercises, interoperable weapons systems, and integrated forces.”²² Assets which are specific to a relationship (i.e. U.S.-South Korea alliance) and developed over time for a particular purpose (i.e. regional security) are likely to create positive feedback loops resulting in more productive “transaction costs”.²³ Specific examples of alliance assets in the U.S.-South Korean alliance include a combined forces command structure, regular joint training exercises, and interoperable weapons platform systems.²⁴ In the U.S.-Japan alliance, USFJ does not share an integrated command structure with the Japanese Self-Defense Force (SDF). However, Japan’s national defense strategy, its domestic security institutions, and its ability to sustain relatively low levels of defense spending are grounded in the U.S.-Japan alliance. The Philippines, while no longer playing permanent host to U.S. forces, continues to conduct joint training exercises with the U.S. military and relies on U.S. assistance in combatting terrorism. Given increasing returns and lower transaction costs, these states have incentives to keep bilateral alliances intact to address security needs. Therefore, the hub-and-spokes regional architecture has developed comparative advantages over alternative security arrangements.²⁵

Institutional Layering and Endogenous Processes of Change in Northeast Asia

How do we explain change if institutions create self-reinforcing mechanisms and are difficult to overturn? How will regional actors respond to portending change in East Asia’s security environment, and are mechanisms in place that take into account China’s continued rise and the relative decline of U.S. power?²⁶ External shocks carry the potential to reshape or create new institutional orders by shattering old ideas and delegitimizing existing institutions and practices.

²¹ Suh defines *alliance asset specificity* as “durable investments that are undertaken to complete alliance commitments and that would incur higher opportunity cost than best alternative uses of alternative users if the original alliance should be terminated.” Jae-Jung Suh, *Power, Interest, and Identity in Military Alliances* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 64.

²² *Ibid.*, 13.

²³ Celeste A. Wallander, “Institutional Assets and Adaptability: NATO after the Cold War.” *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (2000): 705-35 at 708.

²⁴ For further examples see Suh 2007, Ch. 3.

²⁵ Although China and North Korea do not have bilateral alliance ties to the United States, they still exist inside and must contend with a regional security architecture defined by the hub-and-spokes system. North Korea chooses to remain outside any institutional arrangement. China prefers to see reduced U.S. influence in the region and thus by extension, prefers greater multilateral arrangements.

²⁶ A 2009 CSIS report revealed that a majority of Asian strategic elites believed that China would become the strongest and most important country in the region in ten years. Yet a plurality of respondents also indicated that the United States would continue to play a “positive and stabilizing role” in the region. These findings suggest that East Asia is a dynamic region experiencing change and a potential power shift. Multilateral proponents envision a new regional architecture based on the construction of multilateral institutions which facilitate interdependence and cooperation. See Bates Gill, Michael Green, Kiyoto Tsuji, William Watts. *Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism Report Release*. Washington DC: CSIS, February 2009.



This is particularly true if the existing institutional order is perceived to have created the conditions leading to a particular crisis. When an existing institutional system is unable to adapt to the changed, new environment, political space may open for new ideas and institutions.²⁷ Moreover, shocks may loosen institutional ties and alliance patterns among actors. Hence, exogenous shocks often function as critical junctures for institutional change. For example, Kent Calder cites the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis as a critical juncture leading to the emergence of new multilateral economic institutions in the Asia-Pacific.²⁸

The problem with exogenous shock approaches is that the prospect for institutional change lies entirely outside the existing institutional order. Moreover, the exogenous shock-critical juncture approach often assumes a break with an earlier path dependent trajectory in favor of some new institutional path. New political arrangements may emerge from a crisis, but they may not necessarily destroy or replace the existing institutional order. For instance, the Asian Financial Crisis may have rejuvenated East Asian multilateralism giving new life to forums such as the East Asian Summit. However, these new multilateral institutions still coexist with bilateral alliances. Punctuated equilibrium models are useful in describing rapid periods of institutional change followed by stasis. But in post-Cold War Asia, both exogenous and *endogenous* processes lead to incremental change.

Historical institutionalists do offer mechanisms of change through endogenous processes. The process of layering, first examined in studies of institutional development in American politics, may be particularly applicable to Northeast Asia's evolving security architecture.²⁹ In a broad institution such as the U.S. Congress, the process of change is driven by various coalitions pursuing a wide range of collective interests. Institutions develop "through an accumulation of innovations that are inspired by competing motives" which results in a "tense layering of new arrangements on top of preexisting structures intended to serve different purposes."³⁰ Institutional layering occurs when new actors or coalitions design novel institutional arrangements "but lack the support or perhaps the inclination, to replace preexisting institutions established to pursue other ends."³¹ Although new institutional arrangements are designed to meet specific goals, the layering process may look "haphazard" or "ad hoc" rather than the product of some preconceived overarching plan.

Returning to the context of East Asia, multiple interests and competing "coalitions" underpin the interaction between regional actors. Of course, "coalitions" do not exist in the context of East Asian security in the same way they exist in the U.S. Congress. What we can draw from this

²⁷ Jeffrey Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

²⁸ Calder 2008. See also Aggarwal and Koo 2008, 288.

²⁹ Eric Schickler, *Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and the Development of the U.S. Congress* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

³⁰ Schickler 2001, 16.

³¹ *Ibid.* Also see Kathleen Thelen, "How Institutions Evolve: Insights from Comparative Historical Analysis." In *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, edited by James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, 208-40 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 226.



analogy, however, is the growth of new institutional arrangements emerging as a means of resolving not only new issues but also satisfying competing interests. East Asian actors have proposed various multilateral forums, processes, and institutions to address and manage regional problems. However, pre-existing bilateral alliances have “created constituencies” dedicated to maintaining the existing regional security architecture. As a result, new arrangements emerge without necessarily abolishing or overwriting established institutional ties. Instead, new institutions are layered on top of older ones. According to Victor Cha, this has led to a “complex patchwork” of bilateral, trilateral and other multilateral institutional arrangements.³²

Since the late 1990s, East Asia has witnessed growing multilateralism in the region, but not necessarily at the expense of the hub-and-spokes system. Rather than replacing bilateral alliances, multilateral arrangements such as ASEAN + 3 or the SPT have developed on top of pre-existing bilateral arrangements. These “ad hoc” multilateral arrangements are viewed as just one means of achieving the broader goal of a more peaceful, stable Northeast Asia.³³ For now, the hub-and-spokes system will continue to shape if not define solutions to existing security problems. The real question, however, is whether the layering process will continue to bring incremental changes to the overall regional security architecture with multilateralism emerging as the new “default” mode for regional cooperation and stability.

Six-Party Talks as a Case Study

I examine the Six-Party Talks (SPT) as a basis for understanding East Asian multilateralism and to explore portending change in Northeast Asia’s regional security architecture. The SPT represents an “ad hoc” multilateral institution designed to address a specific security concern shared by regional actors. Of course, the SPT was never designed to replace the existing bilateral framework. But the SPT is worth investigating because several members, including the United States, have discussed transforming the SPT into a more permanent multilateral security forum for the region.

Some may wonder why I have chosen an ineffective institution to explain institutional change in Northeast Asia. After all, the SPT has not curbed North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. Nor has the SPT made any further progress since the end of the Bush Administration. Despite its shortcomings, the SPT did constitute the first major multilateral forum dedicated to security consultations in Northeast Asia.³⁴ The SPT negotiations have also been well-documented in

³² Victor Cha, “Complex Patchworks: U.S. Alliances as Part of Asia’s Regional Architecture.” *Asia Policy* 11, no. 1 (2011): 27-50.

³³ For similar views see Ralph Cossa, “Northeast Asian Regionalism: A (Possible) Means to an End for Washington.” 1-10. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2009, 1.

³⁴ Yoichi Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question: A Chronicle of the Second Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 403.



numerous sources.³⁵ Available primary and secondary sources make it possible to examine the motives and competing interests of each of the major players. Although political differences among member states pertain directly to North Korean denuclearization, one can extrapolate tensions rooted more fundamentally in underlying power struggles, identity politics, and competing visions of regional order. Thus, rather than assess the efficacy of the SPT, I use this multilateral forum as a prism to examine the shape and direction of Northeast Asia's regional security architecture.

Why Multilateralism?

The first round of SPT negotiations opened in August 2003 in Beijing. The final round of discussions before the SPT's collapse took place in December 2008. In the end, five years of hard fought negotiations brought little tangible results regarding North Korea's denuclearization process. Yet policymakers and scholars still cling to a small silver-lining in the SPT process: the potential for building a multilateral security forum in Northeast Asian. Before delving into the prospect of East Asian regionalism, I first discuss why and how key players in Northeast Asia converged on this six party process.

At the most basic level, the SPT emerged because all six parties had a stake in maintaining regional security. At least five of the six parties shared both private and collective interests in a denuclearized North Korea. Unlike the 1990s, key players, particularly the United States and China, treated North Korea's nuclear program as a wider regional problem rather than a crisis limited to the Korean Peninsula. The six party process also took shape because no adequate security mechanism existed which could satisfy the complexity of resolving the nuclear crisis. Although bilateral alliances in the region might deter North Korea from launching a direct nuclear attack, they proved less useful in drawing out meaningful solutions to North Korea's apparent insecurity. North Korea preferred bilateral discussions with the United States. However, the Bush Administration remained adamant that it would not engage in any initial direct talks with North Korea. It became clear that China, and perhaps Russia, would also have to be included in any discussions just to bring Pyongyang and Washington to the negotiating table.

³⁵ The two most comprehensive works to date are Charles L. Pritchard, *Failed Diplomacy the Tragic Story of How North Korea Got the Bomb* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007) and Funabashi 2007. Other accounts include Gilbert Rozman, "Turning the Six-Party Talks into a Multilateral Security Framework for Northeast Asia." *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies* 18 (2008): 149-66; John Park, "Inside Multilateralism: The Six Party Talks." *Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2005): 75-91; Kuniko Ashizawa, "Tokyo's Quandary, Beijing's Moment in the Six-Party Talks: A Regional Multilateral Approach to Resolve the DPRK's Nuclear Problem." *Pacific Affairs* 79, no. 3 (2006): 411-32; Gilbert Rozman, "Post-Cold War Evolution of Chinese Thinking on Regional Institutions in Northeast Asia." *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 66 (2010.): 605 – 20; Shulong Chu, and Xinzhu Lin, "The Six Party Talks: A Chinese Perspective." *Asian Perspective* 32, no. 4 (2008): 29-43; Geun Lee, "The Clash of Soft Powers between China and Japan: Synergy and Dilemmas at the Six-Party Talks." *Asian Perspective* 34, no. 2 (2010): 113-39.



This is not to argue that bilateral alliances played no role in coordinating a multilateral response to North Korea's nuclear development. Even prior to the SPT, the United States intended to rely on its alliance with Japan and South Korea to leverage additional pressure against North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program. The U.S. was particularly wary that Pyongyang might exploit weaknesses in the alliance at the negotiating table to extract additional concessions from the international community. As Yoichi Funabashi argues, the Bush administration wanted Japan and South Korea involved from the beginning to avoid giving U.S. allies any reason for discontent "which would give North Korea an incentive to play a divide-and-conquer game with the three allies."³⁶

Nevertheless, existing coordination mechanisms through bilateral relationships were insufficient in handling a crisis requiring assistance from players outside the U.S. centered hub-and-spokes system. The United States was especially counting on greater cooperation from China. During the 2002 U.S.-China summit meeting, President Bush requested Chinese assistance in promoting North Korean denuclearization. During a trip to Beijing in February 2003, Colin Powell also urged Beijing to play a stronger role in joining multilateral discussions and pressing North Korea to abandon its nuclear development.³⁷ Noting substantial energy and economic assistance flows from China to North Korea, Powell's request was buoyed by his underlying belief that China wielded significant leverage over North Korea.³⁸ The Bush Administration may also have had more pragmatic reasons for urging China to take on greater leadership on North Korean issues. Facing two simultaneous conflicts in the Middle East, the U.S. was more than willing to share the burden on North Korea with other international partners. Others more cynically noted that the U.S. had outsourced much of the North Korea problem to China.

In sum, absent any pre-existing multilateral channels in handling region-wide security issues, Northeast Asian states devised an "ad hoc" body to address an outstanding security concern.³⁹ The North Korean nuclear crisis carried repercussions beyond any one state in the region. Not wanting to follow mistakes from the Clinton era, key engagement advocates within the Bush Administration insisted on holding multilateral discussions with North Korea. Such a strategy decreased the possibility of North Korea playing off one state against another. Moreover, the multilateral approach gave other regional actors a stake in shaping Northeast Asia's regional security.

³⁶ Ibid., 159. Thus when Colin Powell reported to President Bush that multilateral negotiations would begin with just a trilateral meeting between the U.S., China, and North Korea, the President made direct calls to Prime Minister Koizumi and President Roh Moo-hyun to apologize about not being able to include Japan and South Korea in the first meeting. However, tensions would also erupt between alliance partners over different preferences and priorities in persuading North Korea to comply to agreements. See Funabashi 2006, 274.

³⁷ James Dao, "Powell Seeks China's Help and, at U.N., its Abstention," *New York Times*. Feb. 24, 2003.

³⁸ Funabashi 2007, 272.

³⁹ The United States and South Korea proposed four party talks which included North Korea and China. However, the talks only lasted from 1996-97, and were limited to bringing a peace agreement and reducing tension on the Korean Peninsula. See http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eap/korea_4party_talks_1997.html (last accessed 4/5/10).



Six Party Talks as a Regional Peace Mechanism

Although the SPT was created to deal specifically with North Korea's nuclear program, the expectation that the talks might lead to the formation of a broader consultative body on peace and stability in Northeast Asia were present from the beginning. Key officials in the Bush administration envisioned creating a multilateral scheme for building trust and promoting peace in Northeast Asia even prior to the onset of the SPT.⁴⁰ In some respect, it was inevitable that nuclear negotiations would spillover to regional security issues. North Korea's nuclear weapons program carries the potential of triggering a wider arms race and regional instability. For instance, a nuclear North Korea would surely keep U.S. troops in East Asia on higher alert. Likewise, given a common threat, we would expect strengthened alliance coordination between the United States and East Asian partners. North Korean missile and nuclear tests would provide Japan the rationale for expanding the role and capabilities of the Japanese Self-Defense Force (SDF). Responding to Japanese rearmament and strengthened U.S. bilateral alliances, China would likely continue its rapid pace of military modernization. China's military expansion could also place Russia on alert with tensions flaring in border areas or over energy security. Therefore, with North Korea's nuclear program carrying larger implications for Northeast Asia, adequate steps addressing broader regional security issues were included as part of the SPT process.

After four rounds of negotiations, the six parties achieved their first breakthrough in 2005 with North Korea committing to abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs for the first time. At this point, the SPT began showing signs of greater promise – not only in defusing the nuclear crisis, but in providing a lasting security mechanism for building confidence and trust among the six party members. The September 2005 joint statement included specific references to commit to “joint efforts for lasting peace and stability in Northeast Asia” and “to explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation in Northeast Asia.”⁴¹ To this end, the six parties established five separate working groups to address the following issues: denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, normalization of D.P.R.K.-U.S. relations, normalization of D.P.R.K.-Japan relations, economic and energy cooperation, and a Northeast Asia peace and security mechanism.⁴² The working groups were organized within thirty days of the February 2007 initial actions agreement. Working group members provided initial reports at

⁴⁰ This included Colin Powell, Condoleeza Rice, and Richard Haas, the director of the State Department Policy Planning Staff. Funabashi 2007, 158, 402.

⁴¹ Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six Party Talks. September 19, 2005. Available at http://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/September_19_2005_Joint_Statement.doc/file_view (last accessed 4/4/10). Joint statements such as the one above are often brushed aside as diplomatic rhetoric and nicely worded statements followed by inaction. This appeared to be the case as Washington froze North Korean accounts held in Macau's Banco Delta Asia (BDA) while Pyongyang conducted missile and nuclear tests in 2006. But the six parties resumed discussions at the end of 2006 and mapped out an “initial actions” plan for implementing the Joint Agreement.

⁴² United States State Department. *Background Note: North Korea*. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2792.htm> (last accessed 4/4/10).



the beginning of the sixth round of the SPT in March 2007. The working groups met again in August and September 2007.

Momentum continued to build with a “second-phase actions” implementation strategy. North Korea presented tangible signs of progress by adhering to its end of the bargain, disabling three core nuclear facilities and destroying cooling towers at the Yongbyon facility in November 2007 and June 2008, respectively. Although the SPT moved in fits and starts, “anticipation grew that once the nuclear issues was resolved the six countries would extend their interactions into a security mechanism for resolving disputes in Northeast Asia.”⁴³ As chief U.S. negotiator Christopher Hill indicated to reporters, “the SPT had the potential to develop into an embryonic form of a Northeast Asian regional organization.”⁴⁴

Although six party multilateral negotiations have not resumed since late 2008, many East Asian regional optimists still see the SPT as the best path towards East Asian multilateralism.⁴⁵ Initiating working groups within the six party process was one positive step in turning the SPT into a multilateral security framework. Some scholars have suggested using the SPT process to construct a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula as an intermediate step between North Korean denuclearization and achieving the longer term goal of creating a regional peace and security mechanism out of the SPT process.⁴⁶ Others such as Francis Fukuyama have advocated turning the SPT into a five party forum (SPT minus North Korea) that would meet regularly to address security and economic problems.⁴⁷ For example, a potential humanitarian and refugee crisis triggered by North Korea’s collapse would best be handled if some pre-existing mechanism were in place to deal with such a crisis. A five party forum might also address security dilemmas linked to Chinese military modernization or Japanese rearmament. A multilateral security dialogue complementing Asian multilateral economic organizations would also help cool nationalist sentiments fueling regional security dilemmas.⁴⁸

The Six Party Talks and Institutional Layering

Will the SPT process help bring about a lasting multilateral security framework? Moving one step further, will this multilateral framework gradually replace the postwar hub-and-spokes system, or help create a greater sense of Northeast Asian community? Some Northeast Asian states may find multilateral forums such as the SPT useful in promoting one’s own national interests while also contributing to regional security. This is most apparent for China who, at least until 2008, played the role of dealmaker. Initially skeptical about multilateral talks pushed by Washington, China

⁴³ Rozman 2010, 615.

⁴⁴ Funabashi 2007, 403.

⁴⁵ Francis Fukuyama, “Re-Envisioning Asia.” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 1 (2005): 75-87; Rozman 2010, 615.

⁴⁶ Rozman 2010, 615.

⁴⁷ Fukuyama 2005.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*



first agreed to broker three-way talks between Pyongyang, Washington, and Beijing. North Korea and the United States were not particularly fond of the trilateral format and Beijing eventually agreed to host the SPT.

Over time, China came to embrace its role as “honest broker” in the SPT as it received recognition and status from other Northeast Asian states.⁴⁹ Beijing accrued two major benefits through the SPT. First, by playing the role of broker, other regional players took note of China’s leadership in the region. This in turn boosted China’s image as a responsible global stakeholder.⁵⁰ As Suisheng Zhao argues, multilateralism “may provide new mechanisms for China to dispel concerns about its growing strength.”⁵¹ The SPT also helped improve cooperation in U.S.-Sino relations. Thus, by promoting regional cooperation with neighboring states, China could advance its own national interest through its peaceful rise. Second, as some Chinese scholars have suggested, China may view the SPT as a means to bypass the hub-and-spokes system and establish a new multilateral security regime.⁵² Such a strategy would certainly improve China’s position with two other powers in Northeast Asia: Japan and the United States. Beijing’s active participation in the SPT counters Japan’s own attempt to consolidate its leadership position regarding East Asian multilateralism. China’s participation in regional institutions such as the SPT also acts as a “soft” counterweight against U.S. influence in East Asia. In short, “China’s efforts to construct a network of institutions along its periphery have made the integrity of the U.S.-centered hub-and-spoke framework increasingly anachronistic.”⁵³

The SPT provides benefits to other actors besides China. For example, despite North Korea’s penchant to only deal with the United States, the SPT permitted South Korea to engage with North Korea on the nuclear issue. The SPT has also given South Korea “a means for a middle power to find some balance in the midst of four assertive great powers.”⁵⁴ This type of strategic thinking was especially prevalent during the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration; lacking U.S. support for Roh’s engagement policy and overarching vision for peaceful reunification, the SPT provided South Korea another outlet to defuse tension on the Peninsula. For Russia, the SPT presented Moscow the opportunity to be seen as a Pacific player.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ China’s efforts are well-documented. For instance, China engaged in shuttle diplomacy with Pyongyang, meeting with North Korean officials more than sixty times in the months preceding the SPT. Following North Korea’s threat to boycott the first round of SPT, Wu Bangguo, chairman of the standing committee on the National People’s Congress, offered North Korea a diplomatic carrot in the form of \$25 million to help build a glass factory. It is also widely believed that China’s three-day interruption of heavy oil shipments to North Korea was intended to coerce North Korea into multilateral negotiations. As Christopher Twomey argues, “China was responsible for several key compromises that have allowed the (SPT) process to obtain a degree of success and momentum.” See Twomey 413; Ashizawa 424; Lee 132

⁵⁰ Lee 2010, 137; Ashizawa 412.

⁵¹ Suisheng Zhao, “Chinese Nationalism and Approaches Towards East Asian Regional Cooperation.” 1-11. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2009.

⁵² Funabashi 2007, 307.

⁵³ Zhao 2009, 7.

⁵⁴ Rozman 2008, 155.

⁵⁵ Prtichard 2007, 97.



Northeast Asian states, particularly China, may eventually settle for an alternative to the hub-and-spokes system currently underlying the region's security architecture. Barring some major external shock, however, endogenous change will be a slow moving process. Even as power dynamics and interests begin to shift and realign, the development of new institutions must still accommodate structural constraints and competing interests embedded within existing institutions. Notwithstanding the relative decline in U.S. power, Washington would insist on support for continued bilateral relationships in any future regional security architecture. Thus, even when Beijing balked at multilateral negotiations in early 2003, the Bush administration stated that any discussion of North Korean denuclearization would have to involve South Korea and Japan. As Ralph Cossa argues, "sustaining and reinvigorating Washington's bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea enjoy first priority."⁵⁶ U.S. policymakers have made clear that broader multilateral cooperation will be built on top of bilateral security alliances.⁵⁷ The SPT highlights this layered approach to multilateralism where multilateral institutions complement and reinforce bilateral ones.

The past two decades in East Asia have been marked by the growth of regional institutions. This growth has stemmed largely from functional needs to address broad issues requiring collective action among regional actors. An SPT-like forum offers private benefits to each member country in addition to the larger goal of providing regional stability and mechanisms for peaceful cooperation.⁵⁸ However, states with vested interests and sunk costs in the existing hub-and-spokes framework continue to rely on bilateral alliances to deal with pressing security concerns. In Northeast Asia, the U.S., Japan, and South Korea are not likely to abandon bilateral alliances even if they subscribe to new multilateral arrangements. As a result, East Asian multilateralism has followed an institutional layering process: rather than replacing bilateralism, regional players have created ad hoc multilateral arrangements such as the SPT to manage emerging economic and security issues confronting the region.

The current patchwork of bilateral alliances and multilateral institutions may eventually transpire into a wider regional security mechanism which integrates both bilateral and multilateral elements in a less ad hoc fashion. Such an outcome, however, depends on the alignment of national interests and regional goals. Although the SPT provides evidence for growing multilateralism and the need for institutional mechanisms beyond the hub-and-spokes system, it also reflects power dynamics and tension stemming from the different interests and identities of member states. As a result, the SPT has not reconvened since the end of 2008. Nor have the six parties bothered using the SPT to address North Korea's more recent provocations or other sources of regional tension such as the PLA's assertions about its maritime claims or existing territorial disputes in East Asia. Instead, South Korea, Japan, and the United States have strengthened trilateral coordination since the *Cheonan* sinking and Yeongpyeong Island attacks.

⁵⁶ Cossa 2009, 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Private benefits include rapprochement between the two Koreas, resolution to Japanese abductees, recognition as a member of an East Asian community, or improved status or prestige in the region.



The Obama Administration used its bilateral summit with Hu Jintao in January 2011 to discuss regional security issues. China and Japan, China and North Korea, and the two Koreas resorted to both high and low-level bilateral discussions to ease security tensions that had flared throughout the second half of 2010. The evolution of Northeast Asia's regional security architecture and the prospect for greater multilateralism has thus far followed a path dependent process. Tensions driven by competing interests have resulted in the creation of several multilaterals and "mini-laterals" tailored to address specific issues, but not optimally designed to address broader security issues. The result has been a layering of "successive innovations . . . that appear more haphazard than the product of some overarching master plan."⁵⁹

Conclusion: From Bilateralism to Multilateralism to an Integrated East Asian Community

Examining Northeast Asia's hub-and-spokes regional security architecture as an institution, I argued that incremental changes to this overarching framework are best described by an institutional layering process. As such, the evolution of Northeast Asia's regional architecture since the 1990s has been characterized by the proliferation or expansion of multilateral arrangements such as the SPT, but without necessarily producing deeper regional integration or fostering a Northeast Asian community bound by any regional identity.

Some of the arguments presented in this paper regarding East Asian multilateralism may already sound familiar. However, I have tried to make sense of Northeast Asia's regional security architecture by grounding the empirical evidence for growing multilateralism in the historical institutional literature. More concretely, I used the concept of institutional layering to explain how multilateral institutions have developed on top of existing bilateral alliances. It is possible that greater interaction among the spokes may decrease the utility of bilateral alliances in the future. However, actors with vested interests in maintaining the hub-and-spokes system will resist abandoning existing institutional structures. Asian actors may not be able to create a new multilateral security framework without including elements of the bilateral system.

The SPT raised hopes for building a stronger Northeast Asian community. Northeast Asian states have taken the first steps towards creating a multilateral security mechanism. However, it may be a bit premature to claim that multilateralism has become the new norm when handling regional security issues. I do not imply that multilateralism will not work or cannot exist in Northeast Asia. Nor do I deny that a regional community already exists in the minds and imagination of some regional actors.⁶⁰ Although the proliferation of regional institutions in East

⁵⁹ Schickler 2001, 15.

⁶⁰ A 2008 survey conducted among Asian strategic elites indicated that 81% of respondents supported the concept of building an "East Asian Community." See Bates Gill et al. *Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism Report Release*. CSIS, February 2009.



Asia in recent years suggests increasing cooperation on the part of East Asian actors, this cannot be taken as evidence of regional integration.⁶¹

Multilateral efforts are often built on top of existing bilateral relationships. This makes sense functionally as actors rely on preexisting patterns of cooperation and consultation to address collective action problems involving numerous players.⁶² But multiple, competing interests also reinforce a “layering” process since actors often times lack the will or power to replace or undermine existing institutions. What does this mean for East Asian multilateralism? It means South Korea and Japan will continue to rely on their alliance with the United States.⁶³ In fact, results from a 2009 CSIS survey of strategic elites suggest that Japanese and Korean elites lack confidence in the efficacy of multilateral security mechanisms.⁶⁴ China, on the other hand, has a large stake in defining the future regional architecture. China at times has actively promoted multilateral security mechanisms as demonstrated by its performance in the SPT, thereby enhancing its reputation and profile in East Asia. U.S. policymakers in principle also support greater regional cooperation. However, they remain reticent in putting forward a concrete set of guiding principles towards greater regional cooperation, thus contributing to the ad hoc nature of Asian regionalism.⁶⁵ Consequently, the evolution of Northeast Asia’s regional security architecture is progressing haphazardly rather than with any clear intentionality.

Finally, an increase in multilateral activity has not been commensurate with any growing sense of regional identity. At the rhetorical level, wide support for an East Asian community does exist; regional actors do recognize the potential utility in developing regional institutions to promote cooperation on issues ranging from free trade, energy cooperation, or non-proliferation.⁶⁶ When confronted with acute security concerns, however, East Asian actors more often rely on their own capabilities or existing institutional ties rather than multilateral mechanisms to meet security needs. Reactions to the *Cheonan* incident or Japan’s detainment of a Chinese fishing trawler and its crew members attest to the salience of national identities over regional ones.⁶⁷ Although a deepening web of regional ties has helped foster greater connectedness among Northeast Asians, on political-military issues, national identities often appear more salient than regional ones.⁶⁸

Scholarship on East Asian multilateralism presents competing visions of Northeast Asia’s future. Some take an Asia-centric approach emphasizing greater integration among Asian states

⁶¹ Muthiah Alagappa, “Regionalism in the 21st Century.” *Smart Talk No. 9*. Seoul, East Asia Institute 2010.

⁶² Cha 2011, 41.

⁶³ The CSIS survey indicated 57% of Korean and 54% of Japanese strategic elites relied on bilateral alliances than their own capabilities or multilateral institutions for security. Gill et. al., 13.

⁶⁴ Gill et. al., 2009.

⁶⁵ Scott Snyder, “U.S. Domestic Politics and Multilateral Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia.” 1-8. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2009, 1.

⁶⁶ Gill et. al., 2009, vi.

⁶⁷ Economic interdependence and cultural exchanges have created a greater sense of regional identity. However, this identity is experience more at a personal or cultural level rather than at the political level.

⁶⁸ These differences and competing interests were reflected to some extent in the SPT.



as an alternative and perhaps counterweight to U.S.-led bilateralism. Others take a more inclusive view regarding the geographic scope and membership of an East Asian community.⁶⁹ “Skeptics” emphasize breadth over depth, favoring informal institutions over formal ones and find claims about regional identity as dubious. Still others take nearly as given the development of a Northeast Asian community, citing bottom-up processes through increased civil societal, economic, and political interaction. What is clear from these disparate views is that they all point towards some degree of institutional change for the region.⁷⁰ The slow nature of institutional change makes predictions for Northeast Asia difficult. But if theories of historical institutional change offer any insights, it is likely that change will be incremental and that any future regional security architecture will likely have to include the United States. ■

⁶⁹ The 2009 CSIS survey found no consensus on the membership of an East Asian community. Gill et. al. 2009, vi.

⁷⁰ Distinct interpretations of Northeast Asia’s future regional architecture may partially be based on different levels of progress between economic and security issues. On one hand, economic indicators do point towards increasing integration and cooperation making greater regional institutionalization feasible. On the other, evidence taken from security and foreign policy examples leads to greater skepticism.



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Author's Biography

Andrew Yeo
Catholic University of America

Andrew Yeo is Assistant Professor of Politics at the Catholic University of America. His broad research interests lie at the intersection of international relations and comparative politics. His first book, *Activists, Alliances, and Anti-U.S. Base Protests* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) explores the politics of overseas military bases, focusing on the impact of security alliances on social movements and state response to domestic anti-base pressure. His other works have appeared in *Comparative Politics*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *Journal of East Asian Studies*. Professor Yeo's research and teaching interests include international relations theory, international security, overseas U.S. military presence, social movements and transnational politics, East Asia, and North Korea. He received his PhD from Cornell University in 2008.

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- Young-Hwan Shin, the Executive Director of EAI Fellows Program
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 112) fellowships@eai.or.kr
- Typeset by Young-Hwan Shin

