



# Visions of North-East Asia China, Japan, Korea and the EU

by Nicola Casarini

North-East Asia has become one of the key engines of world economic growth. Yet the political climate among the countries of the region has worsened lately – due to historical, as well as territorial disputes. This situation has led regional leaders to propose various plans for addressing what Republic of Korea (ROK) President Park Geun-hye has called ‘North-East Asia’s paradox’: namely, that of a region characterised by growing economic interdependence but hampered by many contentious issues when it comes to security matters.

President Park launched her initiative last year. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe used the podium of this year’s Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore to press forward his vision – and this came just a few days after China’s President Xi Jinping had presented his own plan for regional security.

The Obama administration follows these developments closely, given Washington’s interests and responsibilities in the area. The EU may consider paying attention to these plans too – not only for the obvious economic reasons but also because it is a strategic partner of all three key regional countries.

## Same bed, different dreams

China’s vision for regional security was announced by Xi Jinping at the meeting of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building measures in Asia (CICA) in Shanghai on 21 May 2014. According to the Chinese President, CICA – whose 24 members include all the Central Asian nations plus countries like Russia, South Korea, Thailand, Iran and Turkey (but not the US) – should become a ‘security dialogue and cooperation platform’ and ‘establish a defence consultation mechanism’, including the creation of a security response centre for major emergencies. Xi’s vision of a new multilateral security mechanism for Asia would thus pass through CICA, where Japan is not a member but just an observer.

Prime Minister Abe envisions, instead, an Asian security framework centred on the US system of alliances and where Japan plays a central role. In his Shangri-La speech, he tried to deflect the deep concerns that some Asian countries still harbour about Japan assuming a stronger military role in the region – due to the history of Japanese imperialism – by emphasising Tokyo’s respect for the rule of law. Abe presented three principles: “making claims that are faithful in light of international



law; not resorting to force or coercion; and resolving all disputes through peaceful means.” The implicit criticism of China is evident, as its rivals in the territorial disputes often argue that China’s claims are nebulous and ill-defined, and based on history rather than legal principles. More explicit was Abe’s invitation to discuss controversial bilateral issues in the framework of the East Asian Summit (EAS).

Yet the main difference between China’s and Japan’s plans rests, unsurprisingly, on the role of the US. While Xi’s vision emphasises the uniquely – and exclusively – ‘Asian’ nature of his security concept, Abe sees the US as having a central role to play.

### The third bedfellow

President Park’s vision lies somewhere in-between. She first unveiled her security concept – the North East Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) – in a speech to a dedicated joint session of the US Congress last year. Her proposal calls for North-East Asian nations to enhance cooperation, first on soft security issues (such as climate change, terrorism prevention, cyber and space technology, nuclear safety) before expanding the trust-building process to more sensitive areas. It is an expanded version of Park’s ‘Korean Peninsula trust process’ – or *trustpolitik*, as it is commonly referred to – which aims to establish ‘mutually binding expectations based on global norms’. It also aims to promote greater exchanges and cooperation between the two Koreas with a view to building confidence and reducing tensions in the area.

While recognising the distinctive characteristics of North-East Asia, the NAPCI takes inspiration from Europe’s experience. Park has made explicit reference to the history of European integration and Franco-German reconciliation on various occasions. On 26 March 2014, at a summit in Berlin, President Park and Chancellor Merkel discussed the history of Franco-German rapprochement as well as Germany’s reunification and their possible relevance, respectively, for North-East Asia in general and the Korean peninsula in specific. Two days later, in Dresden, the South Korean President gave a speech – titled ‘An Initiative for Peaceful Unification on the Korean

Peninsula: Dresden - beyond division, toward integration’ – where she explicitly linked the easing of tensions between the two Koreas and the trust-building process in North-East Asia.

The NAPCI – of which the *trustpolitik* is an integral part – aims at creating the conditions for a ‘grand reconciliation’ between China, Japan and South Korea, which, in turn, might pave the way for a vast free trade zone among the three regional powers. In this plan, the US would maintain the role of an external security balancer.

Park’s security concept appears to be a virtual compromise between Xi’s and Abe’s visions as it includes elements that are considered essential by both. By proposing deeper economic integration among North-East Asia’s main powers as a preliminary step towards political integration, the NAPCI addresses China’s desire to maintain an Asian focus on any process leading to a possible multilateral security framework. By keeping the US involved as an external security balancer, the NAPCI takes into consideration Japanese concerns over a rising China, making sure that US military forces continue to guarantee regional security and the freedom of navigation.

### Trilateral efforts – and tensions

Seoul’s efforts at regional mediation are not new. The NAPCI builds on – and aims to boost – the Trilateral Cooperation based on the annual Trilateral Summit of the heads of state and government of China, Japan and South Korea. The Trilateral Summit was first proposed by South Korea in 2004, as a meeting outside the framework of the ASEAN+3 – itself a by-product of the Asia-Europe Meeting – with the three major economies of East Asia having a separate forum. The first Summit took place in Fukuoka (Japan) in December 2008 when the three countries met to discuss regional cooperation, the global economy, and disaster relief.

In addition to the Trilateral Summit, the three countries have established more than 50 trilateral consultative mechanisms, including 18 ministerial meetings and over 100 cooperative projects. In September 2011, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) was launched: based in Seoul,

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the TCS is an international organisation whose goal is to promote peace and prosperity among China, Japan and South Korea. On the basis of equal participation, each government covers 1/3 of the overall operational budget.

Since 2012, however, no Trilateral Summit has taken place, due to separate disputes over history as well as maritime territorial claims. Nevertheless, trilateral cooperation has continued at the ministerial, business and civil society level, indicating that important sectors of the three societies remain committed to regional integration.

### EU-North East Asia trade partnerships (2013)

Rank	Partners	Euro (billion)	% of total EU trade world-wide
2	China	428.3	12.5
7	Japan	110.5	3.3
10	South Korea	75.8	2.2

Source: Trade statistics database, DG Trade

The implementation of the NAPCI has the potential to revive the Trilateral Cooperation process (including the Trilateral Summit) and to act as a counterweight to the growing polarisation currently underway in the region.

In fact, the need for security and stability in North-East Asia has rarely been more pressing than now. Various events in the last few months have deepened divisions and frictions to such a point that last month Yun Byung-se, the ROK foreign minister, commented that 'it looks like a Pandora's box is being opened'.

After Obama's trip to the region at the end of April, tensions between China on the one hand, and Japan and the US on the other, have intensified. By extending the security guarantee of the US to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands – currently under Japanese control but claimed also by China – the Obama administration has, for the first time, taken a clear stance in support of the Japanese ally over the disputes that pit Tokyo against Beijing in the East China Sea.

China has reacted strongly to what it perceives as an encirclement policy. The US support for countries with which Beijing has sovereignty disputes has convinced the Chinese leadership to press ahead with plans for an alternative security bloc - the

outlines of which were presented by Xi Jinping at the recent CICA meeting.

The emergence of two competing blocs would be disruptive for regional – and global – prosperity. Of course, it is not only China-Japan relations that have worsened in recent times. Relations between South Korea and Japan, two key US allies, have also come under strain over the sovereignty of Dokdo/Takeshima islands – and differing interpretations of history. Seoul is displeased with Abe's sometimes ambivalent attitude *vis-à-vis* the legacy of the Second World War and his attempts to revise Japan's pacifist constitution. US support of a more robust role for Tokyo to offset Beijing's growing assertiveness is encouraging nationalist forces in Japan. These factors not only cause tensions between China and Japan, but also fuel fears and concerns within South Korea.

There is therefore an urgent need for the international community to send a clear message of support for those initiatives – such as the NAPCI – that seek to overcome (or just manage and contain) the divisions.

### EU support and engagement

The EU is well positioned to back the NAPCI. Not only is the Union untrammelled by binding military alliances in the region, but the drive for integration and reconciliation is very much part of its DNA, while also being one of its foreign policy objectives.

The EU can indeed engage the three North-East Asian powers on regional cooperation and trust-building. For instance, the Union is today China's biggest trading partner, the third largest for Japan, and the fourth most important export destination for South Korea. Almost a fifth of the EU's global external trade occurs with these countries, with which bilateral agreements have already been signed or are being negotiated. In 2010, Seoul and Brussels signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

In March 2013, the EU and Japan formally announced the launch of parallel negotiations on a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) and an FTA. In November 2013, Brussels and Beijing opened negotiations for a bilateral investment agreement that – if successful – could pave the way for a FTA. A possible free trade agreement among the three North-East Asian countries could thus complement the Union's own initiatives. Europe's presence in the region is also felt in technology and defence-related policy areas. The EU cooperates on space

technology and satellite navigation with China, South Korea and Japan (with the latter mainly at industrial level). This allows the Union to establish a foothold in the region's evolving space relations. Moreover, some EU member states collaborate with Japan and South Korea in a NATO framework – while France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy have also developed bilateral security and military ties with China.

The creation of the EEAS has added a political and security dimension to the Union's relations with North-East Asia. Since 2010, a EU-China High-Level Strategic Dialogue has been in place between VP/HR Ashton and the Chinese State Councillor responsible for foreign affairs. Since 2011, there is also a regular dialogue between Baroness Ashton and the Chinese Defence Minister. In March 2013, the EU and Japan announced the launch of negotiations for a Strategic Partnership Agreement that would also upgrade political relations. Since 2011, finally, an EU-Korea High-Level Political Dialogue has been in place between the EEAS Deputy Secretary General Helga Schmid and South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister.

This engagement is the consequence of the linkage that EU policy-makers have made between a possible escalation of tensions in the region and Europe's own prosperity. The Guidelines on the EU's Foreign and Security Policy in East Asia, adopted by the Council of the EU in December 2007 (and updated in 2012), acknowledge the strategic interest of the Union in the preservation of peace and stability in the area.

For its part, the United Kingdom, in its Strategic Defence and Security Review of October 2010, identifies East Asia as a region where changing security dynamics could have important implications for Britain's and Europe's security. And in its *Livre Blanc* on defence and national security published in July 2008 (and updated in 2013), the French government states that 'Asia is one of the main regions where rivalries or conflicts could destabilise the international security system', adding that 'major conflicts in Asia would directly affect the interests of France and Europe'. EU support for the NAPCI can thus build on the dialogues established by the EEAS as well as some member states' own initiatives for peace and security in East Asia.

The joint declaration from the EU-ROK Summit on 8 November 2013 explicitly stated that 'the EU's experience could bring a positive contribution to the promotion of cooperative approaches to strengthen peace and stability in East Asia'. As

a concrete step forward, an agreement between the two partners recently established a framework for the participation of the Republic of Korea in European Union crisis management operations.

The two sides also agreed to host a EU-Korea Joint Conference in September 2014 (coorganised by the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and the EUISS) to exchange views on regional cooperation in East Asia.

## Asia 3+EU?

Could EU-Korea cooperation be eventually enlarged to China and Japan to create a sub-regional 'quadrilateral' dialogue – something like an Asia 3+EU? There would surely be no shortage of issues and experiences to discuss – first at track-two level, and then maybe at a more formal one.

The agenda could include (without being limited to) some of the non-traditional security issues outlined in the NAPCI. On all those, the EU may well have something to offer to enhance the discussion.

On non-proliferation and disarmament, the EU3+3 negotiations with Iran on behalf of the international community could offer relevant insights. On nuclear safety, Europe's experience of joint management of resources (as in the case of Euratom) could provide useful precedents and parameters. With regard to space technology, the experience of the European Space Agency could be considered by Chinese, Japanese and South Korean policy-makers with a view to creating an Asian Space Agency (the EU's ongoing collaboration on space technology and satellite navigation with all three North-East Asian countries could facilitate such an endeavour).

On climate change, the 'quadrilogue' may seek to find some common ground and to come to some shared understanding ahead of the Paris 2015 UN Climate Change Conference. On crisis management and confidence-building measures, finally, the experience *inter alia* of the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) could offer insights for creating a distinctive tailored mechanism for early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation in North-East Asia – with a view to closing the Pandora's box before it is too late.

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