

EAI  
Commentary  
No. 31

Sook-Jong Lee

Future Direction of Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative:  
Maritime Disputes and South Korea's *Trustpolitik*

November 20, 2013

**Trust-building through Agenda-Setting in  
Maritime Territorial Disputes rather than  
Comprehensive Indirect Cooperation**

The Park Geun-hye administration's recent foreign policy buzz word is the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative. This idea is an extension of *trustpolitik*, which is her basic foreign policy philosophy. *Trustpolitik* in the region is prescribed to overcome the "Asian Paradox" of recurring conflicts among countries in the region despite their growing socioeconomic interdependence. Once the logic of the initiative is refined, the government plans to actively publicize it and seek agreements with neighboring countries. Some have proposed the bold idea of holding a Northeast Asia summit, officially announcing the birth of the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative, and bringing a secretariat into South Korea. At this point a total six countries – South Korea, the U.S, China, Japan, Russia, and Mongolia, are involved in the initiative (seven countries if North Korea is included).

This idea itself is certainly something to welcome. Once trust is firmly established in East Asian politics, where interests are acutely tense, it will be possible to mitigate perceived threats that are easy to overestimate due to the prevalence of distrust in the region and to lower the possibility of a small disagreement erupting into a large conflict resulting from a misjudgment of intentions. Indeed, maritime territorial disputes between China and Japan, China and Southeast Asian countries, and South Korea and Japan – over the Dokdo Islands – are unfolding quite dangerously. Despite its promise, however, the methodology of the Peace and Cooperation Initiative fails to provide a clear answer on how to build trust in the harsh reality of Northeast Asian international relations.

A wide variety of ideas can be recommended, but the search for an answer should start with considering what needs to be avoided first. A comprehensive and abstract initiative needs to be shunned. Kevin Rudd, the former prime minister of Australia, drew attention by proposing the Asia-Pacific Community (APC) in June 2008, but he could not demonstrate any concrete developments in the plan by the time he stepped down in June 2010. Yukio Hatoyama, the former prime minister of Japan, proposed to build the East Asian Community (EAC) after his inauguration in September 2009, but he failed to develop it beyond mere discourse by his resignation in July 2010. Then-President Lee Myung-bak announced the New Asia Initiative in 2009 during his second year in office, but it amounted to hardly more than rhetoric for a diplomatic tour. Since President Park has a five-year guaranteed term, it seems she operates under more optimal conditions for achieving regional policy success when compared to a short-lived prime minister in the parliamentary system. However, even if President Park takes decisive action next year to materialize the initiative, only four years will remain to institutionalize it. Policy implementation with a focus on a single key issue, rather than broad cooperation or a half-baked theory of community, should be pursued in order to not repeat the mistakes of the previous administrations.

EAI Commentary seeks to play a leading role in providing profound perspectives and timely suggestions toward current issues.

The East Asia Institute  
#909 Sampoong B/D  
Eulji-ro 158  
Jung-gu  
Seoul 100-786  
Republic of Korea

© EAI 2013

ISBN  
978-89-92395-55-7  
95340

[www.eai.or.kr](http://www.eai.or.kr)

*“Thus, for the sake of safety and stability, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative must focus on the maritime territorial conflicts.”*

Then, which issues should be focused on? In order to further cooperation, it is commonly agreed that problems with relatively low levels of conflicting interests and distrust – environmental issues, natural disasters, and cyber security – should come before traditional security issues that are characterized by explicit conflicts among Northeast Asian countries. In other words, trust will eventually be established if cooperation becomes habituated through a soft agenda. This resembles the functional approach to peace, which asserts the importance of deepening interdependence among countries through economic interaction and creating an environment where peace is preferable. The biggest problem of such an approach is that deepening economic interdependence has not yet built trust in a way to guarantee peace.

There have been numerous cases in which diplomatic conflicts over territorial or historical problems resulted in the postponement or nullification of economic cooperation. For example, the South Korea-Japan Free Trade Agreement, initiated in 1997, entered the negotiation stage at the governmental level after an extensive amount of study. The process, however, was halted in 2003 after South Korea-Japan relations became aggravated over the Dokdo issue, and it remains in a deadlock to this day. It is far more common to witness security issues cool off the prospects of economic cooperation rather than spillover effects from economic agreements mitigating security issues. After observing the severe feud between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the chance to build a constructive Sino-Japanese partnership through a soft agenda seems to be remote. Furthermore, the Korea-Japan relationship, which worsened over history issues, does not show signs of recovery either. Therefore, the

possibility of conflict and division resulting from maritime territorial problems in Northeast Asia is too urgent to depend on a roundabout way to build trust for the long-term. It is appropriate to target the fundamental source of mutual distrust and conflict in order to build the trust necessary to conduct the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative.

The thorniest problems due to a lack of trust in Northeast Asia are the conflicts over historical interpretations and maritime territorial disputes. The historical problems relate to Japan's reconciliation with South Korea and China over its imperial conquests. There has been an effort to collaborate on a study of the region's history and to co-write a textbook in order to reduce the gap in historical interpretations and avoid biased history education. Also, human rights issues, such as comfort women, have evolved through a multilateral approach. Historical disputes are a problem which can eventually be resolved 'voluntarily' in the 'long run,' in some sense, as generations change. History issues can be a source of mutual distrust among the public, but they will not develop to the point where mistrust can drive the countries into physical confrontation and escalate into war. On the other hand, maritime territorial disputes are like a powder keg, where a small incident can spark a military clash, and pose the most serious threat to regional peace. Thus, for the sake of safety and stability, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative must focus on the maritime territorial conflicts.

The possibility that maritime territorial disputes will destabilize the East Asian region beyond just the sphere of Northeast Asia is expected to increase structurally. Let's look at China. China seems to have an unyielding stance because of its domestic political circumstances – not because of its confidence in

*“Although South Korea cannot directly intervene in the dispute between China and Japan, it can set up a regional multilateral dialogue on maritime territorial disputes.”*

its military power. As socioeconomic disparity in China increases, the confrontation between practical liberal reformists and communist ideologists will aggravate the regional security situation, because the ideologists will attack the reformists for being too weak on territorial rights. If the ideologists’ appeal to nationalism gains power, the Chinese government will feel increasing political pressure to resolve the current conflict surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which has lingered since Japan’s nationalization of the islands. On the other hand, Japan, which has effective control over the islands, can invoke the right of self-defense under the current legal system.

It is also likely that, if Japan’s right for collective defense becomes possible, Japan would press for U.S. intervention in the island dispute to pay for its enhanced military cooperation with the U.S. Leaders in Washington would attempt to prevent any physical confrontation between China and Japan over the islands, but they could not ignore the worrisome prospect of unintentionally letting such a situation develop, considering the high likelihood of a military clash prompted by an inadvertent incident. Although a physical confrontation is hardly likely over the Dokdo Islands, a deterioration of the situation could occur if Japan adopted an aggressive stance by filing a lawsuit in an international court. Moreover, it is not out of the realm of possibility that right-wing forces in Japan could take a sudden and unexpected physical action. Among the region’s maritime territorial disputes, the Kuril Islands issue between Russia and Japan is the one with the lowest possibility of a physical clash, but it has been treated as one of the most important diplomatic issues in Russo-Japanese relations.

## **South Korea’s Initiative for Trust-Building in Maritime Territorial Disputes**

The standard argument is that it is hard for South Korea to take the initiative in Northeast Asian territorial and maritime disputes, based on two grounds. First, it is doubtful whether or not powerful nations such as China or Japan would accept the leadership of South Korea since it is comparatively weaker. From this perspective, it makes sense to argue that only a superpower like the United States can restrain China from escalating the level of force in maritime disputes with ASEAN countries in the South China Sea or prevent Japan from reacting excessively. However, this is a negative measure meant to deter physical confrontation rather than a positive process which prevents the physical confrontation from happening in the first place through trust building. China will not continue to tolerate the U.S. playing such a role near its territory. If so, which country – China or Japan – would be able to forge a compromise to stop further conflict and maintain the status quo in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands disputes? It is unlikely that Chinese or Japanese leaders would propose a compromise due to domestic political criticism.

In this respect, the role of South Korea is significant. Although South Korea cannot directly intervene in the dispute between China and Japan, it can set up a regional multilateral dialogue on maritime territorial disputes. This is possible because, first, South Korea is perceived as less threatening due to its relatively weaker national power, and, secondly, China and Japan have a more positive perception of South Korea than each has for the other. Furthermore, since South Korea is also involved in its own disputes over Dokdo, the Fisheries Agreement, and cases of illegal fishing with its neighbors, it should take the initiative by forming a multilateral dialogue.

*“It will be easier to facilitate cooperation in marine resource disputes – rather than territorial disputes – because it will only require the establishment of fair rules to manage competing claims.”*

The second reason it is difficult for South Korea to take the lead in maritime territorial disputes is that they are directly related to traditional security issues. Due to the sensitivity of sovereignty issues, South Korea and other countries cannot embark upon a path of concrete cooperation. Maritime territorial disputes are multifaceted and extend beyond problems of territorial dominion and military strategy, which are difficult to yield to other countries. There are also issues over the fair use of maritime resources, with countries contesting Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and jointly-controlled fishing areas. The joint development of maritime resources can lead to higher profits, and multilateral cooperation is imperative for the preservation of the marine environment. Hence, the main purpose of multilateral cooperation in this regard will be to manage trouble with an aim to prevent escalation from reaching the use of military force, rather than the complete resolution of the problem.

There are many lessons Northeast Asian countries can learn from the confidence-building process of ASEAN nations. Confidence-building in Southeast Asia has been criticized for its weakness in crafting legal, binding mechanisms, but those nations have constructed their own standards for forging peaceful resolutions by forming agreements and holding multilateral dialogues. It will be easier to facilitate cooperation in marine resource disputes – rather than territorial disputes – because it will only require the establishment of fair rules to manage competing claims. The joint development of marine resources and preservation of the marine environment are two areas in which multilateral cooperation is comparatively easier. If the leaders of Korea, China, and Japan can announce their will to resolve maritime disputes in a peaceful manner, it will be a good starting point. Since maritime territorial disputes include agen-

das of various difficulties, East Asian nations can build trust by first cooperating on easier agendas, which can then pave the way for dealing with the more difficult issues.

### **Institutionalization from Trust-Building between Political Leaders**

Among scholars who study the concept of trust, there has been a multifaceted discussion. From an economic perspective, an important factor in interpreting the results of trust is the strategic consideration of costs and benefits to reduce the risk. From an ethical perspective, the emotional status created by socialization under the structure of rules is largely emphasized. With respect to the economic viewpoint, the commonly-cited definition of trust is “A trusts B to do X” introduced by Russell Hardin.<sup>1</sup> B acts in accordance with A’s expectation that B will do X, of which A’s expectation or trust is based on A’s assumption that it is in B’s interest to act in tandem with A’s interest. Those scholars, who suggest the cost-benefit calculation to explain why people take the risk of trusting others, pay attention to the utility of trust in resolving the collective action dilemma. The definition of the ethical viewpoint by Denise Rousseau et al., which emphasizes temperamental or emotional trust, is frequently cited. According to them, “trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another.”<sup>2</sup>

Confidence, with a connotation similar to trust, is mechanical compliance with the opinion or act of another party, with no regard for an alternative, based on a positive anticipation for the expected outcome. On the other hand, trust is retractable and can be easily broken, because it is a belief chosen among other viable

“..a trustor’s willingness to put trust in the other party – overcoming the fear of the potential risk – is crucial at a stage prior to the institutionalization when trust has not yet been established.”

options despite the uncertainty of motive, intention, and future behavior of the other party. Although the repeated exchange of positive experiences and the formation of an institution which effectively imposes surveillance and restrictions play an important role in ensuring the continuity of trust, a trustor’s willingness to put trust in the other party – overcoming the fear of the potential risk – is crucial at a stage prior to the institutionalization when trust has not yet been established.

Relations between countries are the work of political leaders, who are only human beings after all. Therefore, in order to conduct *trustpolitik* in maritime disputes, political leaders should demonstrate their commitment to trusting the other party. Only then can subsequent institutionalization efforts to manage situations under commonly agreed rules get started.

### **Park Administration’s Assets for Implementing the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative**

South Korea designs and implements new regional policies whenever a new government takes office. The regional environment, including the status and role of South Korea within regional cooperation institutions, has always changed. Current diplomatic relations among Northeast Asian countries are passing the lowest point. Therefore, expectations are high for the Initiative to ease the situation. The goodwill and respect which China bears toward President Park as an individual will be useful for South Korea’s initiative to encourage Chinese participation in multilateral dialogue on maritime territorial disputes in the region. Diplomatic relations with Japan, which have seriously deteriorated since last year, need to be normalized in

order to establish a foothold for a regional multilateral dialogue.

Park’s image inside and outside South Korea gives her a sense of principle, integrity, and goodwill – all of which strengthen her credibility. These assets allow her to lead multilateral dialogue within the region. The asset of ‘trustworthiness’ can be used to convince other parties of the reliability of her leadership while she tries to take the initiative in multilateral dialogue. There are two risks involved in becoming the first one to demonstrate trust. First, it might fail to draw any positive responses from neighboring leaders for the proposed Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative. To make it worse, they could end up displaying deeper distrust. Although this would be unfortunate, Park has nothing to lose. Secondly, there might be little domestic support for a move to take over leadership of multilateral dialogue on the maritime territorial disputes. However, Park has received steadily rising approval ratings, suggesting that low support for her initiative is unlikely. Since her increasing ratings resulted from her demonstration of leadership in national security after her inauguration, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative can boost this cycle if it is framed persuasively.

Beyond the mere calculation of the risks involved, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, as a sign of *trustpolitik*, will have a positive influence on civic education. Empathy is the ability to see things from another’s perspective, which is effective in comprehending others’ positions. Although empathy does not always bring sympathy, it at least helps build trust through continuous communication based on understanding the other side. If President Park takes the lead by practicing empathy, the citizens of neighboring countries, as well as South Koreans, will be emotionally touched and motivated to coop-

erate. In order for the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative to be different from previous regional peace policies, Park's trust leadership, rather than an institution, is the key. ■

——— *Sook-Jong Lee* is a professor in the Department of Public Administration and the Graduate School of Governance at Sungkyunkwan University. Professor Lee currently serves as president of the East Asia Institute.

#### Endnotes

---

1. Russell Hardin. 1993. "The Street Level Epistemology of Trust." *Politics and Society* 21, 4: 505-29.
2. Denise Rousseau et als. 1998. "Not So Different After All: A Cross-Discipline View of Trust." *Academy of Management Review* 23, 3: 393-404.