

Towards a Northeast Asia Security Community: Implications for Korea's Growth and Economic Development

Prospects for a Northeast Asia Security Framework

by Scott Snyder

Twenty years ago there were many reasons to expect that a regional security framework in Northeast Asia would be just around the corner. The Cold War was ending, and official proposals for new types of Asian security arrangements popped up regularly from many different sources. In a speech in Vladivostok in 1986 Mikhail Gorbachev proposed expanded regional cooperation on the model of the Council for Security Cooperation in Europe.¹ In a speech to the United Nations in 1988, President Roh Tae-woo of South Korea proposed a six-party Consultative Conference for Peace in Northeast Asia.² In November of 1991, former U.S. secretary of state James Baker advocated the establishment of a two-plus-four mechanism for dealing with Korean tensions.³ Susan Shirk established the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue in 1993 with financial support from the U.S. government as a track-two process that would support the development of an official regional security community.⁴ However, none of these proposals gained traction at that time as a viable official, institutionalized mechanism for multilateral management of Northeast Asia's security problems.

Despite the fact that regional security frameworks have flourished in many other parts of the world, Northeast Asia, in security terms, remains underinstitutionalized. This point is particularly notable in comparison with the regionalized structures for security cooperation that have developed in other regions, including the Organization of African States, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Organization of American States. The ASEAN Regional Forum, established in 1994, is the organization that comes closest to providing a venue for multilateral cooperation on security issues, but thus far this conference has not mobilized action to address regional conflicts and is particularly weak in its capacity to address Northeast Asian problems.

There are many different reasons that experts offer to explain the failure of Northeast Asian countries to establish an official regional security framework. Some say that Northeast Asia's character as the nexus for great-power interactions makes a regionalized security arrangement particularly difficult to establish.⁵ Others attribute the failure of regional security mechanisms to take root to historical legacies; for instance, the perpetuation of a divided Korea is widely perceived as having prevented the Cold War from ending on the Korean peninsula or in Northeast Asia. Among those who focus on the intractability of the conflict on the Korean peninsula as a reason why a multilateral security mechanism has not evolved, some blame North Korean intransigence while others suggest that the U.S. alliance is the primary obstacle that stands in the way of a multilateral security community in Northeast Asia. Still another explanation points to deeper historical legacies deriving from the scars of Japanese imperialism and the failure of Japan and the other countries to fully come to terms with the effects of that experience.⁶

The failure to develop official regional security cooperation stands in stark contrast to the economic regionalization that has developed along with China's economic rise. Intra-Asian trade flows have risen from less than 30 percent in the 1980s to more than 40 percent today. These trade flows initially followed regional investment in China as a low-cost center for production of goods destined for U.S. markets, but increasingly components are manufactured for sale in home markets or as a means by which to gain a foothold in China's growing consumer market.⁷ So far, there is little evidence that economic regionalism is spilling over into the security realm. Likewise, functional cooperation on issues related to the environment, transnational crime, or other nontraditional security issues has grown, but this cooperation has not yet been sufficient to support the development of an official region-based mechanism for addressing common security interests.

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Pragmatic approaches to the construction of Northeast Asian regionalism have focused less on the obstacles that have prevented germination of a multilateral security arrangement and more on the complexities surrounding which country is best positioned to play a leadership role in promoting such a framework—or the reasons why various regional actors are disqualified from being able to play such a leadership role. Even if a satisfactory political leader were to emerge, there are active differences about what would constitute a suitable agenda for such a framework and the extent to which—in an Asian context—institutionalization of such a framework would be desirable. For all of these reasons, efforts to date to establish a Northeast Asia–focused structure or to envision an agenda practical enough or compelling enough to launch a fully formed regional institution dedicated to addressing security issues multilaterally have not been successful. From this perspective, prospects for establishing a regional security mechanism in Asia might seem dim.

North Korea's Role in Promoting a Security Framework in Northeast Asia

Despite pessimism regarding factors that have inhibited the development of a regional security architecture in Northeast Asia, it is possible to have hope for such a framework based on the halting, ad hoc efforts in that direction that have been operationalized during the past two decades, with each effort building on past experiences toward the establishment of a full-scale framework for multilateral management of regional security issues in Northeast Asia.

Ironically, North Korea—as the actor that has catalyzed common concerns that have created a basis for cooperation among the other parties in the region—might be regarded as the biggest promoter of multilateral security cooperation in the region. When the North Koreans threatened to pull out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1993, the United States initiated a bilateral dialogue with the DPRK, but the resulting Agreed Framework could not be implemented by the United States alone without support from its allies. The Agreed Framework called for the establishment of a multilateral consortium named the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) to implement the terms of the deal. The fact that the bilaterally negotiated Geneva Agreed Framework required a multilateral structure to pursue its own implementation provided clear evidence that a U.S.-led bilateral approach to solving North Korea–related issues, while necessary, was by itself insufficient. KEDO was a practical step forward in forging multilateral cooperation to meet North Korea's energy security needs as a solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis, but, as an exercise in building regional cooperation, the core membership was incomplete. KEDO's governing board included representa-

tives from Japan, South Korea, the United States, and the European Union, but China and Russia declined to participate.⁸

Subsequently, the four-party talks were established in the late 1990s by the United States, China, and North and South Korea in an attempt to promote confidence-building measures and move from an armistice to a peace regime on the Korean peninsula. But the four-party talks did more to promote Chinese cooperation with the United States and South Korea than to make progress on problems involving North Korea. A third form of multilateral cooperation during this period involved the establishment of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) among the United States, South Korea, and Japan. This group did much to overcome differences among allies in support of the Perry process in the late 1990s, as all parties supported cooperative efforts to engage North Korea in more active cooperation on the basis of Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy. Suspicions (later proved unfounded) about covert North Korean nuclear efforts at Keumchangri and North Korea's Taepo-dong launch in 1998 catalyzed the establishment of TCOG to address differences in policy priorities among the three countries.⁹

In the context of the second North Korean nuclear crisis that developed in 2002 as a result of concerns that North Korea was pursuing a covert uranium-enrichment path to the development of nuclear weapons, the ongoing six-party talks were established as a means by which to include major regional stakeholders in a cooperative effort to address the security challenges posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons pursuits. Early in the crisis, it became apparent that the United States had no option for unilateral action through military means, so President George W. Bush cast the second crisis as a “regional issue,” and the six-party talks were established, with China taking the lead role as host and mediator for the process.¹⁰ This time, all the regional stakeholders are represented in the forum, but the dialogue itself made little initial progress owing to a combination of U.S. reluctance to engage with North Korea and North Korea's continued focus on the United States.

During the second Bush administration, the chief U.S. negotiator, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, was able to obtain authority to negotiate bilaterally with the North Korean delegation in the context of the six-party talks. Following intensive negotiations during July–September of 2005, all parties agreed to the 19 September 2005 “Joint Statement of Principles” for addressing the North Korean nuclear crisis. The document contained few concrete measures, only pledges that the various sides would move forward on the basis of “words for words” and “actions for actions.” The joint statement marked the first time

that the regional stakeholders had identified and articulated the minimum common rhetorical objectives that through joint action and implementation might in the future bind the parties together as a “security community.” The common objectives identified were the (1) the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, (2) normalization of relations among all the regional stakeholders, (3) economic development (focused on North Korea), and (4) peace on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia. The rhetorical shared objectives that might constitute a Northeast Asian “security community” had been identified, but it was not yet clear that the parties were willing to take actions in pursuit of those objectives. In retrospect, the joint statement marked the inauguration of a rhetorical commitment to collective action in the service of these four objectives, but circumstances related to the Banco Delta Asia issue, through which North Korean funds were frozen in a Macao-based bank suspected of facilitating money laundering, prevented this rhetoric from being translated into action.¹¹

North Korea’s October 2006 nuclear test and the drive for UN Security Council Resolution 1718 imposing economic sanctions on North Korea appeared to toss aside any prospect for further negotiations related to the North Korean nuclear issue. But, within weeks of the test, Assistant Secretary Hill returned to Beijing for several rounds of bilateral and multilateral talks, which eventually resulted in the 13 February “implementing agreement” that carefully calibrated delivery of one million tons of heavy fuel oil or equivalent and a U.S. pledge to begin the process of removing North Korea from the list of terrorist-sponsoring nations and ending application of the Trading with the Enemy Act in return for North Korea’s shutdown and disabling of its Yongbyon facilities and a “complete and correct” declaration of North Korea’s existing nuclear facilities as a first step toward denuclearization. Implementation of this agreement dragged to the end of the Bush administration, with the prospect that additional steps toward the objective of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula will have to be dealt with by a successor administration, presumably within the context of the six-party framework.

Beyond the North Korean nuclear issue, it is likely that North Korea’s reconstruction and integration into the regional political, economic, and security order will remain a focal point for active regional cooperation in the economic and political spheres for some time. Multilateral cooperation in the areas of energy security and economic development are already being developed on the basis of a shared assessment of North Korea’s economic development needs, and many of those needs are being responded to in the context of the six-party talks. There have also been nascent multilateral efforts such as the Greater Tumen Initiative to promote regional economic development in Northeast Asia

as a way of both mitigating renewed tensions and positioning for possible economic development and integration of North Korea, northeastern China, and the Russian Far East with the rest of Northeast Asia. Those efforts are poised to enjoy success if only it is possible to finally address the core sources of instability and insecurity on the Korean peninsula and in North Korea.

South Korean Views of Multilateral Security Cooperation

Both liberal and conservative administrations in South Korea have shown support for establishment of a regional security architecture in Northeast Asia. As mentioned above, Roh Tae-woo proposed a six-party Consultative Conference for Peace in Northeast Asia in 1988. Kim Young-sam’s policy initiatives were linked to globalization, but he also promoted a two-plus-two arrangement and supported four-party talks in the mid-1990s as steps toward multilateral cooperation to deal with North Korea.

Under the progressive administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, the idea that South Korea could be a catalyst for promotion of regional cooperation was linked to and regarded as mutually supportive with inter-Korean reconciliation. Kim Dae-jung promoted the East Asia Vision Group and was an active promoter of multilateral cooperation to address regional security issues, in part to ensure that a positive regional environment existed in support of the Sunshine Policy.

Roh Moo-hyun established the Presidential Commission on Northeast Asian Cooperation and promoted its Northeast Asia cooperation initiative based on the idea that South Korea would be best positioned as a regional leader to promote such cooperation. From this perspective, promoting inter-Korean reconciliation was a response to globalization and the accompanying growth of institutional connections in Northeast Asia needed to support increased economic interdependence. It was also linked to the idea that South Korea could utilize such connections in order to promote peace and act as a positive force in promoting regional stability through the strengthening and institutionalization of functional cooperation.¹² Roh Moo-hyun, with his 2005 proposal that South Korea play a “balancer” role in mediating Sino-Japanese rivalry, catalyzed an active discussion of how South Korea might be positioned in Northeast Asia and what types of influence South Korea might mobilize as a regional actor. Although Roh’s “balancer” proposal was quickly rebuffed and set aside, the idea of South Korea playing a balancing role persists and may be better informed by the concept of South Korea as a pivot in Northeast Asia.

For South Korea, promotion of regional security cooperation may be justified both on the basis of a liberal rationale, the idea that institutionalization of economic and security cooperation will mitigate the likelihood of regional conflict, and from a realist perspective since the promotion of regional security cooperation gives South Korea a seat at the table with larger powers and makes it more difficult for larger powers to independently forge agreements on security issues that would have a direct impact on Korean security. Although the Lee Myung-bak administration has not yet presented a clear perspective on the desirability of enhanced regional security cooperation, it has prioritized good relations with the surrounding four major powers as a focus for his initial foreign policy efforts. Some South Korean conservatives have argued that a return to the alliance simply ignores Northeast Asia's increased economic interdependence. Another conservative argument that has been made by South Koreans is that South Korea can be valuable in the context of efforts to hedge against China's rise. From both conservative and liberal perspectives, this discussion is one component of a broader discussion about how South Korea should position itself and what types of influence South Korea can muster as a "middle power" in Northeast Asia.¹³

Increasing South Korean interest in Northeast Asian regionalism has corresponded with both the rise of regional dialogue in East Asia and South Korea's own rising confidence and increased capacity to play a diplomatic role as a regional if not global actor—rather than being confined to parochial concerns and limited in its capacity to defend its own interests, as was the case when South Korea served as the doormat for great-power rivalry at the end of the nineteenth century. The task of channeling South Korea's capacity and forming a doctrine that might wisely guide the use of those capacities has, however, thus far eluded Korean strategic thinkers, who must contend with the legacy of a mind-set that has traditionally conceived South Korean interests in reaction and in opposition to well-defined threats (anticommunism, anti-Japanese colonialism, antihegemony). South Korean efforts to define a constructive contribution to regionalism have constituted a first cut at defining South Korea's role and contribution in positive terms, but the task of defining and operationalizing such a role remains an exceedingly difficult one for South Korean diplomats and policymakers, whose job has been complicated by an increasingly volatile, reactive, expressive, and nationalistic South Korean public opinion on foreign policy-related matters.

Six-Party Talks and the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism

The process of the six-party talks, as the latest stage in the development of ad hoc multilateral approaches to the North Korean nuclear challenge, has arguably laid the founda-

tions for the development of a permanent regional security mechanism in Northeast Asia. The 19 September 2005 joint statement of the six-party talks provides a bare-bones, lowest-common-denominator set of principles that might form the basis for common action in the sphere of regional politics and security, essentially identifying the objectives of the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, normalization of diplomatic relations among all six parties, economic development on the Korean peninsula, and the pursuit of a permanent peace regime as the basis for future cooperation. As the lowest-common-denominator set of agreed principles among major parties in Northeast Asia, the joint statement has laid a foundation for regional cooperation that is somewhat analogous to the role of the Helsinki Final Act, which provided the basis for institutionalization of security cooperation in Europe through the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).¹⁴ The joint statement provides a much more narrow mandate for promotion of regional cooperation than did the Helsinki Final Act, however, suggesting that the basis for institutionalized regional security cooperation in Northeast Asia remains much more narrow than was the case in Europe in the 1970s. James Goodby argues that the operationalization of a Northeast Asian peace and security mechanism along the lines of the Helsinki Final Act might draw on language regarding freedom of travel and contact and the establishment of military confidence-building measures, some of which have already been agreed to but were never fully implemented in the 1992 inter-Korean "Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North" (known as the Basic Agreement).¹⁵

Since the announcement of the 13 February 2007 six-party talks implementing agreement that outlined the first steps to be taken toward denuclearization and normalization of relations between North Korea and the United States and North Korea and Japan, the six parties have formed five working groups, including one to establish a Northeast Asia Peace and Security mechanism as a multilateral vehicle for promoting security beyond the settlement of the North Korean nuclear crisis. The creation of the Northeast Asia Peace and Security working group as the single working group that has been envisioned to outlast the six-party process shows that all the participants in the six-party talks have now officially accepted in principle the idea of a permanent, institutionalized regional security framework, although clearly ideas differ about how such a mechanism would work in practice. One might argue that despite the provisional nature of the six-party talks, with the sole focus of the talks on the North Korean nuclear issue, the establishment of the six-party talks is in fact an institutionalized multilateral mechanism in Northeast Asia.

Some have argued that the establishment of the six-party talks itself has had positive collateral influence in terms of promoting confidence building among the parties, developing habits of cooperation, providing venues for bilateral cooperation even in the context of strained political relations, and providing a vehicle for managing tensions related to the North Korean nuclear crisis. But differing perspectives among the countries on the utility of the six-party process suggest that these positive contributions do not necessarily guarantee that the six-party talks will be institutionalized or lead to the establishment of a regional security mechanism.¹⁶ Jack Pritchard has suggested that the key ingredient currently missing from the establishment of a Northeast Asian security architecture is U.S. leadership and that there is an emerging set of common interests (transparency, avoidance of miscalculation, peaceful dispute resolution, disaster relief, energy security, pandemic response coordination, and avoidance of incidents at sea) in support of which all the regional parties should be willing to join together.¹⁷

If the six-party talks represent the first step toward the institutionalization of security cooperation in Northeast Asia, the establishment of the talks also suggests that the role and prospects for such an institutional dialogue beyond dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue may face significant obstacles. First, the focus of the six-party process solely on North Korea has the effect of limiting the capacity and utility of the talks to address traditional and nontraditional regional security issues beyond North Korea. By this logic, after the North Korean nuclear issue is no longer with us, it will be hard to imagine a security agenda that will successfully mobilize full and constructive participation by all the parties at the negotiating table. Instead of being the precursor to the institutionalization of a multilateral security forum that will eventually grow out of the six-party talks, the six-party talks might actually already be a multilateral security forum; but the salience of this forum is now directly tied to the existence of North Korea-related issues as problems to be resolved.

Despite the in-principle acceptance of the concept of a Northeast Asia peace and security mechanism to be established beyond the North Korean nuclear crisis, it is hard to imagine on which issues the mechanism would generate added value that would have unique application to Northeast Asia or go beyond the contributions of, for instance, the ASEAN Regional Forum in addressing issues unique to the stability and security of the region. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that it is necessary for the six-party talks to show success in order to provide the basis for a Northeast Asian regional security mechanism, it is possible that such a mechanism may be more likely to become semipermanent in the event that North Korea-related issues continue to be a preoccupation and a focal point for regional cooperation on

a protracted basis—or that North Korean political stability and economic reconstruction be adapted as an agenda for regional cooperation that extends beyond the nuclear issue itself.

Second, if North Korea were not the focal point of the talks, it is questionable under current circumstances whether any other issue would be big enough to mobilize effective regional dialogue and cooperation. Functional or nontraditional security issues may be addressed in other forums and do not inherently capture the same level of priority among participants in the six-party talks. It is difficult to imagine that Northeast Asia's great powers would allow bilateral territorial or political disputes to be regionalized, even if those issues have spillover security effects on the rest of the region.

Third, the reluctance of the six parties to meet without North Korea illustrates the extent to which North Korea continues to control the agenda for the talks despite the common regional interests in stability and co-prosperity that are threatened by North Korea. North Korea's presence changes the nature of the dialogue and inhibits frank conversation regarding the collective interests and priorities of the other regional actors, yet it has also been impossible thus far for regional actors to discuss their common interests openly in the absence of North Korea.

Despite efforts by the Bush administration to hold such a meeting and recommendations from several quarters that advocate the establishment of a Northeast Asia regional forum to address security, energy, health, and economic issues, the fact that it has thus far been impossible to establish a Northeast Asian five-party dialogue for fear of what the North Koreans will think—even if the proposed agenda is not North Korea-focused—illustrates the extent to which North Korean issues hold regional dialogue hostage as well as the difficulty of having a regional dialogue that does not focus on North Korea.¹⁸ The dysfunctional nature of the six-party talks in this respect prevents the establishment of a proper foundation upon which to build a longer-term institutionalized framework or venue for discussion of common interests in security and prosperity.

Minilateral Building Blocks and Multilateral Security Cooperation

Given the urgency and protracted nature of the issues surrounding North Korea's nuclear program, it is unlikely that the task of building a Northeast Asia peace and security mechanism will gain early attention from leaders of the six parties in the near term. The need to address regional security issues beyond North Korea is driving new forms of regional security dialogue at the official level, most notably

through the proposal of new forms of trilateral dialogue and cooperation among states in Northeast Asia. For instance, a trilateral summit among the leaders of Japan, China, and South Korea may soon be held for the first time independent of the ASEAN Plus Three meetings, which have provided the venue for annual meetings since 2001. In 2007, the PRC proposed a trilateral meeting with the United States and Japan that might address confidence building and military transparency issues critical to security dilemmas among great powers in Northeast Asia. Although concerns about South Korea's reaction to the dialogue have caused hesitation on the U.S. side, a new administration may consider moving forward with such an initiative. A China-U.S.-South Korea dialogue might play an important role in shaping the future of the Korean peninsula.

The trilateral U.S.-Japan-Australia security dialogue has been ongoing since 2005, and renewed security coordination between the United States and its alliance partners in Japan and South Korea was initiated in October 2008, replicating a trilateral dialogue initiated in the late 1990s that had been suspended in 2003 in the context of rising bilateral tensions between the Japan and South Korea. These overlapping trilateral dialogues could play an important role in building a foundation and an agenda for institutionalization of regional security dialogue in Northeast Asia.

Each of these forms of trilateral dialogue is being undertaken for different reasons and to meet differing objectives, but they illustrate a trend toward addressing a specific set of security concerns on a multilateral basis with partners perceived to be best suited to deal with specific issues. Some are motivated by a renewed sense of threat, while others are designed to promote confidence building among countries that face the necessity of managing tensions or promoting cooperation so as to forestall the prospect of renewed tensions. These two contradictory rationales for promoting regionalism, first on a trilateral basis and perhaps subsequently among multiple parties, are likely to continue to coexist with each other for some time, with the intensity and agenda of each dialogue waxing or waning in response to changes in the regional security environment and in the respective threat perceptions and security dilemmas of the various parties in Northeast Asia. Each type of minilateral cooperation also supports a trend toward the strengthening of multilateralism as a means to address security problems on the basis of shared interests—either commonly perceived threats or a need to mitigate and overcome suspicions and promote confidence among parties with potentially conflicting interests. In this sense, multiple, renewed forms of trilateral cooperation are serving as the building blocks for multilateral security approaches while simultaneously hedging against potential regional sources of insecurity.

An outstanding question in Northeast Asia that has been a central component of debate over the future of multilateral security cooperation has been whether such a mechanism would be compatible or contradictory with the role of U.S. military alliances in the region. There are mixed and conflicting views on this subject among participants in the six-party talks. It has become standard practice for Chinese to characterize the concept of alliance as a legacy of the Cold War and to underscore the need to abandon alliance thinking in favor of cooperative multilateralism as a more suitable model for preserving cooperation among states in the future, while conventional wisdom among U.S. analysts is that there is no contradiction between the United States' having Asian alliances and the establishment of a multilateral security framework in Northeast Asia.¹⁹ In contrast, some U.S. analysts may consider the possibility that common social values may enable the expansion of tasks in the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances, and that those tasks might be synchronized through a bottom-up regional approach to cooperation that emphasizes common objectives of both alliances to maintain regional stability.

As new circumstances develop, it is likely that responses to the leading security challenges that emerge in Northeast Asia will be characterized by deepening cooperation, but it also suggests that the development of multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia will continue to be organic, ad hoc, and issue driven for the time being, rather than developing according to a grand bureaucratic plan for institutionalization. The desirability and likelihood that a new institution will be established in the absence of a convergence of a common purpose, interests, and norms for operation remain low for now, but the ingredients for the eventual evolution of broader multilateral security cooperation exist, and they offer potential for development in the longer term.

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Endnotes

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¹⁴ James Goodby and Markku Heiskanen, in "Emerging Regional Security Architecture in Northeast Asia," Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online 08-001A, 3 January 2008, argued that a regional understanding analogous to that represented by the Helsinki Final Act in Europe will be a necessary component of a new regional security architecture in Asia.

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¹⁶ Sheila Smith, "Assessing the Six Party Talks in NE Asia: Some Relationships Flourish, Others Suffer" (presentation at KORUS House, Washington, D.C., 22 May 2008), www.dynamic-korea.com/korus_house/kh_view_news.php?main=KHF&sub=&uid=200800232641&keyword=.

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¹⁸ See Ian Bremmer, Choi Sung-hong, and Yoriko Kawaguchi, "Northeast Asia: Defusing a Dangerous Region," *International Herald Tribune*, 30 December 2005, www.iht.com/articles/2005/12/29/opinion/edbremmer.php. Francis Fukuyama has also called for the United States to take the lead in devising a new security architecture in East Asia, possibly through the establishment of five-party talks; see Francis Fukuyama, "Re-envisioning Asia," *Foreign Affairs* (January–February 2005): 75–87.

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