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**CHINA AND NORTHEAST ASIA'S REGIONAL  
SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: THE SIX-PARTY TALKS  
AS A CASE OF CHINESE REGIME-BUILDING?**

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# **CHINA AND NORTHEAST ASIA'S REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: THE SIX-PARTY TALKS AS A CASE OF CHINESE REGIME-BUILDING?<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

China, as host of the six-party talks first convened in August 2003, has been one of the major players in dealing with the North Korean nuclear crisis that began in October 2002. China's role in the talks has helped to start shaping a stable regional security architecture in Northeast Asia. Beijing's leadership in building a new security regime in the region suggests a change on Chinese perspectives regarding its role within the broader East Asia's regional security architecture. After years of passiveness with regards to involvement in security regime building in the region, China has evolved into an active leader seeking to shape a more institutionalized security. Despite the obstacles to building a functioning regime in Northeast Asia, China seems poised to continue working towards creation of a more stable and institutionalized security architecture.

**Keywords:** China, six-party talks, East Asia, regime-building, security architecture

## **1. Introduction**

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank participants in the China's Role in Global and Regional Governance conference, organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) on March 10-11, 2011, and the Innovation and Invention: China and Global Influences workshop, organized by Oxford University on September 1-2, 2011, for their remarks on previous versions of this paper. I would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

China's approach to East Asian security has shifted in the past two decades. Over the course of this period, Chinese policy makers have moved from passiveness to leadership, from assertiveness to cooperation, and from unilateralism to multilateralism. China plays an increasingly central role in East Asia's security architecture. Beijing participates in a multitude of forums and shapes security debates not only because of its rise, but through advancing solutions to regional conundrums as well.

Due to its economic, political, diplomatic and military rise, China is poised to become the main challenger to American hegemony at the global level. In East Asia, American domination was contested throughout the Cold War. Enmity between the Soviet Union and the United States brought intra- and inter-state conflict to several regions, including East Asia. Meanwhile, Sino-American rivalry prior to normalization of relations was played in the fields of Korea and Vietnam. Concurrently, the Sino-Soviet split of the late 1950s was not solved until Mikhail Gorbachev visited Beijing in 1989. Thus, East Asia was tripolar throughout the Cold War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it can be said that East Asia has become bipolar [35]. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the approach that Beijing takes to the security architecture of East Asia and the role that it sees itself playing in any possible regime-building.

The aim of this article is to show how China is working to build a new regional security architecture in Northeast Asia, and to explain why Chinese leaders are seeking to create such an order. The article will analyze China's role in building a new regional security architecture by examining Chinese behaviour in the six-party talks aimed at dealing with the second North Korean nuclear crisis. These talks helped China to move beyond the mixture of passiveness and assertiveness that characterized its regional security policy in the 1990s. They made

Chinese leaders realize the benefits of becoming actively involved in managing security issues, as well as of the advantages of multilateralism.

There is an ongoing debate regarding China's rise and the impact that it will have on East Asia as a whole and Northeast Asia in particular.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, there are those who believe that China is developing an assertive policy towards the region. They point out that China has been involved in clashes and spats with other countries in the region. There are unresolved disputes around issues such as sovereignty claims over the waters of the South China Sea, and Beijing has allegedly been unwilling to solve them diplomatically. Also, according to those who maintain this position, the modernization of the People's Liberation Army and China's growing military expenditure indicate that Beijing is flexing its military muscle.

On the other hand, there are those who have a more positive view regarding China's behaviour. They point out that Beijing has been socialized in regional practices, learning how to operate within an environment in which the use of military force to solve inter-state disputes is, increasingly, not an option. Those defending this position explain that China's military build-up is consistent with its increasing power, and therefore should not be seen as a threat by its neighbours. Moreover, unresolved territorial disputes have not produced substantial clashes since the end of the Cold War. Therefore, Beijing's approach towards regional security is characterized by acceptance of the status quo.

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<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of this debate, see Shambaugh [38].

However, little attention has been paid to the possibility that China might be willing to create a regional security architecture in Northeast Asia. Given China's rise, it should be unsurprising that Beijing might want to construct a security regime. The reasons why China would seek to build a new regional security architecture will be explained in detail below. But here suffices to say that the still inconclusive debate regarding China's approach towards security in Northeast Asia ought to contemplate the possibility that Chinese leaders are seeking to build a regime helping them to satisfy their security-related goals.

The six-party talks are the most appropriate case to illustrate China's role in shaping a new security architecture in East Asia. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, the six-party talks are a security institution. Other groupings, such as ASEAN+3 or the East Asia Summit, have goals beyond promoting regional security cooperation. Secondly, the six-party talks are specific to Northeast Asia. Other security institutions in which China is involved, most notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that Beijing helped to create, cover other regions in which actors and power balances are different. Finally, China has been actively involved in the development and functioning of the six-party talks from the onset. The two other East Asian security institutions of which China is part, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting – Plus, were ASEAN initiatives. Being a security institution specific to East Asia in which China has taken a leading role from the beginning, make the six-party talks an excellent case to judge how China would like a new regional security architecture to look like and why.

This article will proceed as follows. The next section will summarize China's approach to regional security prior to the creation of the six-party talks. Then, the article will focus on Beijing's work to make the six-party talks succeed and the reasons behind this. Afterwards,

the article will delve on the obstacles that China has encountered to build an institution to its liking. The section after then briefly examines China's approach to the six-party talks since their interruption in December 2008. A concluding section will put an end to the article.

## **2. China and East Asian security prior to the six-party talks**

Describing Chinese regional security policy prior to the establishment of six-party talks as both passive and assertive might seem contradictory. However, Beijing's policy during the period was characterized by both elements. China was not involved in developing the ARF, launched in 1994 under the initiative of ASEAN. Similarly, Beijing was not particularly enthusiastic about track II projects such as the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue or the Shangri-La Dialogue, among others. Beijing did participate in security-related and other institutions being created in East Asia. However, it was never one of the leaders in any of them. As Shambaugh explains, China would only become proactively engaged in regional institutions towards the end of the decade [38], p. 69).

In fact, throughout the 1990s China seemed to be content with engaging in buck-passing to the United States even on issues with the potential to spill over inside its borders, such as the North Korean nuclear conundrum.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the first nuclear crisis of 1993-94, China's role was minimal, with Beijing being unenthusiastic about mediating the crisis [23], p. 362). China blocked United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions on Pyongyang. But other than that, Beijing made no attempt to get involved in solving the crisis. Similarly, when attending four-party talks convened in 1997-99 to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue,

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<sup>3</sup> Buck-passing is used in this article as is commonly understood in the field of International Relations - the refusal by a state to deal with an aggressor so as to get another power to deal with the threat.

Beijing was a passive participant. Despite being on the negotiation table, China did not advance any meaningful proposal to deal with it. Sha Zukang, Chinese ambassador for Arms Control and Disarmament Affairs, argued that “as for initiatives on the part of China, we can’t go into the kitchen and do the cooking when we don’t know how to cook.”<sup>4</sup> Beijing passed the buck to Washington, looking for the Bill Clinton administration to deal bilaterally with Pyongyang.

On the other hand, China displayed Cold War-style assertiveness when it came to dealing with issues that Chinese leaders thought of as central to the security of their country. Two of them stood out: Taiwan and the South China Sea. In 1995-96, the third Taiwan Strait crisis took place, with China conducting missile tests and air and naval exercises in response first to Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui’s visit to the United States and then Taipei’s first free elections. These two events signified a watershed on the Taiwan issue. By allowing Lee to visit the United States, even if on a private capacity, Washington was implicitly telling Beijing that Taipei was not isolated. Lee’s decision to hold free elections further improved the image of Taiwan in the West. Beijing’s missile tests and military exercises proved that it was willing to use military intimidation to affect United States-Taiwan relations and Taiwanese politics.<sup>5</sup>

As for the South China Sea, China had diplomatic spats with several Southeast Asian countries during the 1990s. Stern territorial claims fuelled suspicions about China’s rise among ASEAN countries. China and Vietnam had clashed over the Spratly Islands in 1988. Six years later, in 1994, the Philippines protested Chinese construction of infrastructure in the

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Opall-Rome [22], p. 22).

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the crisis, see Ross [36].



Mischief Reef, controlled by Beijing but claimed by Manila, among others. There were similar diplomatic spats with other countries in the region, most notably Vietnam. Oil and natural gas reserves in the South China Sea would be welcomed by any resource-poor East Asian country controlling them. On several occasions, China and Southeast Asian countries dispatched their navies in a show of force. Clashes such as those of 1988 did not occur, but tensions did not subside throughout the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

Chinese policy began to drift away from assertiveness and towards confidence building in the late 1990s and early 2000s [38] p. 70). Beijing acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2003, after having signed the year before a bilateral free trade agreement and a joint declaration on cooperation in non-traditional security issues with ASEAN [41]. Chinese officials had also become more active in ARF meetings. Differently from the North Korean nuclear issue, China seemed interested in being part of the solution to security conundrums in Southeast Asia. Outside of East Asia, China had been key to the creation of the Shanghai Five in 1996, renamed as the SCO in 2001.

The change in attitude from China towards international institutions was related to the partial success of socialization efforts conducted by the Clinton administration and ASEAN. Socialization made Beijing more comfortable in multilateral institutions underpinned by cooperation, changing the behaviour of Chinese officials involved in them [17]. Moreover, reactions by East Asian countries to the Tiananmen incident of 1989 were positively perceived by Chinese leaders. The incident had led to stern international condemnation of Beijing, but no East Asian country except for Japan criticized China. Barely a year after the

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<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of tensions in the South China Sea throughout the 1990s, see Ang [2].

incident, Tokyo had reversed its position. Hence, no East Asian country was actively involved in the isolation of China after the Tiananmen incident [38], p. 67. Moreover, East Asian leaders were appreciative of China's behaviour during the 1997-98 financial crisis in the region, which they regarded as responsible. Meanwhile, Chinese officials grew in confidence about their role in the region following the success of their response to the crisis [38], p. 68). Nonetheless, China still refrained from taking a leading role in regional security. It would not be until the six-party talks were established that Beijing would begin to see itself as a possible leader of security and confidence building initiatives in the region.

### **3. The six-party talks and China's security regime-building in East Asia**

Six-party talks including China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Russia and the United States were launched in August 2003. The talks were established to deal with the second North Korean nuclear crisis. The crisis began in October 2002, when an American delegation headed by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Jim Kelly accused North Korea of having a highly enriched uranium programme, in breach of the 1994 Agreed Framework signed by Washington and Pyongyang to put an end to the first North Korean nuclear crisis. North Korea's First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Sok-ju admitted possession of the programme [13], pp. 93-94). Even though Pyongyang later retracted from Kang's assertion, the United States decided to the de facto terminate application of the Agreed Framework by stopping fuel shipments to North Korea. Pyongyang reciprocated by withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Trilateral talks involving China, North Korea and the United States were held in April 2003, but they failed to end the crisis.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview of how the crisis developed, see [18].

Following the escalation of tensions and the failure of the trilateral talks, the George W. Bush administration began work to convene a multilateral forum to discuss the crisis. Even though ostensibly established to end the crisis, the ambition of the Bush administration went beyond dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue. From the onset, Washington saw the multilateral forum as a means to engage China in the resolution of a security conundrum and, subsequently, increase confidence at the bilateral and regional levels. Bush administration officials were adamant in having China work together with the United States to solve the crisis, insisting on Beijing to take a leading role in the resolution of one of East Asia's most enduring security dilemmas [13], pp. 300-328).

Beijing seemed at first hesitant to become deeply involved in the resolution of the crisis. The Hu Jintao government publicly and privately stated that North Korea's nuclear programme was a bilateral issue to be solved between Washington and Pyongyang. Even though China acted as host of the talks, it took a relatively passive approach towards discussions during the first three rounds, held in 2003 and 2004 [13], pp. 337-361). China did not change the passive stance towards the North Korean nuclear issue that it had taken during the first nuclear crisis. Not directly threatened by the Kim Jong Il regime's programme and assured of stability in North Korea, Beijing had limited material incentive to become more involved in solving the crisis.

Thus, China's approach to regional security seemed not to have evolved significantly from the period between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Beijing was partaking in an initiative aimed at solving a security conundrum through multilateral diplomacy. China was hosting the talks, and Chinese officials were involved in six-party talks meetings. But it was other parties

who were offering solutions to the nuclear crisis. South Korea was particularly active in this respect, bringing a proposal to the second round [13], p. 349), and working with the United States on the proposal that Washington presented on the third round [13], p. 361). North Korea made its own proposal as well [13], pp. 349 & 359). The United States, reluctant to become actively engaged in the talks, finally presented during the third round a proposal previously developed with South Korea [13], p. 357). As chair of the talks, China played an important role in liaising among the six parties. However, concrete proposals to solve the crisis were the prerogative of both Koreas and the United States, all of which had a greater interest in putting an end to it. Therefore, as of 2004 it could not be said that Beijing had taken a leading role in solving a security problem in East Asia.

#### *Towards regime-building in Northeast Asia*

China changed its approach to the six-party talks in 2005. During the fourth round, stretching over two periods of time between July and September, China became actively involved in managing the crisis. Chinese officials worked during and between meetings to bring together the position of all parties, taking into account their views and producing several drafts until an agreement amenable to all countries was reached. Thus, the second phase of the fourth round of the talks resulted in a joint statement laying out the principles and steps for solving the crisis [13], p. 392). The statement later served as the blueprint for two more detailed implementation documents issued in February and October 2007, respectively. As of 2012, in the aftermath of heightened inter-Korean tensions due to the November 2009 battle of

Daecheong,<sup>8</sup> the sinking of South Korea's Navy vessel *Cheonan* in March 2010, and Pyongyang's bombardment of Yeonpyeong eight months later, the six-party talks are still seen by Beijing [43], as well as Washington [33], as the best venue to deal with North Korea's behaviour (more on this below). China is still taking an active role in dealing with the North Korean regime.

Chinese behaviour during the six-party talks' meeting that took place between July 2005 and September 2005 was markedly different from that it displayed throughout the three meetings of 2003-04. Chinese officials brought their own proposals to the meeting, and worked to integrate together the solutions presented by other parties to the talks [13], pp. 377-392). Afterwards, Beijing would remain active until the December 2008 round, the last to be convened at the time of writing. Between meetings, the Hu Jintao government dispatched its envoys to the talks to other countries more often than before [13]. China also sought to work towards a more stable security institution for Northeast Asia. Beijing supported the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism (NEAPSM) working group established in the February 2007 joint statement. Envisioned to provide Northeast Asia with an institution to deal with region-specific security issues, the NEAPSM would be a significant step if properly developed.

Outside of the six-party talks' process, China also demonstrated its willingness to take an active role in solving the North Korean nuclear issue. Following Pyongyang's missile and nuclear tests conducted in, respectively, July and October 2006, China supported UNSC

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<sup>8</sup> The battle was the result of a North Korean patrol boat navigating beyond the Northern Limit Line that acts as a de facto maritime boundary between both Koreas in the Yellow Sea.

sanctions. This marked a significant change from Chinese behaviour throughout the first nuclear crisis, when Beijing refused to support any sanction on North Korea. Furthermore, the Hu government allowed financial sanctions on Banco Delta Asia, a Macau-based bank holding significant North Korean assets, to be implemented [12]. This showed that Beijing was willing to put pressure on Pyongyang. Concurrently, the Hu government also encouraged the Bush administration to engage North Korea through diplomacy following the 2006 tests [32], p. 150). China therefore took a leading role in dealing with a security quagmire through non-military means.

The change in Chinese behaviour was driven by two inter-related factors. Firstly, there was a shift in policy from the Bush administration towards the North Korean nuclear issue. This change in behaviour was characterised by a more proactive and less antagonistic approach towards North Korea, which became increasingly evident as hawks left the Bush administration. Secondly, the change in behaviour from the Bush administration allowed Chinese officials favouring a policy based on treating North Korea as a “normal” country to put their approach into practice. It was not possible to implement this approach as long as there was a threat of the US attacking North Korea. This threat dissipated as doves began to dominate Bush administration policy towards Pyongyang.

There is an ongoing debate among Chinese elites regarding relations with North Korea, dating to at least the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, there are elites who argue that North Korea should be treated as a special country. Chinese participation in the Korean War of 1950-53, the long-standing bilateral security treaty dating back to 1961 and North Korea’s strategic location are

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<sup>9</sup> For two excellent analyses of this debate and the rationale behind it, see [27, 29].

some of the reasons why China should treat North Korea differently from other countries, according to this logic. Thus, Beijing should protect Pyongyang from alleged threats coming from the US.

On the other hand, there are Chinese elites who believe that China should treat North Korea like a “normal” country, meaning that Beijing should deal with Pyongyang as it does with any other actor. Those supporting this approach argue that, since Cold War-style East-West divisions no longer exist, China should put its interests first. Thus, there is no reason for Beijing not to follow a North Korean policy mixing carrots and sticks, or even to antagonize Pyongyang when its behaviour threatens Chinese interests. Therefore, China should promote policies that strengthen its own security, with North Korean concerns being secondary. From 2005 onwards, this approach seems to have guided China’s policy towards North Korea in particular and Northeast Asia in general.

#### *The six-party talks and China’s role in the security of Northeast Asia*

As already stated, the main aim of this article is to show how and why China is working to shape a new security regime in East Asia. The positive experience of the six-party talks in terms of improving relations among the major powers in Northeast Asia serves to understand the objectives China wants to achieve with such a regime, as well as the mechanisms Beijing seeks to develop to fulfil them. Even though the North Korean nuclear issue is yet to be solved, relations between China, Japan and South Korea have improved over the past few years, as will be shown later. Furthermore, China and the United States have a clearer understanding of each other’s position towards North Korea in particular and Northeast Asian international relations in general.

In the specific case of Northeast Asia, China seems to have two primary objectives when it comes to constructing a security regime. The first one is confidence building among the three main powers in the region: Japan, South Korea and China itself. The rise of China produced adverse reactions in Japan and uneasiness in South Korea. In April 1996, Japan signed a joint declaration on security with the United States in which both countries reaffirmed the validity of the treaty that has governed bilateral security relations since 1960. The declaration was signed one month after China had conducted missile tests in response to Taiwan's then-upcoming first-ever free democratic election. Tokyo had been ambiguous with regards to its commitment to the 1960 treaty following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but China's tests convinced Japan of the usefulness of reinforcing its security ties with the United States [8], pp. 61-62). In 1998 Tokyo would also take the decision to join Washington's Theatre Missile Defence project, a response to North Korea's missile test a few months earlier but partly a result of China's military build-up as well [16], pp. 6-7).

As for South Korea, the rise of China brought fears of economic decline in the 1990s, exacerbated in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis. This was a common worry among most East Asian countries, afraid of a "hollowing out" effect that would weaken their economies [1], pp. 164-165). In particular, South Koreans were concerned about being economically squeezed by China and Japan, unable to compete with the technologically advanced neighbour to their East and with the cheaper labour to their West. To a certain extent, Japan also shared these concerns regarding China's economic rise. Hence, even if the third Taiwan Strait crisis had not taken place China's rise would have created a negative perception among its neighbours. Moreover, Beijing's perceived support to the Kim regime helped to foster this uneasiness as well.



Thanks to the six-party talks, Beijing was able to start dispelling Tokyo's and Seoul's fears. Japanese and South Korean officials noted that their Chinese counterparts were acting responsibly. Praising China's actions as host of the talks, they expressed confidence in having their views heard and taken into account.<sup>10</sup> They could also realize that China's position with regards to North Korea was more nuanced than previously thought. Certainly, Beijing did not want the collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime. But China was also willing to act though on North Korea. As already stated, Beijing allowed North Korea's accounts on Macau-based Banco Delta Asia to be frozen, thus inflicting economic pain on the Kim Jong Il government.<sup>11</sup> China also allowed UNSC sanctions on Pyongyang to be passed following North Korea's 2006 missile and nuclear tests. In 2009 Beijing agreed to stricter UNSC sanctions following Pyongyang's second nuclear test.

A second objective of China's security regime in Northeast Asia seems to be to manage relations with the United States in a dual way: by building confidence with doves in Washington and soft balancing American hawks. It has long been noted that American foreign policy officials can be divided into the categories of doves and hawks, the former more supportive of cooperation with third parties and the latter more willing to flex their country's military muscle and conduct unilateral actions [30]. The Bush administration was no different, with doves, represented by Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice during their respective tenures as secretaries of State, and hawks, represented by Vice President Dick

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with senior South Korea MOFAT official, 4 August 2008, Seoul; interview with senior South Korea MOFAT official, 8 August 2008, Seoul; interview with senior Japan MOFA official, 14 May 2009, London.

<sup>11</sup> Being based on Chinese territory, the freezing of Banco Delta Asia's North Korea-held accounts needed to be carried out by the Chinese authorities.

Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld while Secretary of Defence, disagreeing on whether to go to war in Iraq, how to deal with North Korea, or, indeed, the best way to approach relations with China.<sup>12</sup>

Aware of this dove-hawk divide, Chinese officials used the six-party talks to support the doves' position towards North Korea, built around dialogue and cooperation, and contain the hawks' preference for pressure on the Kim regime to force collapse. By supporting those American officials with a similar position to theirs, Chinese participants in the talks were able to defend Beijing's interests through alignment with American doves. This enhanced the confidence of the latter on Chinese officials, no longer perceived as a guarantor of North Korea's provocative behaviour.<sup>13</sup> Concurrently, the talks allowed China to soft balance hawkish officials, a more cost-effective and realistic tactic than hard balancing.<sup>14</sup> Figure 1 summarizes China's goals with regards to a Northeast Asian security regime, as well as the mechanism to achieve them.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with US Department of State official, 24 March 2008, Washington, DC; interview with senior US Department of Defence official, 31 March 2008, Washington, DC.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with US Department of State official, 24 March 2008, Washington, DC; interview with senior US Department of State official, 25 March 2008, Washington, DC.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that the dove-hawk distinction has become less relevant to the policy of the Obama administration towards North Korea. No strong hawkish voice has emerged throughout the first term of the administration rejecting dialogue with Pyongyang as a matter of principle, and there has been no suggestion that Washington has contemplated forceful regime change in Pyongyang. Nevertheless, China could use the security regime it is trying to build in Northeast Asia to soft balance American hawks that might hold significant power in any future American administration.

**Figure 1. China’s security regime-building in Northeast Asia**

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Goal 1      | Confidence building with Japan and South Korea                            |
| Goal 2      | Confidence building with American doves and soft balancing American hawks |
| Mechanism 1 | Institutionalized multilateral dialogue                                   |
| Mechanism 2 | Institutionalized trilateral summit with Japan and South Korea            |

The mechanism for China to construct a Northeast Asia-specific security regime is two-fold. The first mechanism is institutionalized multilateral dialogue. Creating a security organization in the region is not realistic as long as the North Korean nuclear issue has not been resolved and Pyongyang does not normalize diplomatic relations with Washington, Tokyo and perhaps Seoul as well. An institutionalized multilateral dialogue is a more pragmatic option under the current security dynamics in Northeast Asia. The six-party talks served this function from August 2003 to December 2008, but have not been convened since. However, the six-party talks have only been interrupted, not terminated yet. All participants, including the United States under the presidency of Barack Obama, have at some point called for the talks to be resumed. China has been especially adamant in solving the North Korean nuclear issue through this mechanism. In contrast to its position from the early 1990s to the early 2000s, buck-passing is not an option for Beijing anymore.<sup>15</sup>

Beijing envisions this mechanism moving beyond the six-party talks in terms of scope and degree of institutionalization.<sup>16</sup> The February 2007 joint statement established a NEAPSM

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with senior China MFA official, 26 July 2011, London.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with senior China MFA official, 22 April 2009, London.

working group. The mechanism would deal with security matters beyond the North Korean nuclear conundrum, and would meet regularly rather than on a case-by-case basis. Even though the working group to establish the mechanism has not met since 2008, this does not mean that the idea has been abandoned. Chinese officials have kept referring to it [11], track II dialogues including representatives from China and studying the feasibility of the mechanism are running [39], and the intention is for the mechanism to be established [34], p. 5).

The second mechanism being promoted by China to achieve the confidence building and soft balancing objectives outlined in figure 1 is institutionalized dialogue with Japan and South Korea through a trilateral summit. Annual Head of Government meetings to discuss security and economic issues as well as cooperation have been taking place since 2008. The 2009 change of government in Japan after 54 years of almost uninterrupted rule by the Liberal Democratic Party did not affect the summit, suggesting that this confidence building mechanism overrides possible party divisions. Discussions and a feasibility study on a free trade agreement have been launched as well.<sup>17</sup> Following the fifth summit meeting between the three countries, they agreed to launch negotiations for a trilateral FTA [25]. Were the agreement to materialize, relations among the three powers would probably strengthen. Meanwhile, confidence building in the area of security is already being boosted by a Foreign Minister summit dating back to 2007. The summit discusses Northeast Asian and East Asian affairs, and more recent dialogues on specific issues such as Asian affairs and counter-terrorism have been added to it.

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<sup>17</sup> For information on the summit, see [24].

An institutionalized summit increases trust among the three main players in Northeast Asian international relations, but it also serves to soft balance American hawks. Firstly, through the simple fact that security issues can be discussed without the presence of these hawks – or of any American official for that matter. Secondly, through direct engagement with Japan and South Korea. Both countries have long-standing security agreements with the United States, host American troops, and maintain a trilateral security dialogue at the Minister of Foreign Affairs level. The summit in which China takes part is held at a more senior level and involves economic issues as well. Hence, it has the potential to become more integrated both vertically and horizontally, thus further enhancing the soft balancing of American hawkish influence in the region.

Even though this trilateral dialogue would seem to work against the six-party talks, this is not necessarily the case. To begin with, the trilateral dialogue is more wide-ranging in scope. The dialogue began as an exercise to deal with financial matters in Northeast Asia. It has later evolved to include other items, including soft security issues. But hard security matters are not part of it. The trilateral dialogue could therefore complement the work of the six-party talks or the NEAPSM, if they are re-initiated. Furthermore, the trilateral dialogue could facilitate cooperation to soft balance American hawks. However, this soft balancing is not new; it already took place during six-party talks' meetings. Therefore, the trilateral dialogue would simply institutionalize an already existing practice rather than create a new source of tension in the region.

#### **4. Obstacles to building a functioning security regime**

The previous section analyzed the goals that China has pursued when building a security regime in Northeast Asia and the mechanisms the Hu government has employed to achieve this goal. Nevertheless, China has also encountered difficulties when constructing a workable security regime in the region. The most obvious has been the behaviour of North Korea. Pyongyang has supported and objected to the six-party talks at different times. It has also engaged in nuclear and missile brinkmanship on several occasions. The Kim Jong Il government did not show any discernible commitment to seriously engage in the construction of an enduring security regime in Northeast Asia. And it is soon to know what position the Kim Jong Un government will take on this issue.

Yet, arguably the behaviour of North Korea is not necessarily one of the major problems to China's security regime-building. A security regime to strengthen mutual confidence with Japan, South Korea and the United States does not automatically entail participation of North Korea. Indeed, Japan, South Korea and the United States have called for the creation of a Northeast Asia Regional Forum including China and Russia that would serve as a counterpart to the ARF [28], p. 4). Certainly, Northeast Asian peace cannot be said to have been achieved until Pyongyang establishes diplomatic relations with Tokyo and Washington, inter-Korean relations become less frictional, and North Korea's nuclear threat is under control. Nonetheless, if Beijing's objectives are those described in the previous section, then a working security regime can still exist. The North Korean nuclear conundrum may have not disappeared, but a regime enhancing mutual confidence with American doves, Japan and South Korea, and balancing American hawks can still be in place.

These being the two goals that Beijing sought to achieve from regime-building, there were two separate obstacles that the Hu government had to overcome. The first one was China's

traditional policy with regards to North Korea, which could have undermined its role as a balancer. When the six-party talks were first convened in 2003, China had a long history of protecting North Korea from international criticism and intervention. The relationship between China and its neighbour was still characterized by many as “lips-to-teeth” [14], p. 156). Indeed, Beijing had ensured that the UNSC refrained from imposing sanctions on Pyongyang during the first nuclear crisis, as explained above. Even if this characterization might have become obsolete when the six-party talks were launched, China still remained the closest country that North Korea could call an ally. Furthermore, the North Korean economy was still heavily dependent on trade and aid from its neighbour [14], p. 156). And China remained the only member of the six-party talks, aside from Russia, to have diplomatic relations with North Korea.

Thus, some officials expressed in private doubts about the role that China could play in the six-party talks.<sup>18</sup> There was mistrust towards Beijing. The Hu government had just replaced the Jiang Zemin government when the six-party talks were first convened. There was no reason to think that the new government would shift China’s decades-old policy of promoting North Korea’s political stability and economic openness. Therefore, China faced a major obstacle to obtain its goals: the countries with which it wanted to build confidence with did not trust Beijing’s intentions. There was a feeling that as long as stability was maintained in North Korea, China would not become actively involved in solving the second nuclear crisis.

To overcome this obstacle, China took several actions. Beijing became a real balancer in the six-party talks. Rather than siding with North Korea, Chinese officials took the needs and

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with US Department of State official, 28 March 2008, Washington, DC; interview with US Office of the Vice President official, 1 April 2008, Washington, DC.

objectives of all participants into consideration. The documents drafted by China reflected the position of all parties, not just those of the Kim Jong Il government [13], pp. 285-286). The Hu government even resorted to publicly criticizing some of North Korea's actions, which further demonstrated that China had moved beyond continuous defence of its neighbour regardless of its actions. This was clearer after Pyongyang's nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009. Furthermore, China allowed financial restrictions on Banco Delta Asia to be imposed and UNSC sanctions on North Korea to be passed. These actions were perceived by other countries in the region as evidence that China was willing to work together with them and to rein on North Korea's behaviour. For example, then-Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill stated that the talks had "done much more to bring the United States and China together than any other process" he was aware of.<sup>19</sup> South Korean<sup>20</sup> and Japanese<sup>21</sup> officials also expressed their belief that China had acted as a mediator throughout the six-party talks' process. The Hu government demonstrated that it was willing to remove its unconditional support for Pyongyang in return for improved relations with other actors in the region.

A second obstacle faced by China was the long-standing alliances between the United States and, respectively, Japan and South Korea. Both alliances date back decades. The alliances are not directly targeted at China or North Korea, but they are based on mutual defence. For example, the alliances prompted Japan and South Korea to assist American war efforts in Iraq. The alliances were supplemented by the Trilateral Cooperation and Oversight Group

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<sup>19</sup> Cited in [21], p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with senior South Korea MOFAT official, 4 August 2008, Seoul; interview with senior South Korea Ministry of Unification official, 26 August 2008, Seoul.

<sup>21</sup> Email exchange with Japan MOFA official, 16 September 2008, Seoul.



(TCOG). Meeting regularly since April 1999, the TCOG was the specific mechanism used by Japan, South Korea and the United States to coordinate their policies towards North Korea. Surviving the Clinton administration, the TCOG met at regular intervals during the early years of the Bush administration [37]. The TCOG allowed the three countries to seek a common position for the first rounds of the six-party talks.

The presence of Washington's two bilateral alliances and the TCOG could have undermined China's security regime-building efforts. Firstly, by presenting China with the task of confronting a common position by the three countries on how to deal with North Korea. And secondly, by allowing American hawks to obtain greater support for their policy towards North Korea and therefore making them more difficult to overcome. In addition, their respective alliances with the United States are cornerstones of Japan's and South Korea's respective security and defence policies. Thus, besides having to overcome an obstacle with regards to the North Korean nuclear issue, China needed to be able to manage to improve its relationship with Japan, South Korea and the United States on the security realm.

The Hu government was also able to surmount this obstacle and lay the foundations for a regional security regime. Chinese behaviour during six-party talks' meetings and on the issue of sanctions has already been explained. This behaviour was useful to undermine a possible common position from Seoul, Tokyo and Washington, which nonetheless was never developed due to their differences on how to deal with North Korea. Nevertheless, more important to weaken the impact of the two bilateral alliances was Chinese behaviour between six-party talks' meetings and outside of this framework. With regards to the former, Chinese officials met with their counterparts from the five other parties away from the actual rounds of meetings [13]. Hence, China was able to discuss the North Korean nuclear issue on a bilateral

basis. Thus, Beijing could convey to Seoul, Tokyo and Washington its views on how to bring a final solution to the crisis. These meetings did not directly undermine the bilateral alliances between the United States and the two other countries. However, they were an opportunity for China to reassure them of their intentions and to find common ground. This was clearest in the case of South Korea. Beijing and Seoul had similar views on how to deal with the nuclear issue while Roh Moo-hyun was the South Korean president. Hence, China and South Korea presented similar solutions to the crisis [26]. Even under conservative Lee Myung-bak's presidency, both countries would present the most serious proposal to revitalize the six-party talks in April 2011 [6].

As for China's behaviour outside of the six-party talks, the trilateral meetings with Japan and South Korea have already been described above. Rather than undermining the six-party talks, they serve to improve communication with Japan and South Korea. Thus, they could serve to find common ground on security matters if their scope is broadened. However, more useful to soft balance hawks, build confidence with doves, and make the Bush administration less reliant on the alliances with Japan and South Korea, was the Senior Dialogue between China and the United States first held in August 2005. Established to deal with security issues of mutual concern to Beijing and Washington, the dialogue brought together a large number of top-level officials from both countries. According to a Chinese official involved in it, the meetings were very helpful for Beijing and Washington to discuss security issues openly.<sup>22</sup>

Even though these bilateral and trilateral dialogues and bilateral consultations outside of six-party meetings could be seen as undermining multilateralism, actually they reinforce it by

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with China MFA official, 26 July 2011, London.

creating a diplomatic network that can function as a substitute for a proper security regime until a NEAPSM is established. Equally important for China, this network allows it to prevent the possibility of other countries coming up with a common position that would undermine its regime-building efforts. As Keohane and Nye explain, like-minded officials from different countries may create transgovernmental coalitions through direct contact in international institutions. These coalitions can serve for those officials to coordinate their policies and to influence the behaviour of their respective governments [20]. China's bilateral and trilateral dialogues and meetings can serve this function and supplement the work of the six-party talks whilst the latter are not reconvened.

## **5. China and the six-party talks post-2008**

Following the seventh round, held in December 2008, the six-party talks were interrupted. This means that Chinese efforts at building a working security regime have been disturbed, if not completely halted in the near term. Notwithstanding this disruption, Chinese behaviour since the seventh round of the six-party talks took place has demonstrated Beijing's shift from passiveness, assertiveness and unilateralism to leadership, cooperation and multilateralism. Indeed, North Korea's refusal to return to the six-party talks seems to have reinforced China's belief in a new approach towards its neighbour [29], pp. 119-120). At the regional level, China seems to have moved further towards building a viable security regime.

The ideal regime, the NEAPSM, is not a realistic possibility as long as the six-party talks are not reconvened. In the future, this mechanism might be used to deal with security problems in Northeast Asia aside from the North Korean nuclear crisis. However, the NEAPSM has so far not gone beyond being a working group of the six-party talks. Thus, North Korea still has to

be part of it. As long as the talks are not reconvened, the NEAPSM cannot become a reality. And even if a new round of talks takes place, the most pressing issue will be to deal with Pyongyang's nuclear programme rather than to develop the NEAPSM.

Hence, China has showed its dedication to building a regional security regime in other ways. Most notably, Beijing has maintained its commitment to the six-party talks' framework. Chinese officials have invariably called for resumption of the talks. Even when North Korean behaviour has been counterproductive, such as with its nuclear test of 2009, Beijing has pushed for the talks to be reconvened [9, 10]. Chinese officials have also maintained their meetings with their counterparts from the other parties. In April 2011, China went a step further and publicly announced, together with South Korea, a roadmap for resumption of the talks, as mentioned in the previous section.<sup>23</sup> In short, the Hu government has taken a leading role by seeking to maintain the multilateral framework developed between 2003 and 2008.

China's commitment to the talks has been remarkable given the hesitance to resume them that other parties have sometimes displayed. North Korea announced that it was abandoning the talks in early 2009 [19]. South Korea also made a similar announcement. Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan stated that the talks would be affected following the sinking of the *Cheonan* navy ship in March 2010 and the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong in November of the same year [5]. Seoul demanded an apology for both incidents from Pyongyang before talks would resume.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the Obama administration was ambivalent with regards to the

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<sup>23</sup> According to this roadmap, the first stage towards eventual resumption of the six-party talks would be to have inter-Korean nuclear talks. This would be followed by a dialogue between the US and North Korea. Finally, multilateral talks would be reconvened.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with South Korea MOFA Official, 3 August 2011, London.

talks. Obama stated that the administration wanted the North Korean government to cease provocations and abide by the agreements reached in the six-party talks [40]. Washington made clear that Pyongyang had to show its willingness to abandon brinkmanship before it contemplated the possibility of resuming the talks. Similarly, Japan was also unconvinced of the value of the talks. Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara maintained that talks should not be reconvened until North Korea ceased provocations and real progress could be made [15]. Hence, besides Russia, China was the only country unmistakably committed to resumption of the six-party talks.

Chinese commitment to cooperation and diplomacy rather than assertiveness was also demonstrated following Pyongyang's brinkmanship after 2008. Following North Korea's second nuclear test, in May 2009, Beijing's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a strongly-worded statement [22]. China also supported a new round of UNSC sanctions. Beijing even participated in implementation of the sanctions, a notable difference from its behaviour after sanctions had been imposed in 2006. Nevertheless, following the *Cheonan* sinking in March 2010, China publicly casted doubt on the results of an international investigation that blamed a North Korean torpedo attack for the incident [4]. The Kim Jong Il government denied involvement in the sinking. Afterwards, Beijing refrained from publicly criticizing the Yeonpyeong shelling [42]. This was seen as proof that China was again unwilling to condemn North Korean brinkmanship.

However, this view fails to take into account China's behaviour in private. A few months after the *Cheonan* sinking, a Chinese delegation dispatched to Pyongyang told North Korean

officials that its behaviour was being counterproductive.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, according to South Korean ambassador to Beijing Yu Woo-ik, two Chinese delegations visiting North Korea in early 2011 urged Pyongyang to modify its behaviour [3]. Moreover, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao criticized Pyongyang's behaviour when Kim Jong Il visited China in May 2011 [7]. Furthermore, Beijing continued applying UNSC sanctions. If the Hu government had wanted to side with North Korea, it would have refrained from applying sanctions. Instead, China kept pressure on its neighbour.

Therefore, in private the Hu government was putting pressure on North Korea to abandon brinkmanship and return to the multilateral and cooperative framework of the six-party talks. Joining international public condemnation of the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents would have been counterproductive. Beijing regarded both issues bilateral inter-Korean affairs, rather than regional affairs. Moreover, China was displeased with the Lee Myung-bak government's tougher stance on its Northern neighbour. Therefore, assumptions that the Hu government would publicly condemn North Korean behaviour in these two cases were unrealistic. China had to juggle pressure on Pyongyang with the goal of resuming the regime around which Chinese officials seek to construct a security framework for Northeast Asia. Further pressure on North Korea would have probably slowed down achievement of this goal.

## **6. Conclusions**

The goals that China wants to achieve in East Asia through the security regime it is trying to build do not point towards regional hegemony. Rather, these objectives indicate that Chinese

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with China MFA official, 26 July 2011, London.

officials want to reduce uncertainties regarding China's well-documented rise, moving beyond the animosity that prevailed in the 1990s. If not amity, China would want to at least enhance trust in its actions from other states in the region, while concurrently weakening the position of hawks more likely to try to contain Beijing.

A deep analysis for the rationale behind these objectives is beyond the scope of this article, but it seems that Beijing's focus on domestic development might be the main reason. Hu's emphasis on balanced and sustainable socioeconomic growth necessitates a peaceful and stable international environment. This way China can concentrate its economic resources on sustaining domestic development, rather than having to substantially increase spending on the People's Liberation Army to prepare for a possible clash with the United States or a regional power.

The mechanisms employed to achieve the two objectives outlined suggest that Beijing seeks to focus its economic resources on domestic growth. Deepening participation in existing multilateral institutions is arguably the most cost-effective means to advance those goals. Complementing this mechanism with a widening institutional framework plus bilateral dialogues is also more economical than engaging in hard balancing. Bilateral dialogues may also be the only way for the Chinese government to achieve its goals in the fragmented region that East Asia still is.

Ultimately, any sustainable security regime will need China to take a leading role. Similarly, it will need to be based on cooperation at the multilateral level. Otherwise, lingering mistrust will not disappear. Hence, China's move in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century towards building a security regime in the six-party talks is a welcome development. Even if this particular regime fails to

evolve into an NEAPSM, Chinese intentions seem clear. Thus, in spite of instances of tensions that may occur, China's changed approach towards regional security promises to avoid any future protracted conflict in Northeast Asia stemming from Chinese behaviour.

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