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**Violence from Within:
North Korea's Place in East Asian Community Debates**

**Kim Mikyoung
Hiroshima Peace Institute**

North Korea's Place in East Asia

North Korea never ceases to claim its place under the sun. It is located at the center of the East Asian region, in both the literal and figurative senses, linking continental China and oceanic Japan, and sharing borders with China, Russia, and South Korea. And North Korea lies at the epicenter of debates whether there truly can be a meaningful regional community in East Asia.

The East Asian region has been rattled over the ship sinking and island shelling. The South Korean corvette of the 2nd fleet, PCC-722 *Cheonan*, sank while conducting a mission in the vicinity of the Northern Limit Line on March 26, 2010. The Sea Patrol along the ROK western sea line was soon dispatched, and rescued 58 out of 104 crew members. Among the 46 missing crew members, 40 are reported to have perished while 6 are still missing as of April 24, 2010. The ROK Ministry of Defense organized a Civilian-Military Joint Investigation Group consisting of 25 experts from 12 Korean civilian agencies, 22 military experts, 3 advisors recommended by the ROK National Assembly, and 24 multinational experts from the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Sweden. On May 20, the team issued reports implicating DPRK for the attacks.

Portrayals of a rapidly changing East Asia – China's rise, Japan's decline, the U.S. as an

Asian-Pacific power, and South Korea as a medium power – have given way to concern over the region's propensity to violence. Observers of East Asia increasingly question how realistic and sustainable the ideal of creating an East Asia community would be, when so much danger is lurking within the region. For instance, the wide spectrum of reactions to the North Korean belligerence sheds an instructive light on the on-going East Asian community debates. The regional governments' responses to the North's provocations have ranged widely from direct accusation to cautious ambivalence.

The community discourse, with its assumptions of shared values and goals, has yet to address the dangers lurking within. "Community," as a concept different from "association," often assumes a shared cultural ethos among members who try to defend and promote their common interests and values. In this regard, the debates over community in East Asia have been largely oblivious and indifferent to the Kim Jong-il regime. However, as seen in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* incident, North Korea needs to be included in the East Asian community debates because it simultaneously consolidates and divides the region.

Efforts to situate North Korea in East Asian community debates entail ideational considerations formed through a state's repeated interactions with reference groups of significant other states. The self-image of a state, which is the manifestation of a cognitive framework, influences the shaping of national interests, preferences, and foreign policy behaviors. The "politics of labeling and framing," along with strategic calculations, designate North Korea's place in East Asia. A nation-state in the international system understands others' perceptions of it, and it reacts to those others accordingly. North Korea is no exception to this.

The *Cheonan* incident is a tragic case in testing the validity of norm-based East Asian community discourse. Violence within the community, which is a disruptive element, consolidates domestic interests over the ideational construction of an international society. Internal violence deepens the divisions of pre-existing rivalry by reviving old wounds and competition. Consequently, it can enhance the power of parties that control

the perpetrators of violence. The *Cheonan* incident has chilled the romanticized prospects of communal vision, pushing it back to a Cold War-like modality. The incident has reminded the community that *realpolitik* supersedes normative rhetoric.

North Korea is indeed a part of Northeast Asia, but its isolation makes a systemic study of the nation much more difficult than for other countries. North Korea is an East Asian nation sharing a Confucian cultural tradition, geographical proximity, historical memory, linguistic affinity, and racial similarity with other states. However, DPRK's dynastic socialist dictatorship and dynastic-authoritarian socialist government makes its regional membership a challenge.

Regional reactions to the *Cheonan* incident demonstrated dramatic divisions among the member states. Other than geographical proximity, binding elements such as shared worldview, ethos, mutual identification, and common ideational values were notably missing. Amid rising concerns and anticipations, the future trajectory of East Asian community debates remains to be seen. The (re-)constructed narratives surrounding the violence within the community show more room for pessimistic predictions than rosy wishful thinking.

Violence from Within

Amid the flurry of predictions on the future trajectory of East Asia, one thing that does not cause much disagreement is Japan's relative decline vis-à-vis China over the next few decades – in military strength, economic competitiveness, and political influence. These changes cause anxiety in Tokyo, whereas China reacts with ambivalence towards the speculations. Japan is trying to balance between the U.S., its traditional ally, and China, the emerging partner and rival. Current skirmishes over military bases in the Okinawa Prefecture are just one manifestation revealing Japan's confusion between its dependence on the U.S. and its desire for self-reliance. Policy continuity from the previous Hatoyama government to the current Naoto Kan administration implies that the East Asian community debates – in rhetoric, not necessarily in substance – are highly likely to continue in Japan for years to come.

While Japan's stance vis-à-vis China dictates the shifting regional landscape, the two Koreas maintain their *status quo* as medium powers. The DPRK continues to insist on bilateral dialogue with Washington over its nuclear programs, while simultaneously maintaining close relations with Beijing. Seoul is trying to tread precarious waters among the four adjacent nations: the American unipolar hegemon, the traditional Japanese front runner in East Asia, the Chinese impressive reemergence, and the North Korean adversary compounded with primordial linkage.

Regarding inter-community violence, European experiences suggest that violence (or war) was not excluded from its vision for regional integration. Throughout history, a few powerful European nations have attempted to unify the countries into one integrated region. The examples include Napoleon's France in the early 19th century, and Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy in the early 20th century. There were countervailing forces to unify the region by peaceful means. For instance, the Austrian Duke, Graf Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, initiated a pan-European movement in 1923, followed by the French Foreign Minister Briand's call for the creation of a European Union in 1929. All these efforts failed because of resistance from the international community and the emergence of nation-states in the continents.

The European experience is useful in discerning how North Korean threats impede the making of an East Asian community. North Korea exercises the power of the powerlessness. The defiant regional underdog persists and intimidates the strong. Unlike Japan, Italy, and Germany, DPRK does not have enough military strength to launch a total war. The difference in scale, however, does not necessarily mean that violence can be ignored in the community debates. Violence, regardless of its magnitude, is a disruptive and divisive influence dampening the communal spirit. North Korean threats and violent propensities exert substantial influence on the regional security and order. The *Cheonan* incident shows that only the perception of violence can be detrimental enough to push each member state to engage in strategic calculation for self-vigilance.

East Asia observers are busy speculating on the next hegemon of the regional hierarchy. The *Cheonan* Incident suggests that the ability to manage Pyongyang will be one of the determining factors for the next regional hegemon. Given the age-old rivalries among the member states, the party which can control, manipulate, and manage the danger is highly likely to emerge as the next leader. Japan as an economic superpower obviously looms large in East Asia's regional international politics. However, the difficulty of Japan's potential ascendance as a regional hegemon is vastly compounded by the long shadows of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere, an ever-poignant reminder of pernicious regionalism during the heyday of Japanese imperialism. The possibility remains distant given Japan's past record compounded with Tokyo's inability and unwillingness to extend heartfelt apologies for imperial atrocities. Its stagnant economy and destruction by earthquakes in an unprecedented scale further hampers its capability and willingness.

The "Great China" prospect is potentially more promising, but it depends on a host of unpredictable variables including, most importantly, the sustainability of China's relentless economic growth and its international conduct as a responsible great power in the uncertain years ahead. Applying the thesis of the clash of civilizations to the debate on the rise of China, Samuel Huntington argues that Asian countries will be more likely to climb on the bandwagon with China than act to balance against it, and that Asia's Sino-centric past as opposed to Europe's multi-polar past will be Asia's future, even as China is resuming its place as regional hegemon. China's cautious ambivalence regarding the *Cheonan* incident makes this scenario more persuasive than others. China's stance towards the *Cheonan* incident is an outcome of strategic calculations rather than a conviction derived from careful assessment of scientific evidence. Considering the close coordination among the U.S. and Japan after the September 2010 Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) Islands disputes, Beijing is trying to strengthen Sino-DPRK ties in order to keep it a buffer from the rest of the regional players. As of now, it is only China which stays engaged with DPRK, and that grants substantial power to Beijing when it comes to managing regional security.

As a medium power, Korea has been advocating the European Union as a model for the East Asian community. Except for the cultural differences between the Judeo-Christian world view of Europe and the Confucian ethics of Asia, both the EU and the East Asian community have overlapping goals such as war prevention, peace building, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges. Unlike Asia, Europe was less preoccupied with establishing hierarchy. Given historical precedents such as a Sino-centric world order and Japan's Greater Asia Co-prosperity Sphere theorem, East Asia's preoccupation with the next hegemon is a salient topic in need of careful consideration.

Conclusion: The Future of Regional Order

The sinking of *Cheonan* reminds us of two unspoken mishaps: the dismissal of North Korea as a legitimate party to the discourse, and the potent adverse effects of inter-community violence. The multilayered readings of the *Cheonan* incident alert us to what we have refused to see, and why. The unfolding saga of the past year has carried a self-reflexive momentum. The stories of Japan, South Korea, and North Korea reveal the hidden intentions of each stakeholder. Therefore, the sunken *Cheonan* is nonetheless instructive for the future trajectory of community discourse.

The community debates project the region as one integral unit amid the rapid shifts in its socio-political and economic landscapes. North Korea is an accused perpetrator that occupies a crucial place in the East Asian community. Even though the East Asian community debates project the region as one integral unit, rapidly shifting landscapes reveals the tension between the old order and emerging hierarchy where North Korea plays a crucial role. Countries in East Asia are now facing a new reality in which the domestic political needs of the regional government supersede normative community rhetoric and managing the behavior of the North Korean regime has become the key to the effective exercise of hegemonic power.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.



Kim Mikyoung is Associate Professor at the Hiroshima City University-Hiroshima Peace Institute. She has taught at Portland State University, USA, as Fulbright Visiting Professor, and served with the US State Department-US Embassy in Seoul as a public diplomacy specialist. She has published many articles on memory, human rights and gender in East Asia. Kim is co-editor of *Northeast Asia's Difficult Past: Essays in Collective Memory* (with Barry Schwartz, Palgrave Macmillan 2010), and also is a co-editor of *North Korean Review* (SSCI journal, with Suk H. Kim, McFarland Publisher, USA, 2011-2). Her book, *North Korean Human Rights Debates in East Asia* is forthcoming (Praeger 2011).