

# Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia

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Chairman Hong Seok-hyun,

Director Niblett,

Former prime minister Rudd,

Distinguished guests, and

Ladies and gentlemen,

Last week, I returned home after taking part in the UN General Assembly and related special summits. As many of you are well aware, my president and many world leaders had to grapple with a host of complicated issues simultaneously, from climate change, poverty eradication, and education, to the Ebola outbreak, the extremism of ISIL and foreign terrorist fighters. The list goes on and on. It truly feels a global Pandora's Box is opening up. The message is clear: in this interconnected world we are no longer free, whether from problems of global governance, or from the conflicts of other regions. We cannot go it alone.

This sense of urgency and unease is now shared more widely. Last July in an interview with *Foreign Policy* magazine, Dr Brzezinski said, 'we're seeing the kind of world in which there is enormous turmoil and fragmentation and uncertainty – not a single central threat to everybody, but a lot of diversified threats to almost everybody'. Dr Henry Kissinger recently commented in his latest book, *World Order* that the world is now at a turning point.

But if one asked, 'where do most daunting challenges to global peace and security come from?' most would venture the Middle East and the Eurasian regions. Unfortunately, Northeast Asia is now adding its name to this list of conflict zones.

On previous occasions, I have spoken of how this region is going through a transformation, how the tectonic plates are shifting under our feet.

For the past two decades, Northeast Asia focused more on the Korean peninsula due to North Korea's nuclear weapons programs and its on-going provocations. But in recent years, we are witnessing a surge of new problems compounding the tensions in the region: the underlying historical and territorial issues between regional countries have come to the fore. Challenges such as maritime security, space and cyber security, delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) have also emerged. Now it is not just North and South Korea, but also all key players, even China and North Korea that are having troubles.

Those of you from Europe might find this perplexing. After all, the predictions of this being a Pacific Century or an Asian Century are a very recent memory. So why and how have things come to be this way? Let me share with you my thoughts.

First, is what I call the 'Asia Paradox'. Northeast Asia is a region of deepening economic interdependence but dithering political and military cooperation. There is a mismatch between high and low politics.

Second, comes the 'return of geopolitics'. It isn't just major regional powers grating on each other, nor does size or power necessarily matter. Different countries have competing dreams and visions, and they are not shy in being bold and assertive.

Third, is the admixture of atavistic historical revisionism to geopolitical tensions. This is putting enormous negative pressure on bilateral relations.

Fourth, geo-economic cooperation is being dampened by geo-political constraints. Those from this region will understand what I mean.

Fifth, is the lack of trust between and among regional countries. The trust deficit is at alarming levels.

Sixth, comes the detrimental fact that Northeast Asia has neither the mechanisms nor a culture of multilateral cooperation to diffuse regional tension and conflict. It is the only part of the world where these are absent.

In short, the region has an over-supply of problems and a deficit of solutions. Our biggest challenge is to resolve this imbalance. Northeast Asia, like Europe, is a powerhouse. If Northeast Asia flares up in conflict, it will be a global conflagration on a different scale from the events in Syria, Iraq and Libya.

Under these circumstances, I have high expectations that the forum will discuss the pressing issues of this historical turning point and show the path forward. I thank Chairman Hong and Dr Niblett for bringing together the brightest minds of Asia and Europe under the prestigious aegis of Chatham House and the *JoongAng Daily*.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Keeping in mind the above-mentioned views and analysis, I would like to offer you a broad picture on the Korean government's perspective and policy for regional peace and cooperation.

The main thrust of our government's policy is to replace conflict and distrust with reconciliation and cooperation. In essence, we are endeavouring to build up more stable and constructive relations between countries, as well as to promote a culture of multilateral cooperation.

Moreover, our Northeast Asia policy cannot be decoupled from our policy toward the Korean peninsula. It has to be in sync with our objective of sustainable peace in the peninsula, and indeed the ultimate goal – the peaceful reunification of Korea. So the following are the concrete steps we are taking to this end.

First, comes the focus on strong bilateral relations with the region's major powers. This is all the more so because of Korea's historical experience, its geopolitical location, and its future vision of a unified Korean peninsula. German reunification would not have been possible without the support of its neighbours. Likewise, Korea's reunification needs the backing and blessing of our neighbours.

In this vein, Korea's most important bilateral relationship is undoubtedly with the US. As a recent US congressional report has noted, ties between the two nations are 'at their best state in decades.' Seoul is the capital city that president Obama has visited most frequently in office. The alliance is now serving as the linchpin for peace and security in the Asia-Pacific.

And then, China. Our relations have made conspicuous strides for the past year and a half, under the new leadership of President Park and President Xi. Both sides fondly call our friendship the best-ever since the establishment of diplomatic relations 20-something years ago. Our two countries are giving substance to the strategic partnership in the three pillars of strategic, economic and people-to-people cooperation.

Some people suggest that Korea is tilting too much towards China or that Korea is sandwiched between the US and China. These observations are as superficial as they are glib, in that they view Korea's relationship with the two giants as a zero-sum game. The truth is, and I guess [former] prime minister Rudd will agree with me, this isn't a matter of pick and choose. As President Obama and his senior officials have noted, Seoul's good ties with the US and China are useful assets and completely compatible.

And then, on our relations with Japan, we've had some trouble for the last several years, mainly because of history-related issues, such as enforced sexual slavery during WWII. We want to see Japanese political leaders make a clean break with the past, like German leaders. This sorry state of affairs, however, does not stand in the way of our bilateral economic, social and cultural cooperation and exchanges, as well as close coordination on the North Korean nuclear issue. This is a principled but pragmatic approach.

Now, as we are nearing the 50th anniversary of Korea-Japan diplomatic ties next year, both Korea and Japan recognize the need to make a fresh start to a new future.

Now, North Korea. It has been an odd man out for many years, but especially so since the 3rd nuclear test in 2013 which triggered the toughest-ever international sanctions. Coincidentally, this year marks the 20th anniversary of the Geneva Agreed Framework. The key lesson for North Korea now is, it cannot have its cake and eat it too, as it wishes.

More recently, it has cooled down on China and warmed up to Japan and Russia, its own perceived 'weakest links' in the international sanctions regime. The upside is Russia's principled position opposing North Korea's nuclear development as negatively impacting their bilateral ties. Japan is also taking a comprehensive approach to the nuclear, missile and abduction issues.

It is against this backdrop that you may have to digest the sudden developments in the Korean Peninsula over the weekend. Some people say inter-Korean relations are like a rollercoaster-ride and demand some theatrics. Whatever it is, jawjaw is better than warwar, a la Winston Churchill. So, last Saturday, there were very senior level contacts between the two Koreas at the margin of the Incheon Asian Games. Both sides agreed for a second round of long overdue high-level talks, either in late October or early November. We hope that the follow-up contacts and meetings could be conducive to building trust and peace, recognizing that we still have a long way to go.

Second, Korea is active in promoting various forms of mini-lateral cooperation in harmony with bilateral relations, such as Korea-US-Japan, Korea-US-China, Korea-Japan-China, and North and South Korea and Russia. The Korean government will continue to test the waters to see whether other formats of mini-lateral cooperation would be feasible.

Third, in order to promote a culture of multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia, Korea is pushing forward the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, or NAPCI in short. NAPCI seeks to build up trust by starting with the easier and softer issues like in Europe. Then, we can gradually move on and expand to political and security dialogue. NAPCI takes a collaborative approach, so all participants will act as co-architects. Korea's role will be of a facilitator in the journey towards our common goals.

In her Liberation Day speech last August, President Park made a follow-up proposal to substantiate NAPCI. As Europe paved the road for wider collaboration by setting up Euratom, she suggested that Northeast Asia needs a more systematic mechanism to consult on nuclear safety. In fact, the three countries, Korea, Japan and China, account for 40 per cent of operational or planned nuclear power

plants around the world. The Fukushima incident has also alerted us to the necessity of working together for nuclear safety. We are hopeful this can become a pilot project in this region.

As part of our efforts to implement NAPCI, Korea is hosting the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Forum later this October. Regional organizations like the EU and the OSCE will also be welcomed as observers. Our arms are open to North Korea, too.

Fourth, our strategy is to move this regional cooperation beyond Northeast Asia to Eurasia. My government's Eurasia Initiative envisions enhancing connectivity on several fronts, including transport and energy networks as well as people-to-people and cultural exchanges. We see some potential in the on-going Rajin-Hassan logistics projects involving South and North Korea and Russia, as well as several Silk Road projects pursued by neighbouring countries.

Distinguished guests,

Korea has been and will continue to make persistent diplomatic efforts to overcome the current dilemma facing us in Northeast Asia. Our quest for the reunification of the Korean peninsula is also intended for sustainable regional peace and cooperation. A reunified Korean Peninsula, peaceful and nuclear-weapon-free, will be a cornerstone for the region's peace and cooperation.

The European experience is a source of inspiration to us. What we wish to realize in the eastern end of the Eurasian continent is like what Europe has achieved in its western part. I genuinely hope that all of you here today will offer your insights and wisdom for a new Korean peninsula, a new Northeast Asia, and a new Eurasia. Thank you.