Trust-Building toward a Peaceful and Cooperative Northeast Asia

2016 Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Forum

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Distinguished session representatives, participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

First of all, let me express my gratitude to the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Korea, the United States Department of State and the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) for arranging this forum. It is always a pleasure to be invited to this important process, as an international partner along with the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). I would also like to convey the greetings of the Secretary-General Ban to all the participants.

I also appreciate the many experts from the NAPCI participating countries, as well as the international partners who have gathered here over the last two days. The expertise you bring will be instrumental in aiding the process of building a regional institution. This Forum allows us the opportunity to take stock of the gains we have made and to think about where we should go.

The partnership of the United Nations with regional arrangements under Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter has been a hallmark in our service for global public good. For the past seventy years, the United Nations has created a global web of cooperative networks with a growing number of regional and sub-regional organizations.

In this web, Northeast Asia remains a missing link. This has always been an anomaly, almost incongruous given its growing economic and strategic weight. Northeast Asia has the second, third and eleventh largest economies in the world. Together, China, Japan and the People’s Republic of Korea amount to over 27 per cent of global GDP. They have a combined annual military budget of around $224 billion.

A Northeast Asian regional cooperative framework is long overdue. This becomes more obvious if we have a closer look at how much the three countries in Northeast Asia are interconnected.

First, in terms of economics and people’s exchanges, the region is interconnected as never before. China, Japan and the Republic of Korea are either their first, second or third largest trading partners. They are also either the first or second largest tourism destinations to each other. Nearly two hundred thousand students from ROK, China and Japan study in each other’s countries.

Second, the challenges facing the region are diverse and complex. Most of their impacts will be trans-boundary. Issues such as natural disasters, drug trafficking and energy security are already impacting Northeast Asia.
Third, solutions cannot be found by one country alone. Therefore the potential gains from institutionalised regional cooperation clearly far outweigh the costs of cooperation.

Ladies and gentlemen

The process advocated by the Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) presents a pragmatic way forward. As I understand, it does not aim to reinvent the wheel. Rather, it seeks to connect existing mechanisms and build on them to create a coordinated, comprehensive and consolidated framework.

Any institutional approach must be inclusive of all regional countries, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. The United States and the Russian Federation must also be involved.

The approach must combine top-down leadership from the highest level with bottom-up functional interaction. This means starting with trans-boundary issues of potential high consequence, but where there are low levels of political differences. Nuclear safety and disaster risk management have been identified, as such issues. Issue areas such as health, climate change and environment, nuclear security and cyber security can further be considered.

The holding of the trilateral summit between China, Japan and the Republic of Korea in November 2015 was a welcome development in providing leadership at the highest level. The ownership and stewardship of these three countries of any cooperative initiatives is the key to their successes.

ASEAN countries have for a long time done enough in trying to bring the three bigger countries in Northeast Asia together through the ASEAN +3 process and then adding another +3. Now it is incumbent on the three countries in Northeast Asia to take a more proactive leadership in consolidating their trilateral collaboration and involving other countries in the region to their processes like NAPCI.

Ladies and gentlemen

Now let me touch upon the two issue areas NAPCI has focused on over the last year.

First, on nuclear safety. Northeast Asia has the highest concentration of nuclear power plants in the world. Consequently, there is a strong need for cooperation among the regional players for better cooperation and exchange of information on nuclear safety.

Nuclear security is also an area of common interest for all players in the region. Nuclear security and nuclear safety are the two sides of the same coin. Any accidents at nuclear power plants, man-made or natural, will have devastating consequences to the region.
In the last year, China, Japan and the Republic of Korea have agreed to enhance nuclear safety cooperation. Although this was primarily done bilaterally, it provided solid ground for the trilateral cooperation. Such enhanced cooperation may also help in developing a stronger nuclear safety culture, as well as expanding it to involve other key regional players such as the United States and the Russian Federation.

Second, disaster risk management. 1.6 billion people in Northeast Asia have been affected by natural disasters since 2000. The Asian region occupies 30% of the world's land mass, but 40% of the world's disasters occurred in the region in the past decade, resulting in a disproportionate 80% of the world's disaster deaths. This clearly indicates the benefits of regional cooperation in disaster risk management.

Last October’s trilateral agreement to respond to emergencies related to natural disasters represents tangible progress. So too does the agreement by the environmental ministers of the three nations agreed to cooperate on the management and reuse of disaster waste. Such cooperation could be expanded to other issues on which there is commonality, including climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as environmental protection.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

Going forward, there are several confidence-building measures (CBMs), in peace and security that can facilitate regional collaboration. CBMs should be inclusive and transparent. Transparency promotes confidence. The exchange of information and the identification of norms based on common perceptions of values should be the starting point of any CBM exercise. Any agreed CBMs must be inclusively developed to be effective by all the participating parties.

In the context of the United Nations, CBMs include transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space (TCBMs), confidence-building in cyber security, the implementation of Security Council resolution 1540 related to the preventive measures as well as capacity-building for weaker States against Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) proliferation to non-state actors.

On CBMs related to military matters, the United Nations promotes several transparency instruments, such as the UN Register of Conventional Arms and the United Nations Report on Military Expenditures (MILEX). Countries in Northeast Asia have all been consistent supporters of these instruments. I would encourage all regional States to consider how such instruments could be tailored to a regional context. Confidence and security-building measures (CSBMs) promoted by the OSCE are also an important part of efforts to enhance security, transparency and predictability in the military area.

All these measures could be considered and emulated in the NAPCI context. The United Nations together with participating international partners, the OSCE and the European Union, stand ready to provide any assistance and expertise to NAPCI.
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

The elephant in the room is the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Since the last Forum, the DPRK has conducted two nuclear tests and forty-one missile launches.

These provocations by the DPRK have cast a shadow over all other regional developments. They seriously undermine the international disarmament and non-proliferation regimes.

Maintaining international unity is crucial to responding to this grave challenge.

In parallel with addressing the challenge emanating from DPRK, efforts must continue to nurture a cooperative framework in Northeast Asia. The door must remain open to DPRK for the future. The DPRK should realize that it will be the biggest beneficiary of any enhanced cooperation, once they decide to reverse the course.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

NAPCI is a commendable effort to fill the overdue gap in an institutional framework in Northeast Asia. For the last three years, it has made significant achievements, but we must admit there is a long way to go. Institutionalization does not happen overnight. It requires years of accumulating habits of dialogue in select areas backed by inclusive processes and persistent commitments. Through these processes, greater convergence will emerge on the vision, ‘why’ it is needed and on the purpose, ‘what’ needs to be done, as well as on ‘how’ it is implemented. It takes collective efforts to develop the clarity of vision, the unity of purpose and the consistency in implementation. We all carefully need to nurture a three year old NAPCI into a mature institution. Challenges ahead will be many and complex. But as the Secretary-General Ban of the United Nations said at the beginning of his second term, five years ago, nothing is impossible if and when we work together. Only together we can build the future we want.

The journey to build an institution in Northeast Asia will not be easy but is worthy of persistent pursuit. The journey must go on.

In this regard, holding this year's NAPCI in Washington is a welcome development. It demonstrates greater sense of co-ownership of the process by the participating countries. I hope it will be further spread to other participants and that the next meeting will be hosted by other participating countries including Ulaan Baatar.

I would like to conclude by congratulating the US State Department and CSIS for successfully hosting NAPCI for the first time outside Korean soil and the Korean co-host for providing thoughtful bases for discussion, and last but not the least, thanking all the participants for your active participation and contributions.
I hope that this process will continue to be nurtured regardless of transitions in some of the participating governments. On the part of international partners, UN, OSCE and the EU, we can assure you that our assistance and cheerleading will continue despite some of our own transitions. I thank you so much.