

Identity Politics and Regional Cooperation in Northeast Asia

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1. Introduction

Globalization and regionalism is an important ongoing issue in academic world. Particularly in Northeast Asia (NEA), regionalism became an academic issue in the post-Cold War era with the emergence of de-ideological tendency. The issue was more materialized after the financial crisis in Asia. Regionalism in NEA has been studied in many aspects. Some analysts are concerned about the lasting legacy of historical conflicts and hatred in the region. Others are mainly focused on the rosy economic cooperation among the three countries in NEA. Also, some note that political and security question in Northeast Asia would change the balance of power in the region, so that it would be very difficult to make regional cooperation in the region.

Recently, however, Japan announced that Japan and Singapore would have an agreement on Free Trade Area (FTA). Also, China and Asean countries promised each other to make FTA between China and Asean in 10 years. The prospects of regionalism outside Northeast Asia, at least, became evident. But none of these above are truly materialized in NEA. During last ten years, cooperation such as initiatives of Korea-Japan FTA has been deeply discussed. But, it was discussion per se and cannot produce any visible outcome. Then, what are the reasons to hinder NEA from making cooperative regional bodies for the future. Some analysts say that growing economic interdependence and economic intensity in NEA can be a good indicator of feasibility of economic cooperation in the region. Therefore, the reason why the economic regionalism is retarded can be a good subject of research on NEA.

This paper focuses on the problems of regional cooperation in Northeast Asia on the perspective of 'identity politics.' I list irrational, emotional, psychological, historical and cultural factors based on the identity politics as the factors of undermining North East Asian regional cooperation. In reviewing trends of regional cooperation in International Relations Theories, this paper suggests that ethnicity and multi-cultural identities are important factors in identity politics, which embraces certain aspects of the constructivist approach. In North East Asia, nationalism has been intensified in each country for formulating modern nation-states. However, in this post-modern era, excessively consumed nationalism is still being prevailed in three countries (China, Korea, Japan). This excessive nationalism such as

territorial dispute, textbook issues, a different understanding of historical facts, has been consumed mainly by the state and hinders various identity groups to understand each other. Therefore, various identities should be encouraged to correspond each other for regional cooperation.

2. Theories on Northeast Asian regional cooperation

In international relations theories, regionalism, regional cooperation, regional integration, and unification are not separately defined well. This becomes more complex in explaining who are the actors for the regionalism; sovereignty state, trans-border regions, individuals or international non-governmental organisations.

Generally, however, regionalism can be defined as below; firstly, economic cooperation in a particular region, secondly, collective political body or bloc, and finally, community consciousness. Therefore, in international politics, regionalism can be appeared as forms of political and security alliances or international regimes and free trade areas. Particularly, Track II non-governmental or semi-governmental cooperations are being emphasized more than cooperation among Track 1 (governments). These can be explained by the theories of neo-realism, neo-functionalism, and neo-liberalism in international politics.

In 1990s, however, constructivists question on the existence of modern nation state and its sovereignty as a tool of explaining international relations. For them, weakening role of modern nation states, emergence of trans-national and multi-national bodies, and resurgence of ethnicity can be good indicators to analyse international relations in the post-modern era. Therefore, they emphasize identity and recognition of international bodies, and non-governmental organisation in particular. Most theorists of international relations, however, agree on four points below in explaining regionalism; identity of modern-nation state, actors of behaviour such as state or non-state, rational basis of explanation, and political cooperation.

In application of their theories in Northeast Asia, neo-realists argue about two reasons of detardness of regionalism in NEA. Firstly, China and (South) Korea are afraid of Japanese economic power and its implication in the region. Secondly, American presence and its powerful influence can be a negative factor for the regionalism. Meanwhile, however, it is paradoxical that economic interdependence has been growing without any regional security pact. Neo-functionalists explain that Northeast Asia does not have homogeneous basis for regionalism such as common consciousness so that trans-state bodies are not appeared. They point that entrepreneurs in the region are very nationalistic, not multi-national. So, three countries have been looking for other countries as their partners than NEA region such as Singapore, Chile and etc.

In reviewing works on regionalism in NEA, some points can be addressed. First, there are many works on regionalism in NEA, particularly in four aspects such as detardness, political integration, economic integration and security pact. Secondly, these works can be explained as counter-works for

the emergence of regional entities in other parts of the world. Thirdly, the debates are mainly based on rational indicators such as economic indicators for interdependence.

3. Identity politics and theoretical framework

As we see in the previous parts, current theories of explanation of NEA regionalism have many limitations. Moreover, in the last decade of the 20th century, countries of Northeast Asia were rapidly changed. Cold War system was dismantled in the world, but it was only sectional and partly change in NEA. Meanwhile, ethnic revival, technological improvement, expansion of cultural images of U.S.A as well as economic development were evident in NEA. These new trends were mixed with traditional, and modern shapes of NEA and produced a rather different course of development; without regionalism.

To see the development and regionalism of NEA, I think identity politics should be introduced in analysing regionalism in NEA. In identity politics, revival of marginal identities and various identities in multi-dimensional society are emphasized. It is a kind of approach rather than a theory which is related to the current theory of international relations, constructivism. But, it is different from the constructivism at the point of explaining state nationalism which is related to modern nation-state building, and of emphasizing nationalism in analysis. Nationalism as a symbol of 'modern' period is being used again in the post modern era.

4. Special Characteristics of Northeast Asia

By using identity politics, I will explain the reasons why regionalism in NEA has not been worked considerably like other parts of the world. I list four points of special characteristics of NEA as the reasons; an imagined map, modern nation-states building by surge of nationalism, state nationalism and finally, conflicts in NEA.

1) An imagined mind-map of Northeast Asia

An imagined mind-map of Northeast Asia is an invented form of mind-map after the European countries advanced to Asia and integrated the region into the newly modern international world. Therefore, NEA is a given space by the westerners in the modern era. It means that making Northeast Asia is not based on homogeneous identities. It was redefined as a concept by others and has been appeared in mind of Northeast Asian people as well as the world. Now, everybody accepts Northeast Asia naturally as a geographical term as well as political, economic and security terms. Then, what are the homogeneous factors in NEA? Racial and ethnic affinities, usage of Chinese characters, influence of Chinese culture, particularly sinicised Buddhism and Confucianism have been addressed as homogeneous factors.

However, these homogeneous factors are only emphasized in recent period after the birth of modern-

nation state in NEA. In fact, three states in NEA had dim contacts each other more than three centuries, at least. Ming dynasty in China had a isolation policy since the 14th century and it was continued in the period of Manchu-built Qing China. Chosun dynasty in Korea also had the same policy from the early period of the 15th century. Japan's Tokukawa regime also had the same policy, although they opened some ports to the westerners. Three countries communicated each other only in formal style of diplomacy, tribute system. Trans-border trade were minimized and illegal traders were often executed if they were found. Therefore, it is very difficult to say that there were growing inter-relations among them and we can find homogeneous factors in NEA in the pre-modern era. Peoples of the three countries still cannot communicate verbally, although they share the Chinese characters. Separation made these countries very different from each other.

Therefore, Northeast Asia is a modern form of concept which was invented by the westerners in focusing the geographical proximity. That is an 'enforced' concept for the NEA peoples' mind. Japan also invented a new concept, Toyo (literally East Seas, but meaningly Oriental or Asia) based on the westerner's NEA. This kind of invention in Tokukawa Japan was a Japanese effort in which Japan wanted themselves to be a separate entity apart from other 'dirty, backward and inferior' neighbors in Northeast Asia. In short, a new modern Japan was started from a negation of a member of NEA, and keeping a distance from China and Korea.

2) Modern nation-state and forming nationalism in Northeast Asia

Building a western model of modern nation-state was an enforced movement to the NEA people and nationalism was invented or re-emerged as a different form, at least, in three countries. Important thing here, however, nationalism had been functional as a tool of separating these three countries. Later, nationalism in NEA became an evident proof of characteristics of three countries. Moreover, negative factor of nationalism such as resistance, segregation and hatred became evident as Japan invaded Korea and China. Therefore, in Northeast Asia, birth of modern nation state was based on 'otherness' rather than looking for homogeneity. The excessive consume of nationalism in NEA can be explained in Japan's Orientalism and Japan's Asianism.

Modern Japanese nation state was formed at the same time during the procedure of invasion and colonialism. It means that three countries did not start as parallel and equal sovereign states. Japanese concept of 'hierarchical nationals' can be a good example for this. Japan stated that Japan would be the center of the civilization in NEA and other parts should follow the line of Japan. This theory was developed in Korea as a concept of 'Japanese-Koreans as the Same Ethnic Root' and 'Five Nationals (Japanese, Korean, Manchus, Mongols, Chinese) Harmony' in Manchuria. In fact, however, there were hierarchies and Japanese should lead the others in NEA to build an 'European style new empire in Toyo (Inoue Kaoru).' Therefore, 'inferior' peripheral other Asian states should cooperate with Japan. Here, 'invasion' can be translated differently as 'liberation from the western powers by Japan.'

Asianism also can be a tool for Japan for the expansion of Japanese sovereignty to other Asian

countries in the name of the 'Pan Asian Common Prosperity Sphere.' Japan took this term in the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. Therefore, the idea of Asian cooperation was happened with the invasion at the same time. This was a Japanese tool of 'civilising project' towards the Koreans and Chinese. Against this, Koreans and Chinese sought their source of nationalism at the anti-Japanese movement. These tendencies make three NEA countries more separately than ever in the modern-era.

3) State nationalism in NEA

Historical experiences in NEA in modern era show an excessive consume of nationalism in Korea and China. After Japanese surrender and consequent Cold War, two blocs (China and North Korea vs. South Korea and Japan) confronted each other without normalising their relations until 1972. Only in 1992, China and South Korea normalized their relationships, but North Korea and Japan do not have a formal relationships until now. North and South Korea are still divided. Therefore, it is hard to say that peoples of the three nations in NEA could have enough time to communicate each other to make a common ground of homogeneity. Rather, China and Koreas like Japan above expanded their consume of nationalism to make new nation state and to forming national unity in their countries.

Chinese effort to emphasis of nationalism can be explained as a part of their policy towards the 55 ethnic minorities. As a multi-ethnic country, the first task of the Chinese government was to complete national goals of nation-state; territorial integrity and national cohesion. Therefore, nationalism in China was characterized as a state nationalism in which the state was the main actor to provide theories of national cohesion and practical policies on their nationals. Here, the Chinese government had a policy of 'regional autonomy' in which cultural nationalism could be permitted to the ethnic minorities unless it was not expanded to a certain form of political nationalism.

Also, 'history of relationship among nationalities (minzu guanxishi)' were emphasized and a new approach to the orthodox Chinese history was emerged. Here, new concepts were introduced. For example, China (Zhongguo), Chinese (Zhongguoren), and its state boundary (guotu) of the ancestral land (zuguo) in the history of our state (benguo) were discussed because China was regarded as a united multi-ethnic state from ancient times. Therefore, some Chinese scholars claimed that the concept of 'invasion' of traditional Chinese territory by the barbarians should be rejected on the ground that the wars were between nationalities within newly expanded concept of China. China's new approach to their history is a big debate issue. Here, it should be only emphasized that this kind of effort was a manifestation of excessive nationalism by the Han-led Chinese state.

The Korean peninsular was no exception for this excessive consume of nationalism. Korean nationalism was a good source of independence from Japan. But, nationalism as a tool of mobilizing their people were widely used both in South and North after the division of two Koreas. This excessive consume of nationalism could work as a barrier of not only both people to communicate each other, but also two Korean peoples to understand other NEA countries.

4) Conflict rather than cooperation

The ongoing excessive consume of nationalism in North East Asian countries has been a negative effect to the regionalism in NEA. It was started from the pre-modern era to the recent period. Then, what are the features of these factors of conflict in real world? These can be listed as debates on history such as the textbooks, territorial disputes, role of nationalism in diplomacy or in cooperation.

First, debates on the history can chase up to the ancient history. It traces back to the birth of each nation, state and ethnic group. Although this kind of debates are purely academic in the West, here in East Asia it is a hot potato at the present. China and Korea (South and North) argue the owner of the ancient bronze age in China's Northeast, formerly called Manchuria. It was initiated with the discovery of bronze short swords, which were used from the 20th to the 2nd century BC. As I stated below, Chinese scholars considered these findings in the present China's territory as a belonging of the Donghu, the ancestors of present day Mongolians and some of Han Chinese. Meanwhile, North Korean scholars argue that the owner should be a part of the Dongyi, the ancestors of present Koreans. This kind of debates in history of East Asia can be found in other cases such as the ownership of the ancient kingdoms of Kokuryo (Gaojuri 9n Chinese), Bohai (Palhae in Korean) between China and Korea. Another case is a possible existence of Japanese state or at least a puppet kingdom in southern Korea. The problem here lies in that it is not only debate on historical facts, but also it functions as a source of nationalism in each country. The most evident dispute we can see is the 'Japanese textbook disputes.' It is the debate not on the ancient time, but the recent past when the Japan invaded Korea and China. Japan have kept the position of negation all the time to the Nanjing Massacre, comfort women, and biological warfare in Northeastern China. These are ongoing issues in the present day diplomacy for three countries in NEA.

Secondly, territorial disputes are important in NEA. Because the modern nation-state is a territorial state and each country has a firm stance on territorial issue in NEA, it is an important subject not to forming a NEA cooperation. We can see many cases of territorial disputes between Japan and China, Japan and Korea, and even Korea and China.

Thirdly, nationalism per se is a strong force in three countries in East Asia. Emphasis on the collective identity such as nation could not give a space for the people in the region to think about their identity differently. Patriotism is more important than the loyalty to other identities such as religion, region, gender and etc. From time to time, these excessive resort to the collective identity were worked as a barrier to the cooperation on the governmental level as well as non-governmental levels. That can be a good reason of explanation why international non-governmental organizations were not activated in NEA, even in most developed country like Japan.

5. Alternative plans for better cooperation in North East Asia

Alternative plans for future cooperation in NEA can be a reverse process of the excessive consume of nationalism. Those can be listed as weakening excessive nationalism, emphasis on individual identity

rather than collective identity and growing concerns on the non-governmental sectors. Cooperation should have a target; a future Northeast Asian identity. At the moment, possible alternatives are policy-level consideration on the ethnic minorities in each country and strengthening role of the NGOs.

There are many ethnic minorities in three countries. They have been existed as a marginalised being in each society. However, ethnic minorities in Northeast Asia are a good indicator to see the development of society, internally and externally. Particularly in Northeast Asia, roles of some ethnic minorities should be addressed. 17,000 Overseas Chinese (Huaqiao) mainly from Shandong Province in Korea, 600,000 Koreans and Taiwanese in Japan, 2 million ethnic Koreans (Chaoxianzu) in China, 200,000 Chaoxianzu in South Korea are the ethnic minorities in NEA. Until now, the governments of NEA have a negative attitude to the minorities. They were regarded as a possible force of splitting national cohesion, of dangerous element of security for both internal society and international disputes and of exit door of the marginalised residue of the society.

However, a new attitude should be introduced to each society for better Northeast Asia in the future. Ethnic minorities in each country can be a good mediator to Northeast Asian people who have been isolated and separated from cultures of other countries. From those ethnic minorities, Japanese can learn about the new culture of China, Korea and Taiwan. South Koreans also can learn how to co-exist in harmony with the people who have different cultural backgrounds. There are many ethnic Koreans in Northeast Asia who have different passports, different legal status, and even cannot speak Korean language. Also, ethnic minorities do have a tendency of thinking of 'openness' to other cultures. So, it can be a positive force of more open and multi-cultural Northeast Asia based on more individually defined identity. They are not a force of disintegrating the present communities in NEA. Excessive collective identity has been consumed too much in NEA, this is a trial to reduce the excessiveness. People can think about their community again in open society.

For this, non-governmental organisations should be formed in areas where three countries can communicate. NGOs for 'Yellow Sand-wind (Huangsha)' could be a good example. Preventing desertification in North China also could be a good cooperative body between Korea, Japan and China. Standing committees on refugee, flood, draught, hunger and earthquake in the non-governmental levels should be developed. Migration, especially labour migration, also can be a good subject to understand each other.

In conclusion, regionalism in NEA cannot compare with other parts of the world because of excessive nationalism in each country in modern nation-state building process. It is a still dominant negative power of forming deep cooperation in NEA. To solve this problem, identity politics which based on individual identity rather than collective identity should be introduced in NEA. For this, roles of ethnic minorities and NGOs should be emphasized in NEA. That could be a source of multi-ethnic culture in harmony and peace with ongoing development in NEA.