Expert Group Meeting on
New and Inclusive Multilateralism in North-East Asia

Incheon, Republic of Korea, 4-5 December 2019

Background

North-East Asian countries have substantially increased the level of economic integration, infrastructure connectivity, social interactions and bilateral and multilateral cooperation. In terms of trade, for instance, the subregion’s intra-regional trade (exports plus imports) accounted for 21.8% of North-East Asia’s total trade in 2018. It is within range of the intra-regional share of economic groupings like ASEAN (with 23% intra-regional trade share) while key economies in the subregion are leading players in global trade.

However, institutionalized multilateralism or regional integration has not made much progress and even the existing state of multilateralism has shown their vulnerability to geopolitical tensions. As a result, the collective dynamism of the subregion has yet to reach its economic potential, though the subregion’s key economies have individually chartered robust development paths. The subregion has not been able to fully utilize potential complementarities in factor endowments that can be shared for mutual benefits, and jointly manage shared vulnerabilities in terms of transboundary environmental problems and disaster risks.

The absence of a formal multilateral mechanism in North-East Asia has often been recognized as a key factor encumbering the subregion’s potential. This is not to say, however, that there are no cooperation mechanisms at play in the subregion. Regional cooperation and integration take many forms, ranging from government-led mechanisms (i.e. regionalism) to initiatives driven by subnational actors (i.e. regionalization). For North-East Asia, existing mechanisms can be broadly characterized as “functional cooperation and integration” played out in different sectors, involving different country membership configurations and represented at different levels (e.g. national, subnational, civil society).

Mechanisms for functional cooperation and integration include the UNESCAP Subregional Office for East and North-East Asia Office (SOENEA), the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) and the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI). SOENEA is the most comprehensive in terms of membership by covering all six North-East Asian countries and operates platforms of multilateral and multistakeholder cooperation in the areas of environment, trade, transport and energy. Such platforms are the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC) and its North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership (NEACAP), and North-East Asia Regional Power Interconnection and Cooperation (NEARPIC) Forum as well as the annual
Involving China, Japan and Republic of Korea (ROK), the TCS supports trilateral dialogue and consultation through 21 trilateral ministerial processes and at other senior government levels in the areas of health, education, environment, finance, transport and logistics, culture, sports, economy and trade and disaster management while the secretariat itself has the different levels of involvement in the trilateral processes. Furthermore, TCS Foreign Ministers in August 2019 agreed on the “Trilateral+ X” cooperation modality which could further deepen integration in the subregion. The modality articulates a set of principles, focused areas of cooperation and implementation approach—a possible building block for the step-by-step approach to formalize functional cooperation arrangements. The Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI) is another case in point. An intergovernmental cooperation mechanism among China, Mongolia, ROK and Russian Federation, GTI focuses on priority sectors of transport, trade and investment, tourism, agriculture, energy, and environment. A Consultative Commission, composed of Vice Ministers, agrees on a multi-year strategic action plan covering the priority sectors. Other mechanisms driven at the subnational level also exist, including the Association of North East Asia Regional Governments (NEAR).

Recent developments have generated compelling reasons to re-energize the discourse with the aim to identify a step-by-step approach in formalizing existing functional cooperation arrangements towards an inclusive and practical multilateral mechanism in North-East Asia. At present there is a strong pushback against multilateral arrangements (particularly related to the trade system) while various new agendas for sustainable development call for new forms of multilateralism involving diverse stakeholders. In this regard, the UN Secretary-General made an urgent call to strengthen the traditional multilateralism, a rules-based order, and support a new form of cooperation, an inclusive multilateralism, where no country is left behind and with closer links to civil society and other stakeholders ensuring no sectors are marginalized.

Recognizing the opportunities at hand to contribute to the discourse, ESCAP East and North-East Asia Office, in collaboration with subregional organizations and institutions in North-East Asia, will organize an experts group meeting to discuss approaches and strategies for new and inclusive multilateralism in North-East Asia, in light of the recent developments.

Organizers

- United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) East and North-East Asia Office

Objectives

The main objective of the Meeting is to support the shared goals on and approaches to new and inclusive multilateralism in North-East Asia. To achieve this, the Meeting will:
1. Review the trend and status of multilateralism in North-East Asia;
2. Review the status of functional cooperation and integration mechanisms/arrangements in North-East Asia across economic, social, environmental and political areas;
3. Identify approaches to further strengthen and/or institutionalize functional cooperation arrangements towards an inclusive multilateral mechanism in North-East Asia; and
4. Provide guidance and feedback on the ESCAP study on a new and inclusive multilateralism in North-East Asia, to be presented at a subregional forum in May 2020.

Participants

Experts will be invited from:
1. Subregional and regional organizations (e.g. TCS, GTI, SCO, NEAR; ADB; ASEAN; APEC)
2. National policy institutes from North-East Asian countries
3. Key policy think-tanks from North-East Asian countries
4. Academia working on regional cooperation mechanisms in North-East Asia

Provisional Agenda

Day 1

09:00-09:30 Opening Session
• Opening Remarks
• Tour de Table
• Group photo

09:30-12:00 Session 1: Setting the Scene – Trend and status of multilateralism and subregional cooperation in North-East Asia
• Overall trend of cooperation and institutional settings
• Global and (sub) regional megatrends and dynamics

12:00-13:30 Lunch

13:30-17:00 Session 2: The State of Play – Functional cooperation and integration mechanisms/arrangements in North-East Asia
• Sectoral dimensions across policy areas (i.e. economic, social, environmental and political)
• Institutional dimensions across actors (i.e. intergovernmental organizations, subnational groupings, multilateral organizations; civil society)

Day 2

09:00-12:00 Session 3: Way Forward – Approaches to further institutionalize functional cooperation arrangements towards an inclusive multilateral mechanism in North-East Asia
• Challenges and opportunities for multilateralism in North-East Asia
• Lessons learned from experiences in other region’s mechanisms (i.e. EU, ASEAN, SAARC) and practical applications in North-East Asia
• Approaches towards an inclusive multilateral mechanism in North-East Asia (i.e. level and scope, areas of cooperation, implementation process, institutional framework and support)

12:00-13:30  Lunch

13:30-16:30  Session 4: In support of new and inclusive multilateralism in North-East Asia
• Recommendations for policy makers, institutions and civil society
• ESCAP study on new multilateralism in North-East Asia

16:30-17:00  Closing Session