

# How Has Korea Imagined Its Region?

Asia-Pacific, Northeast Asia, and East Asia\*

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· **Keywords** : Korea, regionalism, East Asia, Asia-Pacific, Northeast Asia, East Asian Community, Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative

**[ABSTRACT]**

The lack of shared recognition and widespread confusion in perceptions of “region” among Korean scholars, policymakers, journalists, etc. are the source of problems such as the poor development of nuanced and delicate narratives of “region.” Despite the fact that the terms “Asia-Pacific,” “Northeast Asia,” and “East Asia” have different origins, scopes, and political/economic implications, they tend to be used interchangeably in a variety of literature without clear recognition of distinctions. This article

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attempts to clarify Korean conceptions of region by sorting out the major concepts that have been employed most frequently in Korea by elaborating the historical backgrounds, strategic considerations, meanings, and political economic implications of each of the three main concepts of “region” in the Korean context.

## **I . Introduction**

Since the 1990s, there has been a drastic acceleration of transnational interactions associated with regionalism in Asia, which has numerous theoretical explanations. Basically, it is suggested that regionalization—meaning the enlargement of non-state economic transactions and the growth of economic ties among Asian states during the process of economic development and internationalization—was the main driving force behind this phenomenon. The advancement of Japanese multinational companies to the numerous Asian sites for overseas production and marketing networks after the Plaza Accord, coupled with the rise of China as a gigantic trading partner and an investment destination, have precipitated the Asianization of the Asian economy to a great extent. Korea, too, was one of the key contributors that served this rise in intra-regional economic transactions on account of its rapid economic development and internationalization. In addition, according to the leading literature, political and cognitive factors such as demands for a new international order in the region after the collapse of the Cold War, strategic responses of individual countries to cope with the high pressures of globalization, counter-measures to the extra-regional trends of regionalism such as the EU and NAFTA, resentment against the hegemonic dominance of Western/American interests, and the emergence of new identity combining Northeast and Southeast Asian states may be added to the list of vehicles of the upsurge of Asian regionalism.<sup>1)</sup>

In a similar vein, the issue of region gained renewed saliency in Korean foreign policy making as well as in academic discussions during this period. Reasons were manifold and intertwined. Internationally, the Cold War-based regional order that heavily constrained the thinking and behavior of the Korean people nearly collapsed. Domestically, along with the advancement of political democratization, academic and policy debates concerning the future of the Korean peninsula—including the reunification of the two Koreas—were galvanized. The frequent and sustained escalations of regional conflicts surrounding the North Korean nuclear arms issue, on the one hand, and the history-related conflicts originating from the rise of nationalism in neighboring countries on the other, reminded the Korean people of the necessity of an alternative regional political-security order that could safeguard peace and stability in the region. The negative experience of unfettered neoliberal globalization and the East Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s conferred Koreans keen recognition that a new type of regional economic order that could lead to economic prosperity should be constructed in the region.

A “region” is an ambiguous concept by any means. As Hurrell succinctly puts it, “(T)here are no ‘natural’ regions, and the definition of ‘region’ and indicators of ‘regionness’ vary according to the particular problem or question under investigation.”<sup>2)</sup> Thus, reminding us of the problem of “geographical bias”<sup>3)</sup> which underlies the definition of a region, scholars of

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1) John Ravenhill, “A Three Bloc World? The New East Asian Regionalism,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 2 (2002); Richard Stubbs, “ASEAN Plus Three: Emerging East Asian Regionalism?” *Asian Survey* 42-3 (May-June 2002); Douglas Webber, “Two Funerals and a Wedding? The Ups and Downs of Regionalism in East Asia and Asia-Pacific After the Asian Crisis,” *The Pacific Review* 14-3 (2001); Richard Higgot, “The Asian Economic Crisis: A Study in the Politics of Resentment,” *New Political Economy* 3-3 (1998); Paul Bowles, “Asia’s Post-Crisis Regionalism: Bringing the State Back In, Keeping the (United) States Out,” *Review of International Political Economy* 9-2 (2002); Takeshi Terata, “Constructing an ‘East Asian’ Concept and Growing Regional Identity: From EAEC to ASEAN+3,” *The Pacific Review* 16-2 (2003).

2) Andrew Hurrell, “Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective,” in Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (eds.), *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organization and International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 38-39.

3) Arif Dirlik, “The Asia-Pacific Idea: Reality and Representation in the Invention of a

regionalism have tended to conceptualize that regions are historical artifacts that are imagined and incessantly recreated/redefined through the political, economic, social, and cultural interactions between and among regional actors.<sup>4)</sup> Hurrell's statement that " ... it is how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and notions of 'regionness' that is critical"<sup>5)</sup> makes sense here, too. This article discusses the ways in which Koreans perceived and interpreted the ideas of "region" and "regionness" in the 1990s.

It should not be overlooked, however, that perceptions of region are not formed in a vacuum. Critical observers emphatically call attention to the fact that a "region" is generally a political device or a cultural creation manifested by superpowers. Specifically, in Asia, most ideas of a region that were circulated after the end of World War II were devised or redefined in line with the incentives of global or regional hegemonic states, i.e., the United States or Japan, in the pursuit of each one's political, economic, and strategic gains. What this implies for this study is that to a relatively weak and small country such as Korea—which had to place its foremost national priority on the adjustment to the geopolitical/economic location surrounded by super powers—regionalist ventures have either belonged to the realm of unrealistic ideals or have been viewed as equivalent to the imminent imperative of national survival. As a result, in Korea, fundamental ideas and terminologies of region were far from being independent or creative creatures that were devised on the basis of the country's own national viewpoint. Instead, it was provided from the outside, in that the vital political and strategic positions of Korea were

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Regional Structure," in Arif Dirlik (ed.), *What Is in a Rim: Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 17.

4) For arguments along this line, see Ibid.; David Capie, "Rival Regions? East Asian Regionalism and Its Challenge to the Asia-Pacific," in Jim Rolfe (ed.), *The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition* (Honolulu: The Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004); Richard Higgot and Richard Stubbs, "Competing Conceptions of Economic Regionalism: APEC versus EAEC in the Asia Pacific," *Review of International Political Economy* 2-3 (Summer 1995); Peter J. Katzenstein, "Regionalism and Asia," *New Political Economy* 5-3 (2000).

5) Hurrell (1995).

predetermined and stipulated through the prisms of surrounding superpowers.<sup>6)</sup> Thus, most of the categories of region—such as Asia, the Orient, East Asia, Far East, Northeast Asia, Pacific, Asia-Pacific, Pacific Rim, and Pacific Basin—were either of Western or Japanese origin and were widely circulated in Korea without users’ self-recognized distinctions.

Nevertheless, stating that terminologies and ideas of region are imported, not created, does not necessarily imply that Koreans have no hand at all in formulating and putting forth their own notions of region. Rather, Korean political leaders and academics have attempted to strategically select, interpret, and re-conceptualize those “givens.” Of the numerous options, their choices were Asia-Pacific, Northeast Asia, and East Asia.<sup>7)</sup> The main analytical task of this article is to scrutinize the historical backgrounds, strategic considerations, meanings, and political economic implications of each of those three main categories of region in the Korean context.

The aforementioned categories have coexisted and been used in Korea for a long time. This essay focuses on the fact that, on the one hand, each category of region has a different background, scope, and implications; on the other hand, Koreans have used the categories interchangeably without making clear distinctions among them. Related, conceptual confusion has been prevalent because a single concept tended to have multiple meanings depending on the individual user. It is also observable that in a given time period under specific political economic conditions, there appears a

6) Su-Hoon Lee, “Dongbuka Shidaeron” (The Era of East Asia), in The Korean Coalition of Northeast Asian Intellectuals (ed.), *Dongbuka Gongdongche-rul Hyanghayeo: Asia Jiyoktonghap-ui Kum-gwa Hyunsil* (Toward a Northeast Asian Community: The Dream and Reality of Asian Regional Integration) (Seoul: Dong-a Ilbo-sa, 2004), pp. 67-69.

7) Below is the result of rough title searches through Korean academic databases for the concepts of region to figure out the numbers of social scientific articles published in Korean journals. The numbers should be read carefully, however. The big gap between East Asia/ Northeast Asia and Asia-Pacific reflects not only the quantity but the timing of research. In other words, the latter was the main theme of research when, basically, Korean academia was small/non-active.

	East Asia	Northeast Asia	Asia-Pacific	Pacific Rim	Far East	Pacific Basin
Number of Articles	2013	1451	135	45	12	7

tendency for a certain concept to be employed more frequently than others and for some reason that category acquires new meanings as time passes. Suggesting clues to solving these problems may be one of the targets of this work.

The brief history of the concepts of region in Korea is as follows. During the entire period of the Cold War, the dominant conception of region in Korea was "Asia-Pacific." This had been the basic unit of reasoning in most Korea-designed projects anchored in regional settings. In the 1990s, however, Asia-Pacific began to lose its dominance, especially with the collapse of the Cold War and the East Asian economic crisis providing strong momentum. Instead, "Northeast Asia" and "East Asia" began to be employed more widely, bringing about diversification in the concepts of region and formulating a competitive milieu among the various concepts. Regarding the issue of security, Northeast Asia had been used either rarely with an undertone of a regionalist venture, or at most, in the context of the studies of communist areas during the Cold War era. Now, however, it has gained a higher level of relevance with the emergence of former-communist countries as targets for diplomatic transactions and the breakout of the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. The "Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative" promoted by the Roh Moo-hyun government supplied a powerful impetus for Northeast Asia to be widely adopted as the main category of formal regionalist ventures, both in political security as well as economic areas. Beginning in the 1970s, East Asia, which had been a term circulated cautiously among the historians working on East Asian countries (or regions) began to be extensively employed by social scientists to explore the economic achievements of East Asian countries. In the 1990s, when the term acquired a high degree of recognition from the Korean public, two more versions of East Asia, i.e., "alternative theory of region" and "East Asian community," either evolved domestically or was imported from outside.

This article is composed as follows. To examine the historical background of Korean imaginations of region, the next section briefly reviews a series of formal regional proposals and projects driven by the

Korean government during the Cold War period. Governmental schemes for regional projections receive more attention in the analysis because until the 1980s, regionalism had not attracted much attention from social scientists in Korea; thus, academic works and debates on the issue were surprisingly rare. The following section analyzes the three major concepts of region—Asia-Pacific, Northeast Asia, and East Asia—in terms of their origins, historical background, political/economic implications, etc.—within the context of the political economic milieu of the 1990s. The final section concludes this study by suggesting theoretical implications and future tasks.

## **II . Background: Korea's Regionalist Projects during the Cold War Period**

The Korean conception of a region has undergone three major turnovers along with the changes in the international system of East Asian area. In the pre-modern era, Korea had long been involved in the “Sino-centric tributary order.” Its worldview was self-fulfilling with China at the center and other tributary countries on the periphery and thus did not contain the notion of region as a part of the world order. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese imperialist order substituted the Sino-centric regional system, under which Japanese versions of regional conception, including the Eastern Hemisphere (*Doyo*), East Asia (*Do-a*), and later the “Greater Asian Sphere of Common Prosperity” (*Dai-doa-koueiken*, GASCP) dominated Koreans' perception of region until the end of the Japanese colonial period. As the typical Korean regional schemes that were suggested in the 1910s and 1920s—such as “The System of Tripartite Cooperation” or “The Oriental Peace System”—revealed, the basic configuration of Korean regional strategy was to reformulate or apply the perceptions and strategies of Japanese origin to the Korean context.<sup>8)</sup> Thus, Korea's perceptions of

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8) See Yong-Hwa Chung, “Hankuk-ui Jiyeokinsik-gwa Gusang I: Dongyang Pyonghwa

region during the period of early modernization showed a tendency to anchor in the world view of coalitional relations among the three Oriental nations, i.e., Korea, China, and Japan, as opposed to the invading Western powers, particularly Russia. The cognitive basis of such views was geographical, civilizational, and racial affinities among the three countries while the strategic objective was to safeguard national independence not only from Western powers but also from China and Japan. It is well known that the worldview built on such types of affinities was of Japanese origin.<sup>9)</sup>

After the end of World War II, the international milieu surrounding Korea abruptly restructured into the Cold War system, characterized by national division and U.S. dominance over the area. Accordingly, a newly constructed independent government began to reconfigure its conception of region with the motivation of safeguarding national security through anti-communism. An available solution was to adopt the notion of Asia-Pacific,<sup>10)</sup> which echoed the strategic interests of the United States and Japan within the context of the Cold War political economic order.<sup>11)</sup> The division of the Korean Peninsula and China made the most of the

Gusang” (The Perception and Idea of Region in Korea: The Theory of East Asian Peace), in Yul Sohn (ed.), *Dongasia-wa Jiyeokjueui: Jiyok-ui Insik, Gusang, Jeonryak* (East Asia and Regionalism: Perception, Idea, and Strategy) (Seoul: Jisikmadang, 2006); Kwang-Ho Hyun, “Yu Gil-Jun-gwa An Jung-Geun-ui Dongasia Insik Bigyo: Jungguk-gwa Ilbon-e daehan Sangihan Siseon” (A Comparison of the Conception of East Asia of Yu Gil-Jun and An Jung-Geun; A Different View of China and Japan), *Yoksa Bipyong* (Critical History) 76 (Fall 2006).

9) Yong Hwa Chung (2006), pp. 47-49. For more detailed discussions, see, Koyasu Nobukuni and Lee Seung Yeon (trans.), *Donga, Dae-Donga, Dongasia: Geundae Ilbon ui Orientalism* (East Asia, Great Co-Prosperty Area and East Asia: Orientalism of Modern Japan) (Seoul: Yoksa Bipyongsa, 2005).

10) For the evolution and problems of ‘Asia-Pacific,’ see Arif Dirlik (ed.), *What Is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

11) Ki-Hyung Roh, “Rhee Syngman Jeonggwon-ui Taepyeongyang Gongdongche Dongmang Chujin-gwa Jiyok Anbogusang” (The Promotion of the Alliance of Pacific Union by Rhee Syngman Government and the Idea of Regional Security), *Jiyok-gwa Yoksa* (Region and History) 11 (2002); Myung-Lim Park, “Roh Moohyunui Dongbuka Gusang Yongu: Insik, Bijyon, Jonryak” (A Study of Roh Moo-hyun’s Northeast Asia Initiative: Perception, Vision, Strategy), *Yoksa bipyong* (Critical History) (2006).

preexisting regional ideas and schemes that had drawn on the obsolete traditional Oriental-three-nations concept. Instead, the concept of Asia-Pacific was entrenched in the regional political cleavage line of ideology, e.g., Northern Triangle (Soviet Union, China, and North Korea) versus Southern Triangle (the United States, Japan, and Korea) or the U.S.-Japan alliance versus the Sino-Soviet alliance, which took on dominant relevance as a main conceptual framework for the region. Thereafter, the Korean government pursued several regional projects within the perimeter of the Asia-Pacific region during the entire period of the Cold War; however, the achievement of each of those proposals was a function of American strategic interests and political support and not those of Korea.

The first regional scheme devised by the independent Korean government and its first president Syngman Rhee was the Pacific Pact.<sup>12)</sup> The driving motivation behind it was to construct a formalized anti-communist alliance system in Asia following the model of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in order to safeguard national security by tying America to the region through a treaty system. The scheduled withdrawal of American troops from the Korean Peninsula in June 1949 might have provided a strong drive to pursue such a regional security scheme. President Rhee put strenuous diplomatic efforts into realizing the idea of a Pacific Pact in cooperation with President Elpidio Quirino of the Philippines and Chang Kai-shek of China (later Taiwan) during the years between 1949 and 1955. The proposed member states at the time included most countries within the perimeter of the Pacific Rim and East Asia, excluding only Japan, i.e., Korea, the United States, several Southeast Asian countries, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and even some Latin American countries.<sup>13)</sup>

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12) In some cases, it was called 'APATO' (Asia-Pacific Area Treaty Organization) in contrast to NATO as well as 'Pacific Union,' depending on the proposers. Young-Ho Choi, "Rhee Syngman Jeongbuui Taepyungyang Dongmang Gusanggwa Asia Minjokbangongdongmang Gyolseong" (The Ideal of Pacific Union by Rhee Syngman Government and the Organization of Asian People Anti-Communist League), *Gukhejeongchinonchong* (Korean International Political Science Review) 39-2 (1999), pp. 171-72.

This project, however, confronted multiple political problems. Most of all, in staunch opposition to the Korean government's strong anti-Japanese policy stances, the United States put far too much weight on the construction of a sound alliance with Japan, to the extent of ignoring Korean causes of security. The defeat of the Kuomintang government of China in 1949 meant a significant loss to Rhee in the sense that the main diplomatic counterpart for cooperation was seriously damaged. Another key partner, the Philippines, turned its eyes toward the Southeast Asia Conference<sup>14)</sup> and away from the Pacific Pact, persuaded by the United States and concerned more with domestic political instability. It is also crucial that by signing the Korea-America Mutual Defense Treaty, President Rhee solved the major part of his security concerns about Korea. The final achievement of Rhee's strenuous efforts for forming a Pacific Union was merely to organize a civilian anti-communist organization, i.e., the Asian People Anti-Communist League (APACL).<sup>15)</sup> With the indifference and non-cooperation of the United States, the Korean government could not get even close to its diplomatic goal.

The Park Chung-hee government also contrived a regional security cooperation scheme immediately after its inauguration in 1964, with more fruitful results. The motivation of President Park was fundamentally the same as that of his predecessor, i.e., an international anti-communist coalition for national security that would cope with the rising Communist China. Contrary to Rhee's Pacific Pact proposal, however, Park's attempt yielded the tangible result of organizing the Asia and Pacific Council (ASPAC), which was the first and the sole international cooperation regime initiated and then led by Korea. Composed of ten member countries in the

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13) Roh (2002).

14) The Southeast Asia Conference, which was organized through the initiative of Quirino of the Philippines, abandoned the anti-Communist doctrine of Rhee Syngman as a result of U.S. persuasion. The conference was composed of seven states—the Philippines, Australia, Thailand, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and Ceylon—and was held only once. While Burma and New Zealand were invited and did not send representatives, Korea and China (Kuomintang) were not invited at all.

15) Roh (2002); Choi (1999).

Asia-Pacific region (Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Australia, and New Zealand, with Laos as an observer) and sustained for about six years holding seven annual meetings,<sup>16)</sup> the ASPAC could visibly materialize President Park's heightened political desire for advanced Korea-U.S. relations. Park believed that Korea could play an "initiative role" in regional security affairs as a result of the upgrade of its political status as a counterpart of the American security alliance by dispatching troops to Vietnam in response to U.S. demands. The Johnson administration, partially responding to Korea's request but actually responding for various strategic reasons, supported Park's plans for ASPAC.<sup>17)</sup> Encouraged by such U.S. support, Park demonstrated enthusiastic aspirations for the leadership of the organization to the degree of promulgating his "Great Asia-Pacific Community Design" at the inaugural meeting of ASPAC.<sup>18)</sup>

Nevertheless, the organization faced insurmountable internal obstacles in maintaining its solidarity. Simply put, there was no consensus among the member countries on the purposes and roles of the organization. Korea's original idea was to define the themes of the organization in broad terms so as to deal with all issues in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres, leaving open the possibility of developing a regional collective defense system. Some anti-communist member countries including Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Philippines, agreed to the idea. However, other members such as Japan, Australia, and New Zealand argued for the practical approach of emphasizing economic-cultural exchanges and excluding ideology and politics. Until the last meeting, which took place in 1972 in Seoul, the member countries could not reach an agreement on the issue.

The root cause of such disagreement was the difference in each member

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16) Brian Bridges, "From ASPAC to EAS: South Korea and the Asian Pacific Basin," Working Paper Series, Center for Asian Pacific Studies, Lingnan University, No. 172 (August 2006), p. 1.

17) Tae-kyun Park, "Park Chung-heeui Dongasia Insikgwa Asia-Taepyungyang Gongdongsahwe Gusang" (Park Chung-hee's Perception of East Asia and His Idea of Asia-Pacific Community), *Yoksa bipyung* (Critical History) 76 (Fall 2006), pp. 133-34.

18) Ibid.

country's perception of Chinese threat. Along with the changes in political climate such as the rise of China in the international arena and the subsequent Sino-American rapprochement, some member countries began to calculate that China's threat to the stability of Asia was decreasing, and, at least, they ought to avoid antagonizing China by staying in ASPAC. At least five nations—Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, and New Zealand—either pulled out of the organization or expressed their desire to do so at the 1972 meeting.<sup>19)</sup> Korea's attempts to readjust its stance in line with the majority of other member countries did not make any difference. As a result, ASPAC came to a halt in 1972 and was never convened again.

Approximately ten years later, Korea's interest in regionalist ventures was revived. When the new authoritarian government of Chun Doo-hwan was politically stabilized and Korea acquired enough self-confidence to play the role of a bridge connecting the advanced and developing countries in the region on the basis of strengthened economic power, President Chun proposed a new regional cooperation scheme entitled "Pacific Summit."<sup>20)</sup> The core idea of the proposal was to "set up an institutional scheme of regular summit meetings to discuss common interests and to search for methods of cooperation," in order to "overcome the constraints and challenges that lie ahead of the realization of the Pacific century."<sup>21)</sup> The following five principles were suggested as the cornerstone of the Pacific Summit:

- 1) Set up an institutional scheme of regular summit meetings to discuss

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19) Tae Dong Chung, "South Korea and Southeast Asia: A Reassessment," *Asian Perspective* 1-1 (1977), pp. 8-9; Joon-Young Park, "Asia Taepyungyang Gakryogweui (ASPAC)-ui Oegyojok Uiuu Jaejomyong" (Refocus on the Diplomatic Implications of ASPAC), *Sahoegwahaknonjip* (Social Science Review) (1980).

20) Jae-kyu Park et al., "Asia Taepyungyang Munje Gicho Yongu: Jiyok Hyuprukche Gusang-eul wihan Bangbeopronjeok Siron" (A Methodological Trial for the Idea of Regional Cooperation Entity), *Hanguk-gwa Gukjejeongchi* (Korea and International Politics) 1-1 (1985), pp. 255-56.

21) Im-Dong Wang et al., "Asia Taepyungyang Hyupryokche Gusang-gwa Dongnama Gukgayonhap-e gwanhan Yongu" (A Study on the Idea of Asia-Pacific Cooperative Entity and ASEAN), *Tongil Munje Yongu* (Journal of Korean Reunification) (Chosun University, 1986), p. 5.

- common interests and cooperation;
- 2) Principle of open membership to most 37 countries in the Asia-Pacific region;
  - 3) Principles of sovereignty and independence, mutual equality, and noninterference. Non-approval of hegemonic dominance of one country, and avoidance of a political bloc;
  - 4) Major issue areas for the summit shall be the reification of development potential possessed by regional countries, promotion of regional trade, economic and technological cooperation, development of human resources, enhancement of transportation and communication, exchange of education and culture, etc.;
  - 5) Provide a model of North-South cooperation by encouraging and deepening cooperative efforts between developing and advanced countries or among developing countries.<sup>22)</sup>

The Pacific Summit contained more than a few positive aspects: it suggested unprecedented regularized summit in the region; it was a product of a developing country, not a developed one; and it acknowledged a principle of open membership, etc. It failed, however, to draw *bona fide* responses, receiving little more than rhetorical lip service from the regional countries as it was conceptually conspicuous in its lack of a specified strategy for realization and was not backed up by any subsequent practical measures.<sup>23)</sup>

As reviewed, a series of regionalist schemes—either partially successful or fruitless—by the successive Korean governments of Rhee Syngman, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan commonly took Asia-Pacific as a basic unit of reasoning under the political conditions and constraints of the Cold War. Even though the visible achievements of such projects were by no means great, suffice it to say for our analytical purposes that Korean leaders did endeavor to make use of regionalist schemes to adjust to the changing international political economic milieu by pursuing the strategic

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22) Jae-Kyu Park (1985), p. 256.

23) Bridges (2006).

goals of enhancing national security, creating economic benefits, and even increasing international status under the given conditions.

### **III. Post-Cold War Conceptions of Region: Diversification and Competition**

It is hardly surprising that the major domestic as well as international political economic transformations of the 1990s—such as Korea's democratization and economic rise, the collapse of the Cold War, and the subsequent reconfiguration of regional power relations, advancement of globalization, rise of regionalism in other parts of the world, and East Asian financial crisis—brought about significant changes in Korea's imagination of region. The essence of these changes can be summed up by the following progressions that echo such transformations: the gradual decline of Asia-Pacific, the rise of Northeast Asia and East Asia, and the division of labor—or, in some cases, competition—between and among them. The division of labor in this case denotes that, the Asia-Pacific and East Asia tended to have connotations of functional cooperation in the economic sphere, while Northeast Asia tended to be employed for strategic cooperation in the area of political security issues.

#### *1. The Decline of 'Asia-Pacific'*

The limited but long-lasting political interest of the Korean government in the regional cooperation scheme was realized by joining APEC in 1989 under the Roh Tae-woo government. APEC was the outgrowth of a longstanding joint effort of Australia and Japan to set up a regional cooperative body. Korea played a pivotal role in materializing the idea of APEC not only by actively supporting Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke's initial proposal to create it, but also by drawing worldwide attention to the organization over the course of enticing Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China to join it in order to upgrade its level of institutionalization.<sup>24)</sup>

Thanks mainly to the launch of APEC in 1989 and to the rise of the metaphor “Pacific Community” / “Pacific Century” in widespread correspondence among academics and policymakers, Asia-Pacific seemed likely to remain the central scheme of regionalist ventures in Korea. Discourses such as the vision of Asia-Pacific as the epicenter of economic dynamism and the shift in the gravity of power from the Atlantic to the Pacific increasingly represented the Asia-Pacific as destined to become an ever more integrated region of prosperous free trade, active investment, and rapid economic growth. As Berger and Beeson point out, “APEC was grounded in optimistic visions and was directly implicated in the view that the economic trends that were carrying the region forward were going to continue indefinitely, delivering prosperity to an ever-growing number of people.”<sup>25)</sup> Yet, this concept proved to be overly optimistic.

Since the mid-1990s, the Asia-Pacific, for several unexpected reasons, began to lend itself to alternative frameworks such as Northeast Asia and East Asia for regional projections in Korea. The background factor that drove Asia-Pacific down the road was the inherent weaknesses of APEC that stemmed from problems such as the absence of a consensus on its goals and the wherewithal of grouping among member countries, an outnumbered membership preventing effective decision making, and a lack of driving force or leadership to cope with the imminent problems with which member countries were confronted.<sup>26)</sup> The disparity between visions on the part of the United States and Japan for the function and future of APEC was one of the symbolic elements that weakened APEC’s image as a comprehensive cooperative scheme in the eyes of most member countries.

The East Asian financial crisis decisively embossed the already revealed weaknesses and unavailability of APEC. To the dismay of member

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24) See Yoichi Funabashi, *Asia Pacific Fusion: Japan’s Role in APEC* (Waton: Institute for International Economics, 1994), pp. 73-76.

25) Mark T. Berger and Mark Beeson, “APEC, ASEAN+3, and American Power: The History and Limits of the New Regionalism in the Asia-Pacific” (February 2004), p. 29.

26) See John Ravenhill, “APEC Adrift: Implications for Economic Regionalism in Asia and the Pacific,” *The Pacific Review* 13-2 (2000).

countries that were implicated in a serious financial crisis, APEC led by the United States could neither adopt any meaningful measures toward helping those countries nor take any action to relieve them. Instead, APEC was preoccupied with the debate on the sectoral liberalization of trade, irrespective of the severe hardships of its East Asian members. To most East Asian governments it appeared that the grouping had its priorities all wrong.<sup>27)</sup> Furthermore, it gradually became evident that ensuing annual summit could not forge any meaningful decisions by way of solutions to imminent problems such as East Timor, increasing terrorism, and nuclear arms in North Korea. Continued failure to properly deal with the issues at hand turned a host of member countries' wishful expectations into skepticism about the usefulness of APEC as a cooperation scheme.<sup>28)</sup>

In addition to disappointment in the performance of APEC, there were further realistic factors that called into question the relevance and usefulness of the term 'Asia-Pacific.' For example, as one of the direct victims of the region's financial tumult, immediately after the crisis broke out, Korea's newly launched Kim Dae-jung government had to make overcoming the crisis its first policy priority; as a result, it had to be attentive to world financial organizations, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which began to exert an extremely strong influence on the macroeconomic policymaking and implementations of Korea. For regionalist ventures, the Korean government began to shift its focal point of expectations away from the helpless APEC<sup>29)</sup> to the newly burgeoning ASEAN+3 in search of solutions for a crisis management mechanism, a long-term solution to the financial crisis and regional economic stability, etc. Coupled with the rise of Northeast Asia in the security area, as will be discussed in the next section, this shift even in economic issues doomed the expectations for Asia-Pacific *per se* among Korean people.

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27) *Ibid.*, p. 178.

28) *Ibid.*

29) Taking into consideration that the title of the association organized by Kim Dae-jung when he came back to Korea from exile in the United States in 1985 was "Asia-Pacific Peace Foundation," it was a notable change.

## 2. The Rise of 'Northeast Asia'

In lieu of Asia-Pacific, Northeast Asia began to gather momentum as a candidate for the Korean regional scheme in the late 1980s, when a series of new political progressions—including the collapse of the Cold War international system, the opening of former communist nations, and the advent of political democratization—shifted the focal point of Korea's foreign policy to the normalization of diplomatic relations with former communist countries, including North Korea. Roh Tae-woo's government strenuously pushed for the so-called *Nordpolitik* to succeed in normalizing diplomatic relations with former communist-bloc states, including Hungary and Poland in 1989, Russia in September 1990, and China in August 1992. The two Koreas' simultaneous joining of the United Nations in September 1991 and the promulgation of the "Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" as a result of the easing of political tension with those former enemies enhanced the domestic as well as international prospects for peace in the Korean Peninsula. In a similar vein but in the opposite direction, the outbreak of the North Korean nuclear crisis, when North Korea denied International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections in March 1993 and subsequently withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the following year, increased the diplomatic significance of skillfully coping with the nuclear issue in order to safeguard peace in the area.

The surge of *Nordpolitik* and the North Korean nuclear issue categorically increased the saliency of the concept of Northeast Asia as the central unit of a Korean security cooperation scheme. Ever since President Roh Tae-woo suggested an "East Asian Peace Talk" composed of the six countries at the UN general meeting in 1988, Northeast Asia primarily comprised the six countries surrounding the Korean Peninsula (the two Koreas, the United States, China, Japan, and Russia) and had acquired an increasing degree of regional character in Korean foreign policy. Furthermore, regional cooperation schemes such as the "Four Party Talks" and the "Six Party Talks"—anchored mainly in the idea of Northeast Asia but with

varying numbers of members—gained currency by way of solutions to the North Korean nuclear issue, and more broadly as a comprehensive and prospective body for security cooperation in the area. The logical pillar that upheld the idea of Northeast Asia was that it was a category of region that contains the two Koreas and the four giants surrounding the Korean Peninsula; thus, it has the merit of being realistic by conforming to the emotions of the Korean people, not only in terms of geographical propinquity but also by including major actors that have actually influenced the country historically.<sup>30)</sup>

The promotion of the “Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative for Peace and Prosperity” (NACI) by Roh Moo-hyun’s government in 2003 formally extended the conceptual space of Northeast Asia to the area of the economy and, as a result, advanced it to the status of central unit of the regional cooperation scheme of Korea. Initially, it was proposed to enhance economic cooperation among the Northeast Asian countries in order to construct an herb of finance and distribution, induce foreign direct investment, coordinate for energy and transportation, and so forth. Yet, within a year after its inception, it was enlarged into a more comprehensive national agenda that included medium- and long-term strategic planning and projects for peace- and community-building in the region.<sup>31)</sup> An official document by the Presidential Committee on the Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative says that the ultimate goal of the NACI is “... to materialize a peaceful and prosperous Northeast Asia by fostering the governance of cooperation and building a regional community of mutual trust, reciprocity, and symbiosis.”<sup>32)</sup> Peace, in this context, is composed of the following three tasks: creating a peace system on the Korean Peninsula, strengthening cooperative diplomacy with the four super powers, and enhancing multilateral security cooperation. Tasks for prosperity included a

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30) Lee (2004), pp. 57-58.

31) Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative, “Toward a Peaceful and Prosperous Northeast Asia: Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative” (2003), pp. 8-9.

32) *Ibid.*, p. 14.

variety of cooperative projects to foster finance, logistics, investment, energy, transportation, the environment, and sociocultural transactions.<sup>33)</sup>

The NACI, however, confronted a host of criticisms from the beginning, which mainly related to its carrying a low potential for realization.<sup>34)</sup> One analyst evaluates that “the initiative contains more of aspiration than of thoughtful strategic approach because of the too grand discourse and overstatements.”<sup>35)</sup> Another observer criticizes that “it is hard for the initiative to have more than a rhetorical role because it was suggested without systematic deliberations, loaded with specified visions, the capability to materialize, and deep pondering of possibility.”<sup>36)</sup>

The root causes of such problems seem to be numerous. Some have pointed out that, from the strategic point of view, it would be hard for the Korean government to find the room for an appropriate role under the Northeast Asian scheme because most of the actors involved are superpowers. More fundamentally, the inherent limitation of NACI as a unit of a regional project looms large. The concept of Northeast Asia was known to have been devised by the U.S. army; thus, in Korea, it began to be circulated with the British-origin ‘Far East’ after the end of World War II. It was used as a geographical concept denoting mostly the Korean Peninsula, China, Japan, Mongolia, Taiwan, and occasionally the United States and Russia, with scant implications as a regionalist project.<sup>37)</sup> In the

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33) Ibid., pp. 20-27.

34) Ibid., pp. 12-13; Sa-Myung Park, *Dongasia-ui Saeroun Mosaek: Jeonjang-eseo Sijang-uro, Sijang-eseo Gwangjang-uro* (In Search of a New East Asia: From Battlefield to Market, from Market to Agora) (Seoul: Imaejin, 2006), ch. 3.

35) Myung-Lim Park (2006), p. 174.

36) Yul Sohn et. al., *Dongasia Jiyokjuui: Jiyokui Insik, Gusang, Jeonryak* (East Asian Regionalism: Perception, Idea, and Strategy) (Seoul: Jisik Madang, 2006), p. 12.

37) During the 1960s and 1970s, Kim Dae-jung as an opposition politician had a conception of region based on Northeast Asia, though it was even less clear. Fundamentally, his conception involved China as a main actor in the region. This is in line with the fact that the users of the concept of Northeast Asia in Japan are progressive scholars such as Wada Haruki or Kang Sang-Jung. Namely, before the 1990s, Northeast Asia was used mainly by progressive politicians or scholars who put much emphasis on diplomatic relations with the Communist countries. In the United States, scholars such as Gilbert Rozman and Bruce Cumings use the term “Northeast Asia” actively.

community of social sciences, under the Cold War regional system, Northeast Asia tended to be perceived as having something to do with the study of the enemy, including mostly China and the Soviet Union.

The situation was not so different in other states in the region. In Japan, people have had a tendency to regard their neighbors in the Northeast Asian area, i.e., Korea and China, more as counterparts for bilateral interactions than as counterparts for multilateral cooperation. More critically, the Japanese rarely use Northeast Asia as a category for regionalist cooperation except in some 'Japan Sea Rim' areas such as Shimane, Niigata, and Toyama, or among a handful of progressive scholars.<sup>38)</sup> Both in China and Russia, Northeast Asia tends to be regarded as a category for a domestic-level region including only the northeastern part of the national territory, such as Manchuria, in the former, and the Eastern part of territory, such as Siberia, in the latter. In the United States, Northeast Asia tended to be perceived as a sub-regional unit that complimented the broader scheme of the Asia-Pacific region. With these overlapping problems of, on the one hand, the presence of basic conceptual differences of Northeast Asia between Korea and the neighboring nations and, on the other, the unilateral enlargement of it into a national project encompassing broader issues, is that the Korean government's hope of reconfiguring the region based on the idea of Northeast Asia's economic hub would not be rewarded or even responded to.<sup>39)</sup>

Nevertheless, at least in the area of security issues, the 'Six Party Talks' that are typically based on the concept of Northeast Asia are still considered by many policymakers to be the most effective means of dealing with the North Korean nuclear weapons issue. In this sense, the failure of the NACI project by no means implies a denial of Northeast

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38) Ryoji Nakagawa, "The Revival of 'Northeast Asia' in Japan: Why Have Japanese Opinion Leaders Begun to Speak of 'Northeast Asia'?" *Ritsumeikan International Affairs* 3 (2005); Haruki Wada, *Tohoku Asia Kyoudou no Ie* (The East Asian Common House) (Heibonsha, 2003); Sang-Jung Kang, *Tohoku Asia Kyoudou no Ie o Mezashite* (Toward the East Asian Common House) (Heibonsha, 2001).

39) See Gilbert Rozman, "Flawed Regionalism: Reconceptualizing Northeast Asia in the 1990s," *The Pacific Review* 11-1 (1998).

Asia's usefulness as a regional category in security issues in the Korean Peninsula.

### 3. Emergence and Diversification of 'East Asia'

The origin of the Korean term "East Asia" (*Dong-Asia*) is Japan's *Do-a*,<sup>40</sup> the substitution of *Doyo* (Orient) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Korea had no other options but to adopt *Do-a* under Japanese colonial rule.<sup>41</sup> Throughout most of the post-World War II era, however, the term East Asia nearly disappeared. This occurred on the one hand because it reminded Korean people of the atrocious memories of the pre-war "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Area" created by Japan, and on the other, because a new category, i.e., Asia-Pacific (which was relevant to the changed international order) was imported and gained dominance, as described above. From the 1990s onward, however, East Asia gained renewed currency in Korea in at least three ways.

#### 1) East Asia as an economic development model

The first wave of momentum for the revival of the term 'East Asia' in Korea came from journalistic and academic debates concerning the economic development in some East Asian countries since the 1970s. Such debates were triggered when several East Asian states including Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong—which were later dubbed East Asia's "Gang of Four"—achieved miraculous economic development following the neo-mercantilist trajectory of the regional pioneer, i.e., Japan Inc. As a natural result, the 'East Asia' in this context tended to encompass such newly industrialized Asian countries in addition to Japan. A series of

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40) Japan that had been using *Doyo* (Orient) since the beginning of modernization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; it coined the regional category called *Do-a* (East Asia) in the 1930s and developed it into *Dai do-a* (Greater East Asia) by adding the *Nanbou* (Southern Area). Koyasu Nobuyuki (2005), p. 40.

41) Chung (2006); Sang-Il Han, "Dongasia Gongdongcheron: Silcheinga Hwansanginga?" (Idea of East Asian Community: Is It Reality or Illusion?), *Dongyang Jeongchisasangsa* (The History of East Asian Political Thought) 4-1 (2005).

comparative works about East Asia and Latin America helped to configure East Asia as a unit of region that had characteristic traits of its own.<sup>42)</sup> Along with “a literature big enough to fill a small airplane hangar”<sup>43)</sup> analyzing the causes of East Asian economic growth, the publication of the *The East Asian Miracle* by the World Bank in 1993 confirmed that the term “East Asia” had acquired global currency.

In Korea, instigated by activated academic debates abroad, the relevance and explanatory power of the numerous theoretical approaches to East Asian development including neo-classical/neo-liberal economic theory, dependency theory, bureaucratic authoritarianism, structural Marxism, neo-Weberian state theory, and Confucian capitalism/Asiatic Value, etc., were debated, empirically tested, and, in some cases, refuted.<sup>44)</sup> In those academic intercourses, the extraordinary pace and scope of achievements by East Asian economies tended to be attributed to political and economic factors such as international system, market mechanism, political system (regime type), role of the government and bureaucracy, national economic policies, etc. Intensive debates on the causes of economic growth in the East Asian area contributed to the revival of the notion of East Asia, not only in the sense that they helped the term to gain wider national currency, but also that they implicitly reminded Koreans of the fact that the states in the region shared a plethora of political, economic, and cultural commonalities.

Literature dubbed as Confucian Capitalism/Asian Value, which emphasized the roles of cultural elements for East Asian development, supplied an additional impetus for East Asia to be recognized as a regional entity in Korea.<sup>45)</sup> Inspired by Southeast Asian political leaders such as

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42) See, for example, Stephan Haggard, *Pathways from the Periphery: The Politics of Growth in the Newly Industrializing Countries* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

43) Robert Wade, “East Asia’s Economic Success: Conflicting Perspectives, Partial Insights, Shaky Evidence,” *World Politics* 44 (January 1992), p. 270.

44) For a comprehensive review of the Korean literature along this line, see Beom-mo Ku and Jong-guk Baek, “Hanguk-ui Hubal Sanophwa-e guanhan Munheon Bipyong” (Critical Review of Literature on Korea’s Late Development), *Hanguk Jeongchihak Hwebo* (Korean Political Science Review) 24-1 (1990).

Mahathir bin Mohamad of Malaysia and Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore, and encouraged by the works of Western scholars such as Herman Kahn and Peter Berger, proponents of Asiatic value sought to explain the Asian miracle by contrasting the virtues of Asian communitarianism and good governance with defects of Western individualism and democracy.<sup>46)</sup> In their view, the economic successes of East Asian countries were the product of the cultural traits of Confucianism, including family centrism, sound spirit of labor, strong will for education, high desire for social achievement, frugality, loyalty to organization, and so forth. Curiously, it was not until the mid-1990s when Korean scholars began to pay attention to the discourses of Confucian capitalism that were “instigated by Western observers and responded to by Asian scholars” on the basis of the unsubstantiated awareness that “statements by Asians concerning Confucian capitalism are always true.” Conferences by major academic associations dealing with Confucian capitalism were held frequently and a journal focusing on the issue began to be published in the mid-1990s.<sup>47)</sup>

Ironically, it was not long after Korean academia began having serious discussions about Confucian capitalism that the breakout of the East Asian financial crisis turned a “miracle” into a “total failure.” The virtue of Confucian culture abruptly degraded into the ringleader of a crisis, as the term ‘crony capitalism’ symbolizes. At almost the same time, Korean interest in Confucian capitalism evaporated without being earnestly discussed. Moreover, in addition to the economic adversities of the producers of the model, including Japan, the economic rise of other states such as Brazil, Argentina, Russia, and India deprived the monopoly of East

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45) Suk-Geun Kim, “Yugyo Jabonjueui? Chalbun Yuhang-gwa Gil Yeoun Grigo Nameun Gwaje” (Confucian Capitalism? Brief Popularity, Long Aftershock and the Remaining Tasks), *Oneuleui Dongyangsasang* (Contemporary Oriental Thinking) 14-2 (2006); Min-ho Kuk, “Dongasia Baljeon-gwa Asiajeok Gachi” (Development of East Asia and Asiatic Value), *Dongyang Sahwe Sasang* (East Asian Social Thought) 15 (2007).

46) See Je-Gook Chun, “Asiajeok Gachi gwanryon Dongseo Nonjang-ui Jaejomyung” (A Refocus of the Debates in the East and West on Asiatic Value), *Hanguk-gwa Gukjejeongchi* (Korea and International Politics) 15-1 (1999).

47) Suk-Geun Kim (2006) p. 68.

Asian countries of the status of model for successful economic development.

Strictly speaking, East Asia in this context was just an ex post categorization of geographically adjacent Asian countries that share the common elements of high economic performance, specific causes behind it, cultural commonalities, and so forth. In other words, from a theoretical point of view, it had more to do with regionalization than regionalism. It is arguable, however, that, as regionalization is usually regarded as a precondition for the rise of regionalism, the whole process of the rise and fall of East Asia as a model for economic development supplied a spring board for East Asia to evolve into a genuine category for regionalist projects in Korea, at least by heightening peoples' acquaintance with the term "East Asia."

## **2) East Asian community**

The second version of East Asia that gained currency in Korea in the 1990s refers to the regional cooperation scheme anchored mainly in the ASEAN+3, which was propelled by the East Asian financial crisis. The origin of the idea of APT can be traced back to Mahatir's suggestion of the East Asian Economic Group (EAEG) in the early 1990s. The originality involved in the suggestion was a brand new category of East Asia combining both Southeast and Northeast Asian states.<sup>48)</sup> This East Asia, on the one hand, resembles the traditional Asia-Pacific in the sense that it includes Southeast Asian states. On the other, it is symbolically different from the Asia-Pacific as it intentionally excluded the United States as well as other Western states such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>49)</sup>

Even though the suggestion was partially based on the positive notion

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48) Linda Low, "East Asian Economic Grouping," *The Pacific Review* 4-4 (1991); Takeshi Terata, "Constructing an 'East Asian' Concept and Growing Regional Identity: From EAEC to ASEAN+3," *The Pacific Review* 16-2 (2003), p. 256; Baogang He, "East Asian Ideas of Regionalism: A Normative Critique," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 58-1 (2004).

49) It is noteworthy that they argued for open regionalism from the beginning, and particularly accepted Australia, New Zealand, and India as new members in the course of creating EAS on the basis of the principles of comprehensiveness and openness. As a result, the Asian identity was weakened.

that “these states share commonalities in terms of their attitudes toward economic development and culture,”<sup>50)</sup> the underlying motive of Mahatir was anti-American, anti-Western, or anti-neoliberal sentiment in the pursuit of an alternative to the Western-centered APEC. A series of careful efforts to posit Japan instead of the United States as the leader of the East Asian region reflect his political motivation for Asia-centrism.<sup>51)</sup> In this manner, this conception of East Asia obviously contained the elements of conceptual competition with the Asia-Pacific.<sup>52)</sup> The idea of EAEC had to wait for several years to materialize, due mainly to the United States’ opposition to the formation of a cooperative entity in Asia that did not include itself, and to its active pressures on pro-American states such as Japan, Korea, and Thailand not to accept the offer.

This East Asia, however, was revitalized by coincidence at the time of the formation of the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1996, by way of collectively gathering thirteen Asian states as Asian counterparts to European countries. More decisively, it was brought to fruition by the institutionalization of the APT summit meeting, which convened to effectively cope with the East Asian financial crisis in 1997. Most of all, the shared sense of resentment against the United States and its international financial institutions turned into a common sentiment of identity that connected Southeast and Northeast Asian states; this, in turn, provided fertile soil for the organization of a formal institution that combined the two Asian sub-regions.<sup>53)</sup> Indeed, this version of East Asia has drawn worldwide attention because the APT scheme, as a formal cooperative project in the so-called “region without regionalism,” was developed at the unprecedented speed and scope of ten years since its inception,<sup>54)</sup> and evolved into the much-vaunted East Asian Summit (EAS)

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50) Mahatir, quoted in Higgot and Stubbs (1995), p. 525.

51) Baogang He (2004), p. 112.

52) Higgot and Stubbs (1995).

53) See Webber (2001); Stubbs (2002).

54) See Kee-Seok Kim, “Ilbon-ui Dongasia Tonghap Jeonryak” (Japan’s Strategy of East Asian Integration), *Gukga Jeonryak* (National Strategy) 13-1 (2007).

far ahead of schedule.

This version of East Asia, however, has not attracted much interest from Korean policymakers or from the public for several reasons. As a matter of fact, Korea under the Kim Dae-jung government (1998—2003), as one of the direct victims of the financial crisis, played a key role in institutionalizing the APT scheme by initiating and leading the East Asian Vision Group (EAVG) and East Asian Working Group (EAWG) until around 2001.<sup>55)</sup> During the latter half of Kim's term, however, he could not pay due political attention to East Asian cooperation projects, not only because the social and psychological strain supplied by the economic crisis was substantially relaxed as the worst economic situations were ameliorated, but also because the president himself was occupied by the domestic political troubles derived from a series of political and economic scandals that weakened his political leadership. In addition, the so-called Sunshine Policy and the historic Summit with Kim Jong Il of North Korea in June 2000 turned the attention of Koreans to the Northeast Asian area and away from East Asia.

More fundamentally, this version of East Asia may not be familiar to the Korean people. As was mentioned above, it did not include the United States; to most Koreans who have regarded the United States as the central actor in the region, a region without the United States may sound politically unrealistic.<sup>56)</sup> Moreover, this version of the East Asian cooperative scheme tends to be accepted as a Southeast Asian project. In contrast with the relatively high level of political interests during the Cold War period in the pursuit of anti-communist coalition partners, Koreans' attention to the Southeast Asian states has gradually declined since the advent of the post-Cold War order.<sup>57)</sup> The descriptions of formal governmental pamphlets published by the Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation

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55) See ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Diplomatic Blue Book* (2006).

56) Since the mid-2000s, the United States changed their negative stance toward this regional cooperation scheme to a positive one, or at the very least became indifferent. Kim (2007).

57) See Sa-Myung Park (2006).

Initiative straightforwardly reveal the views of the Korean government on the Southeast Asian states. It is readily recognizable that the sense of common fate and identity that became the cornerstone of the APT cooperation scheme no longer remains and that broadly, the Korean government regards Southeast Asian states as mere counterparts for normal diplomatic intercourse.

There is no burning historical or security issue with the Southeast Asian states. They are the counterparts/regions with which we can sustain smooth relations just through routine diplomatic intercourses, and thus there is no need to set them up as a presidential agenda. Moreover, we do have no problem in undertaking diplomatic transactions with them as well-established cooperative frameworks such as ASEAN+3 and EAS are at hand. Even in case critical situation happens to the Southeast Asian countries, it does not affect the national security or agenda of Korea seriously.<sup>58)</sup>

Due to these real and cognitive constraints, this version of East Asia failed to draw as much attention from Koreans as did its achievements and performance in the international arena. Worse, it is not likely that such a lack of attention will turn into a new activism in the near future.<sup>59)</sup>

### **3) East Asia as an alternative regional system: Creation and Criticism Group (CCG)**

The third version of East Asia in Korea is the so-called “alternative theory of East Asia” suggested by a group of progressive and critical humanities scholars called the “Creation and Criticism Group.”<sup>60)</sup> It is a sort of reflective

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58) Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative (2003), p. 19.

59) In fact, President Lee Myung-bak, who took office in February 2008, announced on March 8, 2009 the ‘New Asia Initiative,’ which expands the Korean government’s diplomatic focus to all of Asia. It is yet to be seen what the initiative will look like and whether it will be able to materialize; however, it is clear that the initiative diverges from the idea of East Asian community and thus implies that the new administration’s interest in this version of East Asia will not be strengthened. *Chosun ilbo* (Seoul), March 9, 2009.

theory of region articulated in the form of intellectual experiments in the 1990s. Amid the alleviation of the conflicting political landscape in the East Asian region, accompanied by the end of the Cold War, the deepening of globalization, and worldwide proliferation of neo-liberalism, the CCG began to pay attention to the conception of East Asia as an intermediating entity between single-nation level and world-system level perspectives in the pursuit of a new type of ideological response to unprecedented circumstantial changes.<sup>61)</sup>

The CCG diagnoses that the root causes of high tension and political stalemate in the Korean Peninsula were the limitations and biases generated by traditional perspectives based on the notion of one nation state or single state history. On the basis of such problematique, they argue that post-Cold War Korea needs to pursue an alternative regional system through which the limits of the nation-state can be overcome. As an intellectual strategy to achieve this purpose, they brought up the extended spatial identity of the region, i.e., East Asia as a cognitive as well as a methodological means of pursuing alternatives to the existing nationally-configured bipolarity of regional order. Moreover, this version of East Asia pursues a strategy of seeking alternatives at the regional level by simultaneously criticizing the Western capitalism symbolized by America and the failed Soviet socialism which is by no means a real alternative to the former. In other words, they seek a third way toward regionalist peace and prosperity in line with Asian traditional wisdom instead of with foreign ideas.

The geographical scope of East Asia, according to this view, needs to be characteristically flexible and fluid, even though they basically tend to regard the traditional three states—China, Korea, and Japan—as the core members of East Asian regionalism. Recognizing fundamentally that the geographical borderlines on the basis of the notion of nation-state are the

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60) *Creation and Criticism* (Changjak-gwa Bipyung) is the title of a progressive journal through which main works of CCG scholars were published.

61) Young Suh Baek, *Dongasia-ui Gwihwan* (Return of East Asia) (Seoul: Changjak-gwa Bipyungsa, 2000), p. 73.

remnants of the Cold War system, they employ East Asia “... to nullify the distinction between Northeast and Southeast Asia, which were the artifacts of Western hegemonic countries’ strategic calculations,” “to prevent the theory of East Asia from being inclined inconsiderately to the theory of Northeast Asia,” and “to overcome the simple geographical demarcations between the nations in the region.”<sup>62)</sup> Furthermore, they try to abandon the view that sees East Asia as an entity with a geographically fixed borderline or structure, and instead depict it as a historical space that can be defined flexibly depending on the regional actors’ activities.<sup>63)</sup> To develop their arguments further, they sometimes expand the perimeter of East Asia by taking into consideration the strategic value of the United States and Russia as regional states in order to achieve the goal of overcoming national division by effectively checking the hegemonic expansion of China and Japan.<sup>64)</sup>

The *problematique* of CCG may deserve a historical evaluation as the first idea of regional project originated from Korea. Since it lacks a sense of real politics, carries over-grandiose discourse, suffers from a deficiency of methodological rigor, it may at most be useful and relevant as a tool for criticizing the past and present situations of East Asia. Not surprisingly, most of the criticisms by social scientists focus on the lack of reality. One commentator keenly points out that they “construct a basic framework that helps imagine an East Asian space, but fail to demonstrate how it functions in the context of East Asia and how it is connected to the behavior and the

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62) Won-shik Choi, “Jubyeon, Gukgajuui Geubok-ui Silheomjeok Geojeom,” in Mun-Ghil Chung et. al. (eds.), *Jubyun-eseo Bon Dongasia* (Seoul: Munhak-gwa Jisungsa, 2004), pp. 313-23.

63) Young Suh Baek, “Jubyun-eseo Dongasia-reul Bondaneun Geot” (Looking at East Asia from the Periphery), in Mun-Ghil Chung et. al., *Jubyun-eseo Bon Dongasia* (Seoul: Munhak-gwa Jisungsa, 2004), p. 14.

64) Won-shik Choi, “Talnaengjeon Shidaewa Dongasiajeok Shigak-ui Mosaek” (Post-Cold War Period and the Pursuit of East Asian Perspective), in Mungil Chung (ed.), *Dongasia: Munje-wa Shigak* (East Asia: Problems and Views) (Munhakgwa Jisungsa, 1995), pp. 84-85; In-Sung Chang, “Hanguk-ui Dongasiaron-gwa Dongasia Jeongcheseong” (Theory of Northeast Asia and East Asian Identity), *SegyeJeongchi* (World Politics) 26-2 (2005), p. 14.

network of relations among regional actors. All they do is ‘imagining’ East Asia.” He adds that “the discussions of CCG tend to unfold without due attention to the historicity of the process of transformation from theory to reality, and accordingly, stay, at best, at the level of abstract and void logic.”<sup>65)</sup> Another observer criticizes that “the method of approaching an East Asian community by utilizing the discourse that overcomes nationalism makes it difficult to understand it and leads to the failure of dealing with nationalism as a phenomenon in the real world.”<sup>66)</sup> Thus, “the new imagination of East Asia ... needs to be suggested not as a ‘teleological must’ but as a ‘vision’ based on historical facts.”<sup>67)</sup>

It is no surprise that social scientists’ critiques highlight the gaps between CCG’s ideals and the real world situation, given their own emphasis on the imaginary aspects of discourse by attaching words such as “intellectual project” or “experiment.” Their basic theme of overcoming the nation-state is still too remote from the real situation of East Asia.<sup>68)</sup> Taking into consideration the facts that China still maintains a socialist regime, Japan is on its way toward conservatism by upholding its strong statist tradition, and Korea still has an over-centralized power structure to the extent that local executives and legislators depend heavily on the central government, it will require a substantial length of time for their idea of an alternative regional system to become reality. Alternative ideas to materialize their main goals, such as the theories of ‘complex state,’ ‘alliance of cities,’ and ‘coalition of NGOs and civil societies,’ seem to be over-relaxing given that the regionalism in the area contains ongoing phenomena with huge socioeconomic as well as political impacts that imminently affect the lives of millions of people. Indeed, in order for their

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65) Sang-Il Han (2005), p. 19.

66) Jang-jip Choi, “Dongasia Gongdongche-ui Inyumjeok Gicho: Gongjon-gwa Pyunghwa-rul wihan Gongdong-ui Uimi-wa Jipyung” (The Ideological Base of East Asian Community: Common Meaning and Horizon for Coexistence and Peace), *Aseayongu* (Asia Research) 47-4 (2004), p. 120.

67) In-Sung Chang (2005), p. 18.

68) Nam-Joo Lee, “Dongasia Hyopryokron-e gwanhan Bipanjeok Gochal” (A Critical Review of East Asian Cooperative Body), in Young Suh Baek (2000), pp. 400-402.

intellectual experiment to have real implications, it needs to be supplemented by more specific action plans that can substantiate their imagination.

**Table 1. Korean Conception of Region**

Variable	Name	Advocate	Member Countries
Orient	Oriental Peace	An Jung Geun	Korea, China, Japan
Asia-Pacific, Pacific Rim	Pacific Pact	Rhee, Syngman	Pacific Rim states (excluding Japan): Korea, US, Canada, Taiwan Southeast Asian States including the Philippines Australia, New Zealand, Latin American states
	ASPAC	Park, Chung-hee	Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Laos (observer)
	Pacific Summit	Chun, Doo-hwan	37 states in the Pacific Rim region
Northeast Asia	Northeast Asian Peace Talk	Roh, Tae-woo	Korea, North Korea, US, Japan, China, Russia
	Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative	Roh, Moo-hyun	Korea, North Korea, US, Japan, China, Russia
East Asia	East Asia as a Development Model		Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong
	Alternative East Asia	Creation and Criticism Group	Korea, China, Japan, Southeast Asia (US, Russia)
	East Asian Community ASEAN+3(EAS)	Kim Dae-jung	Korea, China, Japan, ASEAN 10

## IV. Conclusion

This article has sought answers to the question of how Korea has imagined its region by tracing the historical backgrounds, meanings, processes of evolution, and political/economic implications of three major concepts of

region: Asia-Pacific, Northeast Asia, and East Asia. By doing so, this essay reminds us that Korea has never given up its effort to imagine, offer and propel its own version of regionalist projects in the pursuit of national security and economic prosperity under the constraints of the surrounding international milieu. This study also argued that the major concept of region in Korea shifted from the Asia-Pacific until the end of the Cold War to Northeast Asia and East Asia afterwards, and that there appeared a tendency of division of labor between the latter two, in that the former is employed more in the area of security and politics while the latter has more to do with the economic issues. The diversified meanings of one category, i.e., East Asia, in a variety of forms are also detected. Perhaps more fundamentally, this study confirms that the Korean case also supports the well-known but still persuasive wisdom that the ideas of region are historical and political/economic artifacts that are imagined within the framework of political and economic environments and within the domestic political dynamics of a country.

The major *problematique* of this work is that the lack of shared recognition and confusion in perceptions of the region among Korean scholars, policymakers, journalists, etc. may be the source of problems.<sup>69)</sup> For instance, despite the fact that the terms “Asia-Pacific,” “Northeast Asia,” and “East Asia” have different origins, scopes, and political/economic implications, they tend to be used interchangeably in a variety of literature without clear recognition of distinctions. Fundamentally, such problems prohibit the production of more nuanced and delicate narratives of region by providing scholars and policymakers with obstacles to effective communication. This work, as an incipient effort, attempts to improve such problems by sorting out the major concepts that have been employed most frequently in Korea, and then by elaborating the meanings and implications of each of them.

Considering the geopolitical location of Korea as surrounded by worldwide

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69) For this point, see Dong-yeon Lee, “Dongasia Damron Hyeongseong-ui Galaedeul-Bipanjeok Geomto” (Branches of the Formation of East Asian Discourse—A Critical Review), *Munhwa Gwahak* (Cultural Science) 52 (Winter 2007), pp. 99-100.

super powers, it is unlikely that Korea can develop the ability to create and provide currency to a brand new regional conception in the near future. Yet, in order to enhance regional peace and prosperity, and to find out ways in which Korea can contribute to such aims, it is extremely important to undertake more subtle and in-depth theoretical analyses of existing concepts of region in terms of their merits, implications, and strategic meanings to Korea and to the region, and then to figure out the political and economic relevance and usefulness of each one. There still remains a long way to go.

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