

■ Book Review

Sustainable Peace in Northeast Asia by Yong-Shik Lee*



1. Summary

Northeast Asia, a major region in Asia covering China, Korea (South and North Korea), Japan, Mongolia, and the Southeast corner of Russia, is economically one of the most vibrant areas in the world, with a rich array of economic opportunities. Yet, it is simultaneously one of the world's most politically and

* Director and Professorial Fellow, The Law and Development Institute. Adjunct Professor of Law, Cornell University School of Law.

militarily unstable regions, creating a global security risk. This risk was made apparent by North Korea's nuclear crisis, which was followed by a series of its nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches from 2016 to 2017. Although the worst-case scenario may have been avoided by a summit meeting between the heads of South and North Korea on April 27, 2018, and another summit between the United States and North Korea on June 12, 2018, substantial uncertainty and the risk of a major military conflict remains.

Although less dramatic and visible to the outside world, other political and military tensions among constituent countries in Northeast Asia, with their deep historical origins dating back centuries, are also significant. These tensions have been demonstrated by persistent territorial disputes, lack of reconciliation on the question of war crimes during World War II, increasing disparities in political influence and military power among Northeast Asian countries as a result of China's ascension, and increasing uncertainty in the region due to the potential instability of North Korea. These problems create a risk of destabilizing Northeast Asia with a substantial global impact.

The book, *Sustainable Peace in Northeast Asia*, examines the causes of these complex tensions in Northeast Asia and their underlying political, historic, military, and economic developments. It further discusses their political-economic implications for the world and explores possible solutions to build lasting peace in the region. This book offers a unique approach to these important issues by examining the perspectives of each constituent country in Northeast Asia: China, South and North Korea, Japan, and Mongolia, and their respective roles in the region. Major global powers, such as the United States and Russia, have also closely engaged in the political and economic affairs of the region through a network of alliances, diplomacy, trade, and investment. The book discusses the influence of these external powers, their political and economic objectives in the region, their strategies, and the dynamics that their engagement has brought to the region. Both South Korea and North Korea have sought reunification of the Korean peninsula, which will have a substantial impact on the region. The book examines its justification, feasibility and effects for

the region. The book also discusses the role of Mongolia in the context of the power dynamics in Northeast Asia. A relatively small country, in terms of its population, Mongolia has rarely been examined in this context; *Sustainable Peace in Northeast Asia* makes a fresh assessment on its potential role.

2. Review by Stephan Haggard¹⁾

The strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific region has devolved into a fraught set of conflict points, now stretching from the India-China border, through the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait to the East China Sea. Yet no part of that arc is as complex as the Northeast Asian theatre, where the interests of six parties collide: the two Koreas, Japan, China, Russia and the United States. As U.S.-China relations have deteriorated, the Cold War divides that have been in place since the end of the Pacific War have hardened, with declining prospects of a negotiated settlement. China's struggle to define its global status and the war in Ukraine are now central drivers in this drama. But in the end, the Korean peninsula remains at its heart, precisely because it increasingly surfaces as a focal point for a broader array of competing interests. Those now include China's decision to cast its fate with Russia and the corresponding logic of tighter political, military and economic cooperation among the democracies: the United States, Japan and South Korea.

Yong-Shik Lee weaves an introduction to the current state of play. A distinctive feature of the approach is to work through the perspectives of each of the relevant players, with a particular bonus in considering Mongolia's contributions as well. Prof. Y.S. Lee sees a long-term solution as requiring an institutional component—some kind of regional integration effort that would pull North Korea into the Asia-Pacific success story. He recognizes that building a rules-based order will hinge on where China's domestic politics is headed, but the U.S. must also take diplomatic risks and lead on the economic issues.

1) Lawrence and Sallye Krause Distinguished Professor, School of Global Policy and Strategy, University of California at San Diego.

Prof. Y.S. Lee's approach is anchored in realist fundamentals. China is clearly central to sustainable peace in Northeast Asia, and nothing will move unless Beijing comes to see it in its interest to make them move. Given China's massive political, economic, and military influence in the region, a more balanced, reconciliatory, and constructive engagement with the other Northeast Asian countries around the Korean peninsula is imperative to achieve a meaningful settlement. However, Y.S. Lee's account acknowledges that the nature of China's foreign engagement is inseparable from its internal governance style. He outlines a classic liberal argument (and one with which I strongly agree): China's authoritarian turn is intimately connected with its more confrontational, aggressive, and coercive foreign policy, with Xi Jinping sitting as the architect of that approach. Unless there is some fundamental rethink of China's rise in Beijing, sustainable peace in Northeast Asia will remain elusive.

North Korea's nuclear ambitions represent a more immediate security risk for the region, and they too have an internal as well as external dynamic. Critics of the U.S., Japan and South Korea note that as a weak country facing much more capable rivals, it should come as no surprise that North Korea would seek the cheapest deterrent at its proposal: a missile-based nuclear capability. But the excesses to which the leadership has pushed this program suggests that its strategy is not just a bargaining chip to extract political and economic concessions; if so, the Six Party Talks would have achieved much more and negotiations would at some point have resumed. It is now probably too much to expect a hereditary regime to remake itself. But as China's earlier "peaceful rise" strategy suggests, it is certainly not impossible to combine a form of autocratic rule with an engaged and constructive foreign policy.

Each of the other players in the region—South Korea, Japan, the United States, Russia, and Mongolia—has unique historical, political, and economic contexts that Lee traces to national "codes": these rest on a complex combination of national characteristics, from the nature of postwar nationalism, to the level of economic development, and the extent of the embrace of liberal norms; as with China and North Korea, domestic political forces are given appropriate play.

The most intriguing and controversial component of Y.S. Lee's book is his claim that the formation of an economic and political union in Northeast Asia, such as the European Union, will be a necessary institutional arrangement to ensure sustainable peace in the region. Without cross-cutting institutional and economic ties, the region will remain in its current rut. Prof. Y.S. Lee is well aware that the lack of shared political values, economic disparities, and political and military tensions make the formation of such a union in the near future highly unlikely. But here is where the book makes its most important contribution: that without diplomacy, the chances of transcending the status quo are even more remote. Whether in the form of dialogues such as Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asia Security or cross-cutting initiatives such as the China–Japan–South Korea initiative, which includes an FTA, steps must be found to cross the river to what Prof. Y.S. Lee calls “sustainable peace”. The U.S. plays a crucial role in this regard, and must hold open the door for an alternative to the current impasse.

