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Promoting Northeast Asian Environmental Cooperation: Reflections from the EU

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SANGSOO LEE AND SILVIA PASTORELLI, JUN 30 2013

Environmental Risks in Northeast Asia

The World Bank on 19 June warned that severe hardships from global warming could be felt within 20-30 years. In the report it said that the impact of two-degree warming, expected by the 2040s, would have grave and sweeping consequences, such as food shortages, unprecedented heat waves, and more intense cyclones, in particular in Africa and Asia.

Given recent growing concern about global warming, President Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping held a summit meeting on June 7-8. The big breakthrough of the summit was a new level of cooperation between the two countries on climate change. The two leaders agreed to reduce the use of hydrofluorocarbons. The agreement by the world's two largest emitters of these gases to phase them out is significant.

China is now the world's largest CO₂ emitter, having overtaken the United States in 2007. Massive emissions also contribute to acid rain, a direct consequence of air pollution from SO₂ and nitrogen oxide that remains a serious problem in China. Meanwhile, transboundary pollution is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon in Northeast Asia. For example, acid rain affects more than 30 per cent of Chinese territory and also reaches as far as the Korean Peninsula and Japan, especially during winter when strong northwesterly winds blow over the region. At the same time, sand storms caused by industrial pollution in China are blown to South Korea and Japan causing hazardous air pollution.

The industrialization policies of the three Northeast Asian countries of China, Japan, and South Korea have long focused on short-term, rapid economic development to the detriment of the environment. However, people and governments in these countries, especially in present-day China, have deep environmental concerns, and are increasingly realizing that it is difficult to achieve economic development without engendering significant cost to the environment.

While the central governments in the region admit to some of the environmental degradation having been caused by its policy priorities being placed on national economic development first, counter measures have hitherto been incomplete and the government still views economic development as the central task of the state. Nevertheless, in particular China's economic burden, as a result of premature mortality and morbidity associated with pollution, will increase in the future, unless the government tackles the problems as soon as possible.

Furthermore, the challenge for each country in Northeast Asia is to find ways to ensure that the old paradigm of environmental management is transformed into a more integrated approach that enables policy to support and reinforce sustainable development.

These alarming trends mean that it does not suffice to approach the issue of sustainable societies at a national level since many environmental problems cross national boundaries. Still, Northeast Asia has been left behind other regions in this regard.

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The European Experience

The EU is widely seen as the global leader for regional environmental governance and, although it is still far from being a perfect one, it could represent a model for other regions of the world. This does not mean that other countries should merely adopt the same block of strategies and initiatives created by the EU. However, they can learn some lessons from the European experience and borrow some of its tools to strengthen regional environmental cooperation, shaping them on their own needs and problems.

Environmental policy is a relatively recent area of action for the EU, which at its beginning did not envision environmental protection as part of its competences. It was only during the 1970s that Europe “woke up” to the environment call to deal with the environmental degradation (e.g. air and water pollution, acid rain and incorrect waste disposal) caused by almost a century of intense industrial development, a situation not at all dissimilar from the one that Northeast Asia is now experiencing. It was not only the increasing awareness of the need for better environmental protection that prompted action at the European level. The countries soon realized that air or water pollution knows no borders and that cross-border measures were necessary to effectively tackle the problem. Moreover, the issue of environmental degradation could not be ignored any longer also from the economic side: the states’ different environmental policies and standards represented potential barriers for effective free trade and business. This combination of environmental awareness and the potential distortion of the Common Market originating from different environmental quality standards resulted in a call for action at the regional level.

The launch of the European Environmental Action Plans (EAPs), which outline the Union objectives and priorities for a specific frame of years and possible implementation strategies, marked the official inclusion of environmental protection in the Treaties and in the policy-making process. With the first EAP, the seeds for the funding principles of sustainable development were planted and gradually became the roots for the next Plans, proposing a more holistic approach to environmental protection and sustainable growth. One of the merits of the EU approach is its use of both soft and hard policy tools. Indeed, for reaching the objectives set out by the EAPs, it did not rely only on its huge body of law and regulations, but it adopted a multitude of other tools as non-binding policies and initiatives, incentive-based instruments (like the Emissions Trading System for instance) or the creation of a European eco-label.

Need for Strong Regional Action

Recently, South Korean President Park Geun-hye has addressed a plan for a Northeast Asian peace initiative, the so called “Seoul process”. According to the Seoul Process agenda, trust among Northeast Asian neighbours can be created by initiating negotiations dealing with areas of less sensitive and common interest, such as environmental protection, natural disaster management and nuclear safety.

A number of cooperative programs, plans, and forums have been advocated and extended through multiple channels such as the Northeast Asian Conference on Environmental Cooperation (NEAC), the North-East Asia Sub-regional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC), the Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting (TEMM), the Acid Deposition Monitoring Network in East Asia (EANET), and Management and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the Northwest Pacific Region (NOWPAP).

Nevertheless, environmental cooperation within the region has been hampered by a lack of effectiveness; environmental institutions are often regarded as weaker than institutions in other regions. Therefore, not only is there a lack of legally binding regulations in regard to the environment, but there is also a dearth of leadership and practical action on the parts of the Northeast Asian governments.

Northeast Asian Cooperation: Which Way Forward?

Striking differences between the EU and Northeast Asia exist and they lie in the level of integration and implementation mechanisms. While the former could rely on the legal basis offered by its several treaties, on a set of already tested practices and decision-making process, and, most of all, on its power not only to create, but also to implement its law, the latter is still far from reaching this level of cooperation. There is, however, a point where the

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two approaches converge. In order to avoid tensions EU decision-making processes have always been based on consensus-seeking instead of other practices, such as simple majority voting. While the European Union probably outgrew this consensus-based style of decision, as it is more difficult to take meaningful decisions and promote effective policies, it can still represent a valid choice for a limited group of countries such as China, Japan and South Korea. While this larger and heterogeneous EU seems to be trapped by a consensus-seeking approach, preventing the achievement of more progressive objectives, a consensus-seeking approach could help a smaller group, such as that of TEMM, to discuss important issues and to ease tensions between them, knowing that no decision will be taken without the consent of all the participants.

Significant challenges remain also for the EU, both at the regional and global level. The enlargement to 27 countries, soon to be 28 with the entering of Croatia, climate change and the emerging of new potential threats, highlight the need for a refocus of environmental policies and the way they should be adopted and implemented. Nonetheless, one can not deny the progress the EU made: the quality of its environment has been improved, air pollution was drastically reduced, carbon emissions dropped and the stricter regulation for waste disposal granted to European citizens ensured a cleaner and healthier environment. Such progress gained the Union the role of global leader on the international stage in the climate change negotiations. Moreover, the EU has the great merit to have shown to the rest of the world that substantial results are possible when solid and consistent strategies and policies are set. It demonstrated that the sharing of experiences, best practices and information can lead to the solution of common problems and to the creation of stronger ties between countries. European environmental cooperation is the result of a process of spillover that allowed the EU to expand its policy areas where it was needed. When the EU started to cooperate over the environment, it already had 15 years of history as a Community of countries and a founding Treaty, the Treaty of Rome. Such conditions provided an easier context in which to insert a new field of cooperation and, at the moment, Northeast Asia does not enjoy the same situation. However, it must be noted that the EU started its journey with a much more sensitive issue (coal and steel) than the environment, which is instead generally placed in the realm of “low-politics”. Furthermore, Northeast Asian countries already have initiated to cooperate through the TEMM and they laid the foundations for further work. Mistrust, a lack of leadership and the absence of a setting as that of the EU represent significant obstacles, but they could be overcome with the help of stronger political will. Most of all, what is lacking is a common vision, a proactive framework to guide them for a set number of years. They could jointly design a long-term action plan, along the lines of the EAPs, setting out their priorities and policies to reach their common regional goals in order to create a common vision and an active strategy for the future.

These mechanisms could in turn result in improved trust between the parties, ensured by the rotating leadership of the TEMM working group, and eventually could result in a spillover effect as it happened in Europe, moving cooperation from a low-politics area, as the environment, to more sensitive issues in the region. All these forms of cooperation are expected to provide strong driving forces to promote future regional integration in Northeast Asia. The European model therefore could be very useful for Northeast Asian countries as they start to draw up a road map for multilateral cooperation.

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