

WTO and Regional Cooperation in Northeast Asia: China's Perspective

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Abstract

Economic cooperation in Northeast Asia, especially with Japan and Korea, is one of China's policy priorities in the 21st century. As economic reforms have started in North Korea, Russia and Mongolia, Northeast Asian cooperation will assume larger scope and greater depth in the future. In this paper, the author summarizes China's policy on regional cooperation and trade development with its neighboring countries, and highlights existing problems in regional cooperation. Finally, the author presents the view that regional cooperation should develop into a higher stage— an Asian Union—in the future.

Keywords: WTO, regionalism, China

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China has pursued economic cooperation with the neighboring countries for many years and this movement will be continued and accelerated after China's accession of the World Trade Organization (WTO). This perspective is mainly based on the following analyses.

I. Government Policy on the Regional Cooperation

Government plays an important role in regional cooperation

It is well-known fact that the government is an important player in a market economy. This statement is even true in regional and international economic cooperation programs such as investment measures, environment protection, and free/regional trade agreements (FTAs or RTAs).

Without the government's promotion and action, such transnational cooperation would be difficult to be carried out in fair and equitable ways among individuals and enterprises. Of course, when emphasizing the role of the government one should not ignore the active participation of individuals and enterprises in the regional cooperation. A successful regional cooperation depends on coordinated efforts offered by the relative parties within the region and outside.

Historically, since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the Chinese government has expressed its strong desires for regional peace and development on many international occasions. The Chinese government's appeals have been realized in some cases; however, regional cooperation has not achieved what we had expected for three reasons:

First, there had been long-lasting ideological conflicts, suspicions, unfaithfulness and hostilities in Asian region until the 1990s, as results of the Cold War between the U.S. and Russia since the end of World War II and the wars in Korea and Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s.

Second, there expressed little interest of regional cooperation by Asian nations, except the ASEAN that established in the 1960s. Many Asian countries were too busy in their domestic political affairs to consider an active economic cooperation from a grand vision.

Third, China's practiced for three decades a closed, planning economy, pursuing a goal of self-reliance. Foreign trade was insignificant, and was not seen as an driving force until the 1980s.

Facts have demonstrated that affected by the domestic and international limitations the Asian governments were unable to play their role in pursuing the regional economic cooperation and prosperity at that time.

The Asian Miracle, Crisis and New Asianism

However, the regional and international situations gradually changed in the past decades. In the 1970s, Japan became the first advanced economy in the region and followed by Korea, other “tigers”, and Southeast Asia. Later on the Chinese economy also joined this group of “High Performing Asian Economies” as named by the World Bank in 1995.

Asia, as a region where the “miracles” occurred, has drawn attention of the world. Interesting enough, the term “Asian Miracle” that firstly used by the Western scholars in the 1980s made many Asian peoples think of what similarities are there among them. For the first time in history the Asians seriously think of their features and futures associated with economic success of the past century.

However, at that stage the Asians seemed not aware exactly what could they do in regional cooperation. They just followed the wave of the globalization, without having ideas of regional economic integration such as the Economy and Monetary Union (EMU) in Europe or Free Trade Agreement in North America (NAFTA).

The turning point came in 1997, when the unprecedented financial crisis suddenly broke out in the region. Observing that the previously successful countries were stuck by a catastrophe one after another, the political and business leaders in the region came to recognize that they were actually in the same boat.

Since then, a mood, or a sentiment like we have to do something together emerged in the region. Many discussions, suggestions, and actions were carried out in almost every country in the past years. All Asian ideas could be referred to as New Asianism, a term I used in an article published in the *Korea Herald* last year.

New Asianism was a reasonable reaction to the financial crisis. Meanwhile, it is a significant mark of, what Max Weber called, the degree of political maturity of the Asian nations. It is rather ironical that such a common sense in Asia appeared during the financial crisis instead of during the economic miracles. In this sense, the crisis was a midwife of New Asianism.

China’s policy on Asian cooperation

The Chinese government intends to play an active role in regional cooperation. There are two statements made by Vice President Hu Jintao and Premier Zhu Rongji on the subject.

Hu, when he visited Indonesia in July 2000, delivered a speech of China’s policy on Asian cooperation. In the speech, Hu put forward four goals and urged that Asian nations should¹:

¹ Cited from the *Beijing Review*. August 14, 2000, p. 8

First, greatly develop the economy to enhance the living standard of the Asian peoples, which not only concerns Asian peoples' livelihood, but also the peace and stability in the world;

Second, unite to further strengthen regional economic cooperation. Mutual beneficial cooperation and joint development is the only way for Asian countries to further the development of all of Asian society and sharpen its competitiveness in the international world.

Third, set up a new concept of security and safeguard feasible peace and stability in Asia. The new development of hegemony and power politics constitutes a threat against peace and development of the world. Only through cooperation rather than confrontation, consensus rather than imposing one's views on other, can neighborliness between various countries and joint development be realized.

Forth, meet the requirements of the times and actively push forward the establishment of a just and fair international society. A new international political and economic order should be based on the consensus principles regarding international relations, and reflect the spirit of peace and equality.

Hu also stressed that "China cannot achieve development without Asia, and Asia cannot realize prosperity without China. It is the consistent policy of the Chinese Government to strengthen the good neighborly and friendly relations with its surrounding countries."

Hu implied that China would not pursue a role of leader in the region, "As a friendly neighbor and a trustworthy cooperation partner of ASEAN, China always attaches importance to ASEAN's positive role in regional affairs, respects their efforts in building a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality and support their economic integration process."

China hopes to expand multi-level exchanges and cooperation with ASEAN in trade, economic, scientific and technological, social and other fields, Hu said. In addition, China and ASEASN are highly complementary to each other in agriculture, mechanical and electrical equipment manufacturing, medicine, transportation and other fields, where both sides can develop extensive cooperation.

The second policy statement on Asian cooperation was stated by the Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, at the First Annual Conference of Boao Forum for Asia that was held in Hainan Province, China, in April 2002.

The title of Zhu's keynote speech is "Work hand in hand to build a better future for Asia in the 21st century." Zhu pointed out that the awareness of Asian cooperation,

featuring tolerance, equality and step-by-step progress, is being enhanced, while a cooperative layout featuring openness, soundness and mutual benefit is being formed. He emphasized that the Asia region may conduct cooperation first in trade, transportation, agriculture, information and energy, and then in other fields.

The three points on the regional cooperation stated by Premier Zhu are as follows:

First, to take economic cooperation as the key focus and develop all-round cooperation in a step-by-step fashion. Economic development is the primary task of Asian countries. Given our real needs and experience, such areas as trade, communications, agriculture, information and energy can be made priorities of cooperation, which will be gradually enlarged to include other areas.

Second, to build on existing channels of cooperation to steadily broaden the scope of cooperation. As East Asia, South Asia and Central Asia are relatively independent geographically and different in ways of achieving economic development, it would be more advisable just for the sake of convenience and effectiveness to reinforce sub-regional cooperation as the first step and, on that basis, to actively explore the ways of a pan-Asia cooperation.

Third, to further step up bilateral cooperation to consolidate the basis of regional cooperation. A closer cooperation at bilateral level will facilitate the smooth progress of regional cooperation, while regional cooperation will open even broader horizon for bilateral cooperation.²

As a developing country, the ability and means of China in pursuing the regional cooperation are limited. However, the real question is not about ability but willingness. The reliable and positive role of the Chinese government shall be a great driving force for regional cooperation and integration.

II. Progress of the Chinese Regional Cooperation

Asia is the Largest Market for China

We have often heard of China's trade conflicts with the U.S. and EU, and the allegation that the advanced countries outside Asia were the largest trade partners of China. However, China's regional trade distribution shows that Asia is the most important region for China (see Table 1).

² Cited from the *Beijing Review*. (Supplement) April 25, 2002.

Table 1 China's Trading Partners, 1990

(Units: \$ billion, percent)

	Trade Volume			Trade Share		
	Exports	Imports	Total	Exports	Imports	Total
Asia	44.6	29.0	73.6	71.8	54.4	63.8
Africa	1.3	0.4	1.7	2.1	0.7	1.4
Europe	9.3	12.8	22.2	15.0	24.1	19.2
N. America	5.6	8.1	13.7	9.0	15.1	11.9
S. America	0.8	1.5	2.3	1.3	2.8	2.0
Oceania	0.5	1.5	2.0	0.9	2.8	1.7
Total	62.1	53.3	115.3	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: In this Table, North America consists of Canada and the U.S., and Mexico is included in South America. The Middle East is included in Asia.

Source: *China Monthly Exports and Imports*, Customs General Administration of the People's Republic of China

In Table 1, we can see that most of China's exports and imports were conducted in the Asian region. And the second largest trade partner of China was Europe, the third was North America. Since 1990 this trade pattern of China has not changed significantly. In Table 2, we find that Asia remained China's largest trading partner in 2001, followed by Europe and North America. However, the share of Asia in China's total volume decreased by 6 percent, while that of North America increased about 5 percent, and that of Europe remained virtually unchanged (see Table 2).

Table 2 China's Trading Partners, 2001

(Units: \$ billion, percent)

	Trade Volume			Trade Share		
	Exports	Imports	Total	Exports	Imports	Total
Asia	140.9	147.2	288.1	52.9	60.4	56.5
Africa	6	4.8	10.8	2.3	2.0	2.1
Europe	49.2	48.4	97.6	18.5	19.9	19.1
N. America	57.6	30.2	87.9	21.6	12.4	17.2
S. America	8.2	6.7	14.9	3.1	2.8	2.9
Oceania	4.1	6.3	10.4	1.5	2.6	2.0
Total	266.2	243.6	509.8	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: *ibid.*

Table 2 shows that Asia took up more than half of China's exports and more than 60 percent of its imports. The total volume of China's trade with Asia represented three times bigger than that with Europe or North America.

A full-vision picture of China's cooperation

There have been numerous analyses and discussions on regional cooperation in the past years. If we focus on China-related cooperation, we have got the following patterns.

- (1) ASEAN and China (ASEAN + 1);
- (2) Enlarged ASEAN (ASEAN + 3);
- (3) Near Southeast Asia (China and Indochina);
- (4) Great China (the Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan);
- (5) Northeast Asia (China, Japan, Korea);
- (6) Northeast Asia + 3 (North Korea, Russia and Mongolia);
- (7) Central Asia (Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China, Russian, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan);
- (8) South Asia (China, India, Pakistan);
- (9) APEC; and
- (10) Cross-Border Trade.

China has involved in above 10 types of sub-regional cooperation activities in Asia. In addition to the above catalog, we should not lose sight of China's economic cooperation with Europe, Africa and Latin America. China is willing to make every kind of economic cooperation, by every possible means, with every possible country in Asia and the world as well.

Position of Northeast Asia in China's regional cooperation

Although China's cooperation is an all-directional program, two sub-regional economic relations are regarded as the most important. One is with the ASEAN, and the other is with Japan and Korea. Table 3 shows China's trade partners in Asia in 1990.

Table 3 China's Trade in Asia, 1990

(Units: \$ billion, percent)

	Trade Volume			Trade Share		
	Exports	Imports	Total	Exports	Imports	Total
Japan	9.0	7.6	16.6	20.2	26.2	22.6
N. Korea	0.4	0.1	0.5	0.8	0.4	0.7
S. Korea	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Mongolia	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.1
U.S.S.R.	2.2	2.1	4.4	5.0	7.4	6.0
N.E. Asia	11.6	9.9	21.5	26.1	34.0	29.2
ASEAN	3.7	2.9	6.7	8.4	10.1	9.1
Asia	44.6	29.0	73.6	100.0	100.0	100.0

Notes: 1) ASEAN consists of six countries.

2) Trade figures between China and South Korea are not available for 1990. Diplomatic relations between the two sides were not established until 1992.

Source: *ibid.*

In November 2001, China and ASEAN leaders reached a consensus on establishing the China-ASEAN Free Trade Zone in 10 years' time. It means Asia will have the largest free trade zone of the world, which will inevitably stimulate the economic ties of Japan and Korea with ASEAN nations, thus promoting the economic development of the entire East Asia region.

Northeast Asia, especially Japan and Korea, is the most important counterparts of China's regional cooperation. Of course, we have to take Russia, Mongolia and North Korea into account as well.

Population of China, Japan and Korea is nearly 1.5 billion, or about one-fourth of the world total; the GDP of the three countries amount roughly \$6 trillion, or 20 percent of that of the world. If we combine with the Russians, Mongolians and the North Koreans, the scale of Northeast Asian population and GDP would become bigger.

There are obvious economic complementary factors in Northeast Asia, i.e. in the natural resources, labor force and industrial structures among the countries. Japan and Korea, both hope to gain the natural resources that they are lack, to expand their trade and investment, and to speed up their industrial adjustment. For Russia, it desires to explore tremendous natural resources in the Siberian area. For China, the cooperation with its Northeast neighbors can effectively use its affluent labor and natural resources and to narrow the gap between the northeastern provinces and the southeastern coastal areas.

Great changes have occurred in the trade patterns of Japan and Korea during the past decades. For example, since the 1980s proportion of Asia in the Japanese total trade has increase to about 30 percent, while the percentage of the North America declined to 20 percent. The same changes could also be seen in the case of Korea's trade.

China hopes for economic prosperity in Japan and Korea

There has been a public suspicion that China is worried about the Japanese economic power. This is not true. Li Tieying, President of China Association of Social Science (CASS), pointed out to the visiting senior Japanese delegation in March 2002 that ³

Our purpose is to create a long-term peaceful, multi-cooperative and economically advanced world. The competition we seek is one based on cooperation instead of conflict. Our Chinese people and the government leaders are fully aware of that the Japanese stability and development will benefit China, while a long-stagnant Japanese economy will hurt the Chinese development.

Chinese government officials and scholars have also expressed on many occasions their great interest in the growing Korean economy and their constant support for the reunification of the peninsula.

³ Riben xuekan (*Japanese Studies*). 2002, No. 3, p.3.

Comparing trade figures in Tables 3 and 4, one can find that although the Japanese and Korean economies have been in trouble in recent years they still are large and important partners of China. On the other hand, North Korea, Russian and Mongolia are also playing more and more important roles in economic cooperation with China. It is fair to say that trade, investment and communication with its Northeast Asian neighbors will be the key for China's economic development, despite many historical, political and economical contradictions in the region (see Table 4).

Table 4 China's Trade in Asia, 2001

(Units: \$ billion, percent)

	Exports	Trade volume imports	total amount	distribution ratio		
				exports	imports	total amount
Japan	44.9	42.8	87.8	31.9	29.1	30.5
N. Korea	0.6	0.2	0.7	0.4	0.1	0.2
S. Korea	12.5	23.4	35.9	8.9	15.9	12.5
Mongolia	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.1	0.1	0.1
Russia	2.7	7.9	10.7	1.9	5.4	3.7
N.E. Asia	60.8	74.5	135.5	43.2	50.6	47.0
ASEAN	18.4	23.2	41.6	13.1	15.8	14.4
Asia	140.9	147.2	288.1	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: Russia is a European country in terms of culture and geography.

Source: *ibid.*

From Table 4, we can find that 43 percent of China's export and 50 percent of China's import were recorded with its Northeast neighbors in 2001. In other words, Asia is the most important region of the world for China, while Northeast Asia is the most important sub-region in Asia for China.

China and Russia, Mongolia and North Korea

Apart from Japan and Korea, China also established varied trade, investment and cooperation relations with other countries in Northeast Asia. The development of Northeast Chinese provinces can benefit not only the Chinese border areas but also its neighboring countries as well.

Russia. Both China and Russia are reviving and transforming their economies to adapt themselves to the current trend of globalization. China shares a 4000-km border with Russia and both countries hope to enhance their economic and trade relations. In fact, many Chinese and Russian economists agree that China's future prosperity depends on the Russian Far East area including Siberia, and similarly, development of the Russian Far East area, especially Siberia, needs Chinese cooperation.⁴

However, for some reason, China and Russia are the only big countries in the world that lacks bilateral free trade mechanisms such as free trade zones or free trade exports processing zones. Last year, the total trade between China and Russia was \$10.7 billion, in which the Chinese exports were \$2.7 billion and imports were \$7.9 billion.

North Korea. Total amount of trade between China and North Korea was \$739.9 million in 2001, and main exports from China were foods and minerals.

One striking feature of trade between China and North Korea is active cross-border trade. Another noticeable characteristic of the bilateral trade is the strong role played by the governments of Liaoning and Jilin provinces. For example, Tumen River Area Program has achieved a great progress with specific contributions from the two provinces.

Mongolia. China and Mongolia have a 4600-km border. Trade and economic cooperation between two countries have been expanding. Although the figure of trade is smaller, China has become the biggest trade partner of Mongolia. The total volume of trade between China and Mongolia increased from \$33.6 million in 1990 to \$400 million in 2000. Other partners of Mongolia were Russia (\$251 million), the U.S. (\$121 million), Japan (\$81.4 million) and Korea (\$58.3 million).

China is also the top foreign investor in Mongolia. According to Mongolian statistics, the total investment of China was \$76.9 million by 2000, and number of Chinese companies was 512. As Mongolia is abundant in natural resources, the cooperation between Mongolia and foreign countries including China can be expected to enlarge in the future.

China's accession to WTO

China's trade achievement during the past two decades was made without membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Therefore, we have reasons to believe that, as a formal member of the WTO, China will be able to achieve further trade development with Asia and the rest of the world.

The Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji pointed out as the follows⁵:

China's accession to the World Trade Organization represents the new starting point for its opening to the outside world. Our participation in worldwide economic cooperation and competition will assume greater scope and depth. China will open its door still wider to the rest of Asian and the world, to entrepreneurs and investors of all countries. We will honor our WTO commitments, opening more areas in a phased manner, lowering our tariffs and

⁴ Qin Xuanren. Opening an express lane for Sino-Russian trade relations. *Beijing Review*. May 9, 2002.

⁵ Cited from the *Beijing Review*. (Supplement), April 25, 2002.

removing non-tariff barriers.

In fact there was a WTO fever in recent years in China. According to a rough estimation, more than 3000 WTO books or pamphlets have been published in China. Ordinary Chinese people are learning the rules of the WTO, the challenges and chances following China's accession of the WTO, and the importance of China's cooperation with the world.

Many Chinese experts believe that China's WTO accession has opened broad prospects for integration into the Asian economy. China will be a responsible member of WTO, meanwhile a more active partner of the Northeast regional cooperation.

III. Problems in Regional Cooperation

Chinese scholars' view

As summarized by the Chinese scholars, there are at least three big obstacles in Northeast Asian cooperation:

First, lack of a multiple cooperation institution. Every country in the region recognizes the necessity of the cooperation. However, such cooperation has not found its place in the strategy of economic development of the country. And in many cases, the main body pushing the cooperation is not the central government but the local administrations, private enterprises and non-government organizations. Meanwhile, the most active local areas are often those relatively backward areas of the country. Therefore, the Northeast Asian cooperation remains at a lower level, and is not in a position yet to a higher stage.

The second problem is related to the labor-division in the region. What Northeast Asia has formed is mainly a vertical-type instead of a horizontal-type of labor division, which resulted in a relevant inferior mode of cooperation.

Finally, regional cooperation in Northeast Asia has focused on the exploration of natural resources instead of liberalization of trade, service and financial flow.

Apart from the above, individual Chinese scholars pointed out the problems of cooperation in Northeast Asia from a political vision, such as U.S. political and military influences in the region, the separation and tension in the Korean Peninsula, the rightist trend in Japanese politics, the fears and worries about the so-called China's threat.

It is difficult to comment on all the problems in a short paper. However, I would like to cite an article to explain briefly my view on the issue of "China's threat."

China is not a threat

Recently a Japanese newspaper cited an American expert's article indicating that the Chinese economy is not a threat. The author offered following figures: during the past three decades of reform, China's GDP increased six times, reaching 1.2 trillion dollars and its trade raised to the fourth of the world. However, the percentage of the Chinese GDP in the world is only 3.5 percent and trade is 4 percent, respectively. In other words, the sum of Chinese goods and services equals one-fourth of Japan or one-tenth of the U.S.

The financial market of China is especially weak, beyond comparison with Japan, and even smaller than the scale of the rest Asia. Chinese currency Renminbi is not convertible, and the day of becoming an international currency is remote.

During the past three decades, proportion of China's trade in the world market has increased from 1 percent to 4 percent, but the proportions of Japan, NIEs and ASEAN rose from 2 percent to 8 percent.

Meanwhile, proportion of China's GDP in the world increased from 2 percent to 3.5 percent, while ASEAN's GDP raised from 1 percent to 5 percent, Japan from 1 percent to 10 percent, respectively.

If China's development will continue in the next decades and its trade will surpass Japan, but China's economic capacity still will be smaller than Japan, or about one-fourth of the U.S. and EU.⁶

In my opinion, the question is not figures. The question is that China will not become a threat to its neighbors and the rest of the Asia and the world. We have to change our mind and logic because the world and history have changed.

IV. Conclusions

The cooperation of sub-region and region has occupied China's policy-makers and business leaders for years. As one of the largest countries in Asia, China believes firmly such kind of cooperation will benefit not only the Chinese people but also the entire Asian peoples.

For China, the most important sub-regional cooperation is in Northeast Asia. Japan and Korea are China's great partners in trade and investment. And China, Japan and Korea have formed closest cooperative relations during the past decades.

On the other hand, North Korea, Russia and Mongolia are three emerging powers

⁶ Koyama. The Chinese threat is unbelievable. *Nihon Kogyo Shinbun* (Japan Industry Newspaper), August 13, 2002.

with tremendous potential in the region. It will be reasonable to believe that cooperation in Northeast Asia will be strengthened if the rapid economic development to be realized in these transitional countries in the coming years.

However, as some problems are still existing in the region, especially the historic and political factors, the cooperation among Asian nations has clearly lagged behind the European and North American continents.

In comparison with the European Union, the Asia region does not have a long-term blueprint for its future. Discussions and suggestions were all concentrated on detailed economic issues, without a grander vision and a longer target. It is my opinion, for purpose of commonwealth of Asian people, we need an Asian Union, like that in Europe and Africa. Without such a common goal, we may not be able to overcome problems and obstacles in regional cooperation. Our regional cooperation may become something like a trade or bargain for pure business profits. And profits may lead us to cooperation, may guide us to conflict and controversies as well. We must set up a higher goal in regional cooperation. That is the commonwealth of states in Asia, or the Asian Union.

It is not my intention to discuss a future Asian Union in this paper. However, when we look around the world, and if we wish regional cooperation fruitful and enduring, we must step forward a regional union, sooner or later. Therefore I wish this conference on Northeast Asian cooperation would open a chance for us to think this matter further.

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