Jeju Peace Institute 제주평화연구원

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Mutual Cooperation in the East Sea Rim Area: Energy, Transportation, Investment, and Tourism

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The East Sea Rim Area is one of the two sub-regions of Northeast Asia that consists of nearly 1 million square kilometers (378,000 sq. miles) and is bordered by the Russian Far East, the back side of Japan, and the eastern coasts of North and South Korea. While China does not actually have a border on the East Sea Rim Area, it does share borders with Russia and North Korea and is an important actor in the region' s economic and political affairs. Economic interactions in the East Sea Rim Area have been increasing, especially since the holding of the Asian games in 1990, and all indicators are that these interactions will continue to grow, particularly in the areas of trade and investment and tourism. Although interactions may grow at slower rates, they will include numerous bilateral and multilateral cooperative efforts that the nations have made and will continue to make.

Cooperation among the East Sea Rim Area' s powers is most notable in the area of trade and investment. Consider South Korea, which by itself was responsible for over $200 billion in exports to China, Japan, and Russia and a somewhat smaller amount in imports. These amounts would be even higher if we were to include the total amount of economic interactions that occur today between North and South Korea. The same is true for tourism, even though it is difficult to single out the East Sea Rim Area because travel and tourism data are either measured bilaterally or aggregated by the Northeast Asian region. Nonetheless, we see that tourism has not only grown steadily since 1990, its growth has accelerated in the last five years.

This growth is being driven to a significant degree by the rise the numbers of Chinese traveling to nations in the East Sea Rim Area. The Financial Times of London reported that Chinese tourism in

South Korea grew by 58% in the last year, even though it has been high for some time. The same report also noted that, despite chilly relations between Beijing and Tokyo, Chinese tourism in Japan was up 160% from last year. Finally, the Financial Times reported that that Chinese tourism in Russia was increasing at high rates. In addition to the increases in Chinese traveling to other nations in the East Sea Rim Area, travel between pairs of nations on the East Sea has also increased. While this is true as more South Koreans travel to China and Japan, and elsewhere throughout the world for that matter, notable increases have also occurred between South Korea and the Russian Far East.

Travel and tourism as well as trade and investment all presuppose a certain level and quality of transportation infrastructure. For increases to continue, cooperation among the region' s powers will be necessary and evidence of this continuing cooperation on transportation infrastructure is witnessed in the number of airports serving destinations in the East Sea Rim Area. Specifically, there have been expansions of existing airports, like that which occurred at Tokyo' s two international airports, or the recent creation of entirely new airports like that of Seoul Incheon, which has become one of the busiest airports in the world. Other examples Japan' s Niigata International Airport, which in 2012, expanded its carrier service with the addition of China East Airlines, Fuji Dream Airlines, and expanded flights to China provided by All Nippon Airways. The same can be said for the airport in Vladivostok, which went through expansions and improvements in 2005-06 and again in 2012.

The growth in tourism and international trade and investment that has characterized this dynamic region in the last two and a half decades is not just the result of simple growth in this Rim Area' s economies. It is also the product of planning and cooperation on the part this region' s governments. Such cooperative efforts to expand and the region' s transportation infrastructure sometimes involve some very ambitious projects. One of these has been between South Korea and Russia and involves connecting the Trans-Korean Railway to the Trans-Siberian Railway. This ambitious and expensive project will allow the movement of travelers and freight to occur with much more ease between Europe and South Korea than at the present time. However, its success depends on cooperation from North Korea, which is a concern to both Russia and South Korea. To protect the investments it has already made, Russia forgave a significant portion of North Korean debt. Unfortunately, this has guaranteed North Korea' s cooperation as it has recently indicated that it will not allow the rail line to move through its territory. Despite the fact that this project makes a great deal of economic sense, it is now on hold. Another potential challenge not only to this project but also to the expansion of other cooperative efforts involves the participation of China. China is not directly involved in this railway project and, as a result, has little incentive to support it. While not a deal breaker in and of itself, the non-participation of China gives it little incentive to persuade North Korea to participate.

A greater challenge to the expansion of cooperation in this region will be the problem of energy

and how securing energy for future development overlaps with territorial disputes and misunderstandings. Korea and Japan are involved in a significant misunderstanding over Dokto and Japan and Russia are divided over the Northern Territories. These territorial issues are significant enough to challenge ongoing efforts at cooperation. Unfortunately, they have the potential to become even more challenging as the prospect for energy development in the East Sea Rim Area grows. Russia, South Korea, and Japan must all continue to supply their current and future energy needs, but doing so could render current territorial issues more difficult to solve if they we learn that such territories also have the potential to supply energy. What this means is that to continue cooperation in this vital region will require sincere and consistent effort on the part of governments to resolve these territorial issues in a way that satisfies all parties.

July 24, 2015

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