

Achieving Peace and Stability: Drawing Some Best Practices from Southeast Asia

Raymund Jose G. Quilop

De La Salle University

저자 Raymund Jose G. Quilop is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, De La Salle University in Manila, Philippines. Prior to joining the private sector, he was previously associate professor of Political Science at the state-run University of the Philippines and was eventually seconded/detailed to the Department of National Defense as assistant secretary (deputy minister). Areas of his research interests are on regional community building, security and strategic issues to include Non-Proliferation and Disarmament and civil-military relations. He holds a Masters Degree in Political Science from the University of the Philippines where he also obtained his Bachelors Degree in Political Science as Summa Cum Laude.

* 이 글에 포함된 의견은 저자 개인의 견해로 제주평화연구원의 공식입장과는 무관합니다.

I

With the recent positive developments in the Korean Peninsula resulting from or brought about by (depending on how one wants to see it) the summit of the two Korea's leaders which was preceded by the summit between the US President and North Korea's leader, there is much optimism for the region to have peace and stability. Such optimism is not unfounded, given the sustained policy of the South Korean government to promote ties with North Korea as well as the seemingly increasing receptivity of the North Korean leadership to being at peace with its Southern neighbor.

Notwithstanding these developments, however, it would be best for all stakeholders to proceed with what is commonly referred to as cautious optimism. Leaderships (both from the South and the North) definitely play a crucial role. External parties, in the case of the Korean Peninsula, also have stakes to hold. But peace and stability is the product or result of the long and tedious process of community building. And it is in the area of community building where the Northeast Asian sub-region may draw some lessons or best practices from the Southeast Asian sub-region. Needless to say, the situation in Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia are different. Nonetheless, there may be situations that are similar and equally applicable for the two sub-regions of East Asia.

II

With the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) having celebrated its 50 years in 2017, ASEAN has become all the more described as a success story, specifically in creating peace and stability in Southeast Asia. Indeed, notwithstanding the critiques that have been hurled against ASEAN by cynics and skeptics often alluding to the inability of the Association to do this and that, what could not be denied or disregarded is the fact that Southeast Asia could not be what it is today if ASEAN did not exist.

The seeming success of ASEAN is actually underpinned by what has come to evolve as the ASEAN Way, which in a nutshell is dialogues and consultations towards consensus, the importance accorded to processes as well as the seeming informal character of how things are done in ASEAN. The principle of inclusiveness is likewise a key factor in ASEAN's effectiveness as regional body.

III

In a context where there is much distrust, as was the case in Southeast Asia when ASEAN was established in 1967, it is useful to proceed informally and carefully through a process of what is commonly known as building confidence and trust among the parties involved. Such was the case of ASEAN. While it was indeed founded in 1967 through the Bangkok Declaration, it took nine years before it had its first formal meeting in 1976 and a secretariat established. Indeed, there were no formal structures or formal meetings between 1967 and 1976.

It is also worth observing that the instrument that established ASEAN, the Bangkok Declaration, was technically not a formal one in the nature of a Treaty. The Bangkok Declaration is more a political statement declaring the intention of the foreign ministers of the founding members of ASEAN (Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) to promote economic prosperity in Southeast Asia. Interestingly, the formal instrument that provided ASEAN with a formal and legal character or identity so to speak came in 2009 when the ASEAN Charter was adopted, a good forty-two (42) years since ASEAN came into being through a declaration.

Given this, one best practice that may be learned from the ASEAN experience is the utility of proceeding informally and gradually, zeroing in on the attendant processes and activities that could build confidence among the stakeholders. Bearing this in mind, the processes of building confidence between South and North Korea through various meetings, whether low, middle or high level ones would be useful exercises in building such trust and confidence.

IV

Relatedly, in the process of building confidence and trust, the importance of dialogues and consultations, which as previously mentioned, has become a hallmark of ASEAN, could not be discounted. And while ASEAN has become more often than not criticized for engaging in too much dialogue or convening numerous meetings thereby depriving itself of the valuable time to undertake actions, it is exactly the opportunity to dialogue among one another through the numerous platforms, that enable ASEAN members to build confidence and promote trust among themselves. This likewise allows them to arrive at mutually acceptable approaches on dealing with challenges that confront a particular member or the group as a whole.

Interestingly, despite the critiques hurled at ASEAN for having instituted numerous dialogue platforms, with ASEAN-related meetings now numbering to more than a thousand each year, ASEAN's external partners continue to sustain their participation in these dialogue mechanisms. In fact, one reason for the increasing number of dialogue mechanisms in ASEAN is the increasing desire or interest of external partners to collaborate with ASEAN, with a dialogue mechanism or a meeting often times resulting from such a collaboration. These meetings with external partners serve as platforms for pursuing cooperation between ASEAN and an external partner.

Interestingly too, in spite of ASEAN being described as having too many meetings, mechanisms around the region both for dialogue either on political or economic cooperation and for practical cooperation so to speak, continue to be centered on ASEAN, thus the emergence of the term "ASEAN-Centered" regional platforms. These would include the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM)-Plus to name a few. Consequently, ASEAN remains to be driving force in these regional bodies. And it is only in ASEAN-led platforms where one would expect an inclusive participation by almost all major regional players such as the US, China, Russia, India, regional players that are often at odds with each other and would not want to be involved in a platform or mechanism organized by another regional power. Each of them, however, would not have a problem being part of an ASEAN-led mechanism. In fact, they try to outdo each other on who gets to be first involved in any regional mechanism that is established by ASEAN.

The importance of dialogues and consultations, therefore, could not be discounted nor disregarded. And it is the second best practice that Northeast Asia may want draw from Southeast Asia. Along this line, the Summits between the leaders of the two Koreas, although criticized by observers as not having produced the results these observers may have wished for, played an important role, both in serving as dialogue platform and for building confidence and trust between the governments of the two Koreas.

Given the importance of dialogue mechanisms, it would be useful for the governments of the two Koreas to establish bodies and meetings among their officials at various levels to discuss issues that are of mutual concern. In a period where the North and South Koreas are beginning to build confidence and feel each other's sense so to speak, it is useful to have as many platforms for dialogues and consultations as possible. Such platforms may not immediately produce the results outside observers want to see they may not even produce anything at all. But the important thing is that they keep both sides in constant contact with one another, a key ingredient in building confidence and promoting trust specifically for the two Koreas which have had decades of mistrusting one another.

V

The matter of inclusiveness is something that Northeast Asia may wish to draw lessons from Southeast Asia. ASEAN, has always upheld the principle of inclusiveness in its undertaking. It is in fact a key principle that underpins the various ASEAN-led mechanisms. But inclusiveness needs to be seen in a particular context of ASEAN's evolution as a regional body. It must not be forgotten that while inclusiveness is indeed valued, ASEAN in its initial years did not include all the Southeast Asian countries nor did it include other Asia-Pacific states. While there was definitely an openness to including all the states in Southeast Asia, ASEAN in its initial years was limited to the five like-minded Southeast Asia countries states that shared the common goal of preserving the peace and stability of the Southeast Asian region.

Given this, while indeed, external parties do have stakes to hold as regards the matter of peace and stability in Northeast Asia, it is crucial that in the initial years of building confidence and promoting trust between the two Koreas, dialogue mechanisms may be better left within the exclusive purview of South and North Korea. Eventually, such dialogue mechanisms could be expanded to include the other stakeholders as well. The case of the Six-Party Talks could be a good case in point. While there are definitely other factors that could account for its having lost momentum, the fact that it involved too many in too short a period of time may be another factor.

While peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula is the concern of the entire region or even the global community, it may be more pragmatic and productive for the governments of the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to foremost deal with the issue by themselves. And as confidence and trust is built between the two Koreas, other stake holders could eventually participate.

VI

The North and South are unique sub-regions of East Asia. The context of each sub-region's evolution is likewise different. And while the experience with ASEAN of the Southeast Asian states could not be transposed lock stock and barrel to the Korean Peninsula, the two Koreas may find some best practices in ASEAN worth thinking through and adapting where appropriate and relevant. At the end of the day, in the same manner that Southeast Asia has evolved its ASEAN Way, Northeast Asia should not be precluded nor prevented from developing its own Peninsula Way.

posted on November 28, 2018

저작권자 © 제주평화연구원, 무단 전재 및 재배포 금지

