

Promoting Disarmament and Peacebuilding through a Shared Regional Identity

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Background to this Article

The role of youth in peace and security processes has gained increased recognition with the adoption of UN Security Council resolutions 2250¹, 2419² and 2535³. As part of this movement to recognize youth in peace and security efforts, the authors of this article, young students and peace activists from Northeast Asian countries, were invited by the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA) in 2019 to participate in a Regional Youth Peace and Security (YPS) workshop held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Following this initial event, UNDP and UNODA brought together some of the workshop's participants, along with other youths from the region, to create a Northeast Asia Youth Peace and Security Steering Committee. Committee members participated in online workshops and webinars held by experts for the past six months as a way to form youth perspectives on disarmament issues. Throughout the journey, the authors of this article found a common interest in the central topic of nuclear weapons. This article aims at sharing youth perspectives on furthering disarmament and non-proliferation, with a specific focus on nuclear weapons and shared regional identity.

Introduction

Northeast Asia encompasses the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Japan, Mongolia, the People's Republic of China, and the Republic of Korea⁴ (ROK). The region has been fraught with a history of conflict, and while the region has been relatively peaceful since the end of the Korean War, relations between countries have been challenged by the existence of nuclear weapons and increased militarization. Regional diplomacy has been successful in maintaining stability, however, there is an increased sense of insecurity shared by citizens in the region. In this article, we will shed light on the military and armament situation of the region while underlining the perspectives and role of youth concerning these issues. From this

¹ UN Security Council, Resolution 2250, UN Doc. S/RES/2250 (9 December 2015)

² UN Security Council, Resolution 2419, UN Doc. S/RES/2419 (6 June 2018)

³ UN Security Council, Resolution 2535, UN Doc. S/RES/2535 (14 July 2020).

⁴ There is no official definition of the Northeast Asia region.

analysis, we will argue that disarmament and peacebuilding in Northeast Asia would be more likely to succeed if a unified regional identity was built, and we will underline the role youth should have in this process. The article concludes with policy recommendations on how our respective governments, the United Nations, and civil society organizations should work together to promote disarmament and peace by building a united regional identity.

Situation Analysis of Northeast Asia

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

The DPRK and the ROK signed the South-North Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in 1992. Under the declaration, both countries agreed not to test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons. In 1994, the US and the DPRK adopted the "Agreed Framework" in Geneva, which calls for the DPRK to freeze and eventually eliminate its nuclear facilities, a process that would require dismantling three nuclear reactors, two of which still under construction.⁵ In exchange, the DPRK would be guaranteed the full normalization of political and economic relations with the US and by 2003, a US-led consortium would build two light-water reactors (LWR) in the DPRK to compensate for the loss of nuclear power, the US would supply DPRK with 500,000 tons of heavy fuel per year, and the US would lift sanctions and remove the DPRK from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. Although the US Congress did not find any fundamental violation of any aspect of the Agreed Framework by the DPRK, none of the above promises were fully implemented by the US.⁶ In August 1998, the DPRK launched a three-stage Taepo Dong-1 rocket with a range of 1,500-2,000 kilometers which flew over Japan⁷. Consequently, Japan suspended the signature of a cost-sharing agreement for the Agreed Framework's LWR project until November 1998.

Despite historic dialogues held between the leaderships of the two Koreas (in 2000, 2007, 2018) and six-party talks (2003~2007) for peacebuilding and disarmament on the Korean Peninsula, the DPRK announced its withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 2003, and continued production of fissile material. Between 2006 and 2017, DPRK carried out 6 nuclear tests.

Japan

Japan is the only country in the world that has experienced the use of nuclear weapons during war. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 destroyed infrastructure, culture, history, and claimed a tragic number of lives⁸. Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, that came into

⁵ <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron>

⁶ Ketchell, Misha. (2017, July 20). *Why the US's 1994 deal with North Korea failed – and what Trump can learn from it*. Retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/why-the-uss-1994-deal-with-north-korea-failed-and-what-trump-can-learn-from-it-80578>

⁷ <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000-09/chronology-us-north-korean-missile-diplomacy>

⁸ On the difficulty to assess the exact number of victims from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombing, from "low estimates" (110 000 lives) to "high estimates" (210 000), see the [Bulletin of Atomic Scientists](https://thebulletin.org/2020/08/counting-the-dead-at-hiroshima-and-nagasaki/): <https://thebulletin.org/2020/08/counting-the-dead-at-hiroshima-and-nagasaki/>

effect in 1947, states that military forces and war potential, “will never be maintained”⁹ by the Japanese state. Today, Japan’s Self-Defense Force is one of the most powerful in the region¹⁰.

While Japan has ratified the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, it has not signed or ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. What is more, it supports the potential use of US nuclear weapons on its behalf.¹¹ This clear hesitation to support the prohibition of nuclear weapons comes, in part, from security threats from China and the DPRK.

Youth-led Civil Society Organizations have played a significant role in protecting the promise of peace that Japan made through its constitution. 2015 saw one of the largest youth-led political movements since the anti-war protests in the 1960s. The youth called for transparency in defence and security affairs and the protection of the Japanese constitution, especially Article 9 that states the “Japanese people [will] forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation” and will never use “threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes.” The Article also states that “war potential will never be maintained”¹². Protecting peace is what brought youth together 60 years ago and peace is what youth come together to fight for today. Despite this activism, widening youth dialogue on the issues of disarmament has been a challenge. There is a growing sense of fear toward Japan’s neighbours. A national poll of 18-19-year-olds showed that 88% of them feared missile launches from the DPRK, and 73% feared a potential Chinese military expansion¹³. This growing fear toward neighbors has made youth skeptical of Japan’s non-military solutions to security. Despite this, there is hope. When the same youth were asked how they would like to continue relations with China and South Korea, over 75% stated that relations should be maintained or strengthened, which shows the faith the younger Japanese generations have in regional cooperation and relationship building.

Mongolia

Mongolia has had a nuclear weapon-free status since 2000 (declared in 1992), a status which prohibits any state from: 1. the development, possession, or control over nuclear weapons in Mongolia; 2. transporting nuclear weapons in Mongolia; 3. disposing radioactive material in Mongolia.¹⁴

It is the only case of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (NWFZ) composed of a single country. Mongolia played a special role over the years in promoting the broader concept of nuclear-weapon-free zones and regions. Former Ambassador of Mongolia to the UN, Mr. Jargalsaikhany Enkhsaikhan, has been instrumental in promoting Mongolia’s NWFZ and has spoken in many international arenas to advance the Northeast Asian zone.

⁹ Constitution and Government of Japan

https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html

¹⁰ https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/fs_2020_04_milex_0.pdf

¹¹ ICAN <https://www.icanw.org/japan>

¹² Constitution and Government of Japan

https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html

¹³ Wakamono to Heiwa (Youth and Peace)

<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/wakamonoheiwa/index.html>

¹⁴ The Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI)

<https://www.nti.org/learn/treaties-and-regimes/nuclear-weapon-free-status-mongolia/>

Thanks to positive foreign relations efforts over the past few decades, Mongolia has friendly relations with all countries in the region, including the DPRK. Utilizing these special circumstances, Mongolia has been trying to play a role of regional mediator in global affairs through efforts such as the 'Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security', convening all countries in the region. Unfortunately, for the last few editions of the dialogue, DPRK did not join.

Mongolian youth have a significant interest in Mongolia's development and its position in global affairs. Mongolia's unique situation as a friend of all countries in the region, as well as its NWF status, gives it the opportunity to play a larger role in international relations. However, not many young people, or the broader population, know about Mongolia's unique stance and diplomatic role. This opportunity can only be fully utilized should young people decide to make these issues a priority in national development.

The People's Republic of China (PRC)

A permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and one of the five countries in possession of nuclear arsenals as outlined under Article IX of the NPT, the People's Republic of China reportedly has the fourth largest nuclear warheads as of 2020¹⁵. It acceded to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1992 but has not signed or ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapon (TPNW) adopted in 2017, signed by 84 countries as of October 2020 and which could enter into force in January 2021.

According to the 2006 Chinese Defense White Paper, Chinese nuclear policy states that "China would not be the first to use nuclear weapons at any time and in any circumstance". As reiterated on multiple occasions in the past months, this "no first use" policy would remain unchanged in the future and China would not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones.

Despite this "no first use" nuclear policy, the Chinese government has gradually increased the size and diversified the composition of its nuclear arsenals in recent years, posing a potential threat to regional security. According to SIPRI¹⁶, its defence budget increased from \$167 billion in 2019 to \$178.2 billion in 2020, placing it at the second-highest rank in the world after the United States. However, the younger generation in China, as well as the public, seem to be little concerned about the significance of disarmament and nuclear disarmament. Instead, nuclear weapons are seen as a powerful tool for China to oppose nuclear war, smash nuclear blackmail and safeguard national security and sovereignty, as stated as soon as China started developing nuclear weapons in the 1960s¹⁷. However, "nuclear deterrence" only leads to increased security risks as it breeds fear and mistrust among nations. In other words, the nuclear weapons held for deterrence can be the very thing that leads to insecurity or even nuclear war. Besides, nuclear weapons have catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences that span decades and cross generations. The high cost of their production, maintenance and

¹⁵ World nuclear forces <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2020/10>

¹⁶ SIPRI Military Expenditure Database <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

¹⁷ CHINA'S STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WEAPONS
<https://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/doctrine/huan.htm#:~:text=To%20oppose%20nuclear%20war%2C%20smash.its%20own%20strategic%20nuclear%20weapons.>

modernisation diverts public funds from health care, education, disaster relief and other vital services¹⁸.

The Republic of Korea (ROK)

According to the SIPRI Yearbook 2020, the ROK was ranked 7th in the top 10 importers of major arms, and was the first state in decades to become a top 10 supplier having never been one before.¹⁹ The ROK allocated about \$44 billion of its government budget to its national defence expenditure in 2020. It is about 10% of the whole government budget and 9 times larger than the budget for unification and foreign affairs. One of the reasons for this important defence budget is the ROK government's attempt to keep it equal or larger than the annual budget of the DPRK²⁰.

The current ceasefire status of the two Koreas is one of the biggest obstacles to promoting disarmament on the Korean peninsula. As long as the two Koreas remain at war, citizens perceive the massive expenditure for armed forces and the military duty of all men as necessary. These acts of militarization are heavily rationalized and there is little encouragement for public dialogue on disarmament. According to the 2020 KBS National Unification Survey research, 64.1% of ROK citizens feel anxious about the security situation.²¹ In 2020, a survey of the Korea Institute for National Unification(KINU) showed that among ROK residents (39.9%), more perceive the DPRK as militarily more powerful than the ROK²² than the reverse, showing how ROK citizens continue to feel insecure despite their government spending an important budget on national defence. In the context of the Korean Peninsula technically being at war, it is difficult to draw sympathy or consensus to reduce armed forces. The ROK has been caught in a vicious cycle of armament and antagonism for the past 70 years.

Therefore, active movements and efforts to draw an 'end-of-war declaration' have been carried out at the top as well as grassroots level. President Moon Jae-in urged the international community to support formally ending Korean War in his keynote speech at the 75th UN General Assembly.²³ People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy(PSPD)²⁴ has started a grassroots movement of 'Korea Peace Appeal'²⁵ in 2020 which aims at collecting 100,000,000 signatures to end the Korean war.

¹⁸ Why a ban? https://www.icanw.org/why_a_ban

¹⁹ https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/yb20_summary_en_v2.pdf

²⁰ According to the Korea Development Institute, estimated DPRK's GDP in 2018 was \$33 billion.

²¹ http://news.kbs.co.kr/datafile/2020/08/0816_10.pdf

²² <https://www.kinu.or.kr/brd/board/630/L/menu/399?brdType=R&thisPage=1&bbIdx=57635&searchField=&searchText=>

²³

<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/09/23/national/politics/Moon-Jaein-UN-Korean-War/20200923053500630.html>

²⁴ People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) is a non-governmental organization based in Seoul. It was founded in 1994 by activists, scholars and lawyers who were engaged in various democratic movements for participatory democracy and human rights. PSPD has been working on promoting people's participation in government decision making processes and socio-economic reforms, by closely monitoring the abuse of power of the state and corporations to enhance transparency and accountability. <http://www.peoplepower21.org/English/39340>

²⁵ <https://en.endthekoreanwar.net/appeal>

The Need for Regional Identity

Above, we have clarified the situation related to disarmament in Mongolia, the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Korea and Japan. We have mentioned how youth and the public at large are responding to the situation of armament and militarization. In Japan, while youth was engaged in pacifist movements, growing threats from China and from the DPRK have increased a sense of insecurity and caused a loss of confidence in the region. In Mongolia, national efforts to promote regional disarmament and nonproliferation have gone mostly unnoticed among youth. In China, there is general support for keeping nuclear weapons for national security reasons. In the Republic of Korea, the historical antagonism between the two Koreas and the interference of their allies has lowered sympathy and consensus toward disarmament despite the continued ceasefire since Korean war in 1951.

How can we break this cycle of distrust and armament? How can we move away from national security and promote a regional perspective of peace and security? Assessing the region's increased militarization and armament situation, we see that the nation has been our central axis of security. Northeast Asian youths understand security by focusing on the nation. We have been living under the belief that our own states would provide us protection. However, the security dynamics of national defence and military power threaten our region, the Earth and the people living in it. It is truer now in a time of pandemic, as nations continue to fund military and defence budgets, while finding regional and global solutions to the health crisis should be prioritized. It is high time that we transform our notion of security and safety. But how might we do this?

For Northeast Asia to really start working toward disarmament and nonproliferation in the region, we must build a stronger shared regional identity, which could fundamentally transform our concepts of security. The topic is of special significance to youth, as this region is a home to more than 300 million young people²⁶ (age 15-29), one of the largest youth cohorts in the world. Youth constitute the most international and regionally exposed population in each of our nations. They have the ability to reach out across borders to build a regional identity that can take us out of the violent cycle of distrust and increased armament.

A great example of regional youth activism for peace and security is that of ASEAN youth. During International Peace Day 2020, they self-organized to successfully hold the #AseanYouth4Peace dialogues on regional peace and security. This prompted us to look closer at ASEAN identity and how young people were able to unite on these issues.

²⁶ The youth population is calculated as the sum of youths (15-29) in each country.

<https://www.populationpyramid.net/mongolia/2019/>

<https://www.populationpyramid.net/china/2019/>

<https://www.populationpyramid.net/dem-peoples-republic-of-korea/2019/>

<https://www.populationpyramid.net/republic-of-korea/2019/>

<https://www.populationpyramid.net/japan/2019/>

Our ASEAN neighbors are an example of the power and success that regional identity can bring. What is more, they are an example that regional identity can indeed be created. ASEAN identity emerged from major sources, including certain cultural norms and modes of interaction, a modernist developmental state orientation and approach, and regionalism²⁷. Interestingly, many of the sources of ASEAN identity tend to separate the region more than unite it. However, Acharya explains that “The identity of ASEAN depends on how its members define their character and role in regional order in relation to others within and outside the region, and how they develop a ‘we’ feeling...(The identity building) processes may start even when the participating units lack significant structural commonalities, such as shared cultural heritage, similar political systems, or a common language.”²⁸

It is also generally accepted that ASEAN was founded in 1967 “to create a common front against the spread of communism”²⁹. A collective ‘fear’ of an ideology could be an important tool for unity. Whether it be shared history, fear of the ‘other’, or a collective vision, it is important to actively search for and define it. Acharya states that “[ASEAN’s] founders were ‘imagining’ themselves to be part of a collective entity, or a region, by drawing upon a shared historical heritage as well as identifying common goals in a contemporary setting.” This means that although we may not have existing strong bonds, it is our vision for a collective identity and our efforts for increased dialogue that will ultimately define the success of our endeavour. One needs simply to imagine.

What are the sources of Northeast Asian identity?

Through a small qualitative survey of 15 young people from each of our countries’ youth, the writers found three realities that we share as a region. First, we share deep socio-cultural values and similar ways of interacting within our communities. Everywhere, respect for the elders extends to ancestors. There is a strong sense of family which forms the center of our community. Much of these acts of gathering are similarly practiced through acts of breaking bread together, oriented around annual holidays.

Second, we share a history of conflict. While this has been the source of much grievance and unresolved pain, it is also an experience of war which each has experienced in their own way. Having undergone the eight-year defence war with Japan and a three-year civil war, Chinese people understand the agony of war and cherish the hard-earned peace. As the only country in the world that experienced the use of nuclear weapons, Japanese people went through the pain of their devastating impacts, and thousands of them lost their lives. The Korea War after WWII not only claimed hundreds of thousands of people’s lives, but also divided one Korea into two, causing separation of numerous families and cut-off of communication for decades. Mongolia has also had its share of battles with its Northeast Asian neighbors, during the 1919-1921

²⁷ Acharya, A, “The Evolution and Limitations of ASEAN Identity”, ASEAN@50, Volume 4, 2017

²⁸ Acharya, A, “The Evolution and Limitations of ASEAN Identity”, ASEAN@50, Volume 4, 2017

²⁹ Maizland, L, “What is ASEAN”, Council on Foreign Relations,
<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-asean>

Chinese occupation and the 1939 Battle of Khalkhyn Gol with Japan. In Mongolia's case however, the public increasingly feels that its neighbor countries, including Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea can be considered 'best partners', showing how the people across the nation are ready to embrace better partnerships.³⁰ We have been victims of war, and perpetrators. We all are hoping to heal and live in peace.

Thirdly, young people in our regions have more confidence in bilateral and trilateral relations than in regional ones. They have yet to identify themselves as Northeast Asian. More research is needed to further identify and develop the Northeast Asian identity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite historical grievances and perceived security threats in the region, young people want to create a regional identity, which emanates from the discussions during the NEA YPS Workshop held in Ulaanbaatar in 2019. We want to engage in regional reconciliation and want to start building our future of peace and disarmament. Although the situation in each of our respective countries is complex, young people can overcome this and future obstacles by building a regional identity.

Building of a common regional identity is a powerful method to further disarmament and build positive and sustainable peace. It is a foundation and precursor for confidence building measures. For this to take place we recommend the following:

For the youth:

- We, young people in the region, must continue to reach beyond borders to make colleagues, friends, families.
- We must continue to affirm that there is a tangible sense of shared identity in our region, and to build on it toward a common future of peace.
- We must not cower away from the topics of historical conflict and grievance and face the pains and sins of our forebears.
- We must understand the culture of war that our nations still hold and understand how that affects our daily lives and future.
- We must be aware of our regional military and armament discourse and make clear to our nation's leaders how it affects our lives.
- We must be more educated about disarmament issues in general in order to provide quality input in decision making processes as well as take informed action. Youth can start informing ourselves by visiting <https://www.youth4disarmament.org/> and <https://www.disarmamenteducation.org/>

³⁰ Sant Maral Foundation, Politbarometer 18(52), March-April 2019
https://news.mn/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/sant_maral_survey_2019.pdf

- We must be more aware of applying technology and innovation to strengthen information flow regarding peacebuilding among youth³¹, integrate into existing youth-led civil society initiatives and expand our virtual networks in this region and beyond.

Governments:

- Governments must provide more open and safe spaces for regional dialogue for topics of historical conflict and continued pain and trauma.
- Governments must foster information disclosure and increase public awareness, particularly by providing data on how security decisions affect the daily lives of their citizens. Security through arms cannot be assumed. More diligent work must be done to inform people how arms and military decisions will affect its citizens by clarifying where the military budget is coming from, forming data on how decisions affect Human Security, and making this information readily accessible and legible to regular citizens.
- Governments must take concrete measures to allow further interaction between youth through actions such as lowering travel barriers and enhancing global education with a more regional perspective.
- Governments must direct funds towards peace efforts but not arms, including through peace dialogues and people-to-people exchange to strengthen confidence building and promote cross-country understanding.
- Governments must ensure that youth is given a seat at the table in government dialogues and negotiations. Youth side events at regional events like the Ulaanbaatar dialogues and the ROK-UN conference are a good start, but “youth issues” are still separated from main discussions. Youth must be involved and informed about the decisions for their future.
- Government must include youth and the private sector in regional discussions especially on topics of new technology and innovation as youth and the private sector are at the forefront of developing and using these technologies.

UN Institutions:

- The UN must further regional mechanisms that foster youth dialogue in Northeast Asia with the aim of building a regional identity.
- The UN must connect with a more diverse pool of young people in respective countries. This should cut across all categories, economic, political, social, etc.
- The UN must provide opportunities and channels so youth can express their views regarding regional identity, disarmament and peace-building to policy makers and decision makers.
- The UN could fund or facilitate further research into people’s perspective on Northeast Asian security.
- The UN should expand the UN Innovation cell in order to undertake more inclusive research and provide more engaging data communication that appeals to youth.

³¹ Mancini, F., Letouze, E. F., Meier, P., Vinck, P., Musila, G. M., Muggah, R., ... & O'Reilly, M. (2013). New technology and the prevention of violence and conflict. *International Peace Institute, UNDP, USAID* (2013).

