



## Promoting Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia in an Era of US-China Competition

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### I. Introduction

Throughout pre-modern and modern history of Northeast Asia, whenever there was the emergence of a rising power, war over regional hegemony ensued. The so-called 'Thucydides Trap', where a rising power and a dominant power engage in a hegemonic warfare, had recurred in Northeast Asia quite predictably. In every instance of such a regional hegemonic warfare, Korea was caught between great power competition and wars, and subjected to invasion, occupation, and division. During the 20th century, Korea, falling to victim of the expansionist policies of great powers and their regional wars, was again invaded, occupied and divided.

Recently, in Northeast Asia, on top of the multiple long-standing bilateral conflicts, regional security environment further deteriorated as North Korea acquired nuclear weapons and US-China competition intensified. Such trends thwart peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia, thus undermine South Korea's national interests.

Since the end of the Cold War, each Republic of Korea (hereafter 'ROK' or 'South Korea' or 'Korea') government proposed various Northeast Asia policy initiatives both to ease conflicts in the region and to promote regional security cooperation. Again in response to a mounting US-China competition and pressure to choose sides in the 2010s, the Korean government claims 'peace and cooperation' in Northeast Asia. At the present, Korea is in need of a creative and bold regional peace strategy to protect its national interests. So far numerous regional cooperation initiatives have been proposed by Northeast Asian states but without much success.

Thus this report seeks to explore a realistic, implementable regional cooperation strategy with focus on the following questions. Why does Northeast Asia need regional peace and cooperation? What has obstructed the development of security cooperation mechanisms in Northeast Asia? What are the ways and means to implement 'Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Platform' proposed by the Korean government?

For the purpose of this report, 'Northeast Asian regional cooperation' must include at least

the three major states in the region which are Korea, China, and Japan. This regional mechanism would be more complete if we could include North Korea, Mongolia and Russia. While the United States is not geographically a Northeast Asian country, it could be included in the scope of regional cooperation considering its diplomatic, security, economic and trade interests and military presence in the region.

## **II. Vision and Strategic Objectives of Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia**

### **A. The Vision: A Northeast Asia Community of Peace, Prosperity, and Safety**

This report presents a 'Northeast Asia community of peace, prosperity and safety' as a vision for region. Peace, prosperity, and safety are goals and values that all Northeast Asian states share together and pursue as national interests. At the same time, these are also goals and values that all people in the region seeks either individually or collectively.

In fact, peace and prosperity are national goals and interests that all countries regardless of time and place pursue. Recently, safety has become another key goal and value that all countries and individuals pursue as we suffer from large-scale natural and man-made disasters triggered by climate change, infectious diseases, natural calamities and nuclear accidents these days more frequently than ever.

During the Cold War, security affairs were monopolized by state actors and also focused on military security. However, entering an era of globalization, traditional state- and military security-centered approach became less relevant in solving such new and critical problems such as environment pollution and degradation, climate change, infectious disease, poverty, immigration, nuclear proliferation and accident, cybercrimes, etc. that could pose unprecedented existential threats to the very existence of both individual and humanity. It is quite certain that some of these problems could be handled more effectively by a regional collective approach. Therefore, regional cooperation is urgently needed to ensure the common good of the regional states and residents.

### **B. The Strategic Objectives of Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia**

#### **(1) Easing the Long-standing Conflicts in the Region**

Ever since the end of the Korean War, Northeast Asia has been in a state which is neither violent war nor 'positive peace.' Northeast Asia today is in a state of low-level or 'negative' peace whether peace is maintained only through "peace through strength," balance of power or military (nuclear) deterrence, instead of common security, collective security or regional security cooperation.

Unlike other regions in the world today, all Northeast Asian states are currently embroiled in unrestrained power struggle and arms race. Such regional competition

could escalate into a war, though no states in the region intend to engage in a war now. Rather than relying on such an unstable balance of power and military deterrence, a more stable and sustainable regional security cooperation framework is needed for peaceful coexistence and crisis management in the region.

The historical background to the current unstable and entangled security situations in Northeast Asia stem partly from the San Francisco Treaty which failed to liquidate the Japanese expansion war crimes and restore antebellum national borders before the expansion war. As a result, countries in the region are mired in highly volatile political and security issues such as territorial disputes, past history disputes and divisions. While suffering from division, and territorial and past history disputes, Northeast Asian states seek to complete their sovereignty by solving those territorial and/or past history problems once for all. The problems could only be solved either by a major war or a unilateral concession by one state party that are highly unlikely. Therefore, the current unstable and conflict-ridden state of affairs in Northeast Asia is likely to continue for a while.

Most countries in the region so far have trodden the path of conflict, arms race, and clash instead of regional security cooperation and peaceful coexistence. As a consequence, they are paying enormous opportunity costs in all aspects of peace, prosperity and safety. For example, 7 out of the top 10 world military spending countries (SIPRI as of 2019) are Asian countries. The United States (No. 1, USD 732 billion), China (No. 2, USD 261 billion), India (No. 3, USD 71.1 billion), Russia (No. 4, USD 65.1 billion), Japan (No. 9, USD 47.6 billion), and Korea (No. 10, 43.9 billion dollars). These countries are engaged in an arms race. Except for Japan (0.1% decrease), defense spending in these six Asian countries is growing at an annual rate of 6-7%.

This pervasive conflict structure and arms race in Northeast Asia is the reason behind the Korean government's proposal for a regional security dialogue and cooperation. The security costs associated with mutual distrust and security dilemma will be greatly reduced if a regional security dialogue becomes operative and new security concepts such as common, comprehensive security and peaceful coexistence are widely accepted in the region.

## **(2) Overcoming Regional Bloc-ization Due to US-China Competition**

Since the 2000s, theorists and geo-strategists of the realpolitik tradition foresaw the emergence of US-China conflict and pointed to East Asia and the Western Pacific as the battlegrounds. Professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago argued early on that a peaceful rise of China was impossible and that a US-China clash was inevitable. Professor Graham Allison of Harvard University also projected that the US-China rivalry is highly likely to result in war. Korea and Northeast Asia, which are located on the geopolitical fault line from the US-China confrontation, face an urgent diplomatic challenge to defuse the rivalry in order to avoid the danger of a new Cold War or regional hegemonic war.

The US has consistently pursued a geo-strategy of opposing the emergence of regional hegemony in the Eurasian continent. As the 'rise of China' gained momentum in the 2010s, the US designated China as a 'strategic competitor' and declared an all-out strategic competition in the *National Security Strategy* (December, 2017) and *Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China* (May, 2020).

China responded to the US's geo-strategy aimed at containing China with its own geo-strategy. China's counter-strategies include opposing the deployment of the US missile defense system (THAAD) and strategic weapons in South Korea, opposing the strengthening of ROK-US alliance, tolerating North Korea's nuclear armament, launching the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), claiming the South China Sea as its internal waters, and establishing Island Chains in the Western Pacific, etc.

The competition between the US and China is taking place concurrently in all areas including the economy and trade, military security, technical standards, political system and values, and global governance. The competition is gradually escalating into a competition for supremacy. At this time, in-between states which sides with one power will probably be subjected to direct and/or indirect retaliation from the other side. Those squeezed states between the US-China competition tend to adopt a 'hedging strategy' rather than explicitly choosing one side. As pressures to choose a side by both the US and China, South Korea needs to expand regional and multilateral cooperation with countries that are located in the similar situations and share similar strategic interests.

### **(3) Expediting a Nuclear-Free Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula**

A regional approach could be utilized to address inter-Korean division and conflicts and North Korean nuclear armament and threats, the two major security threats to both South Korea and Northeast Asia. The 'cold war regime on the Korean Peninsula' resulting from the division and inter-Korean war is one of the major reasons for the North Korean nuclear armament. North Korea's self-isolation policy and its lack of diplomatic ties with regional states are also causes of its nuclear armament. Thus any progress of the denuclearization of North Korea would require the conversion of the Cold War regime to a peace regime on the Korean peninsula. Opening of North Korea and its diplomatic normalization with all regional states would also provide a favorable security environment for the denuclearization of North Korea.

For the past 30 years, both the ROK and US governments consistently pursued denuclearization dialogue with North Korea. However, due to the confrontational nature of inter-Korean division and the hostile relations between the US and North Korea, such denuclearization dialogue failed to progress the complete denuclearization of North Korea. As such, the past 30 years was a continued repetition of dialogue and agreements which later collapsed. Thus, instead of solely relying on US-North Korea bilateral negotiations, it is necessary to back the bilateral efforts with a more stable and sustainable regional approach. The reason why the 'Northeast Asia security cooperation regime' was pursued in the past Six-party Talks was to compensate for the lack of trust between the North and the US with a regional approach.

When the ROK and the US governments collaborate to draw a roadmap for the denuclearization and peace regime-building on the Korean Peninsula, 'building a peace and security regime in Northeast Asia' should be a critical element in the roadmap. When North Korea takes the first major steps for denuclearization, both the ROK and US should be prepared to take corresponding major steps for the diplomatic normalization with the North, including opening liaison offices at capitals. Denuclearization and peace regime-building could be further accelerated by holding regional talks for Northeast Asian peace and security cooperation.

### **III. Policy Environment for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia**

#### **A. History of the ROK's Regional Policies**

Since the 1990s, countries in Northeast Asia have made numerous efforts to launch a regional security dialogue and/or regional cooperation mechanism but without any significant results. Most notably, South Korea was the one country that consistently urged for regional security cooperation in Northeast Asia since the late 1980s. It urged for multilateral security dialogue in Northeast Asia as a means to reduce North Korea's military threat, to make North Korea reform and open up by joining the regional and international community, and to supplement the ROK-US alliance. In the 21st century, regional security cooperation is also considered as a way to ease the competition between the US and China.

Earlier, President Roh Tae-woo first proposed the 'Six-Party Consultative Conference for Peace in Northeast Asia' in his speech to the UN General Assembly on October 18, 1988. However, at the time, the US and China did not express any positions, and North Korea flatly rejected the idea.

The Kim Young-sam government also proposed the Northeast Asia multilateral security dialogue as a key foreign policy agenda. In May 1994, Foreign Minister Han Seung-joo again proposed the Northeast Asia Security Dialogue (NEASED), modeled after the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The Kim Dae-jung administration also called for a multilateral security dialogue, but without result.

The Roh Moo-hyun government set the 'realization of an era of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia' as one of its major foreign policy agenda. The Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative was established as an advisory body to the president, and the 'Northeast Asia Initiative' was also introduced. In August, 2003, a new opportunity for security cooperation in Northeast Asia opened up when the Bush administration launched the Six-Party Talks. In the Article 4 of the September 19, 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement, the six Northeast Asian countries agreed to commit 'to joint efforts for lasting peace and stability in Northeast Asia' and 'to explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation in Northeast Asia'. In fact, the Six-Party Talks itself had characteristics of a regional security dialogue. The fact that it decided to work

toward a security cooperation mechanism marks an important milestone in the development of regional cooperation in Northeast Asia.

The 2.13 Agreement (2007) went a step further and established the 'Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism Working Group' as one of the 'initial steps for implementing the September 19 Joint Statement.' It further agreed to promote 'Northeast Asia security cooperation at the six-party ministerial meeting.' Pursuant to the agreement, the first 'Working Group Meeting on the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism' was held at the Russian Embassy in Beijing on March 16, 2007. This meeting is recorded as the region's first-ever intergovernmental security cooperation dialogue. Later, North Korea boycotted the Six-Party Talks, and discussions on security cooperation in Northeast Asia came to a halt.

The Park Geun-hye administration introduced the 'Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative' (hereinafter 'NAPCI') as one of the diplomatic and security initiatives to establish 'trust diplomacy.' NAPCI is a 'regional multilateral dialogue process' that starts by dealing with soft, non-traditional security issues for sustainable peace and cooperation. Propelled by the interest and support of the Senior Secretary's Office for Foreign Affairs and Security of the Blue House, this initiative resulted in launching more than 10 multilateral consultative bodies covering environment, energy, nuclear safety, disaster relief, and cyber security issues. The Park government also began hosting the annual Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Forum.

However, as a regional security dialogue, the NAPCI project had limitations. It aimed at becoming an umbrella dialogue mechanism for the multiple governmental and non-governmental regional consultative bodies already in operation. Due to the focus on functional areas that are non-traditional security issues, the scope of participation by foreign and security experts were limited. More importantly, the spill-over effect that cooperation in the soft security issues would induce cooperation in the hard security ones did not occur. In the 2010's, due to the rise of China, the US-China and China-Japan rivalries intensified, and the US and Japan became reluctant to engage in any regional cooperation dialogue comprising China.

The Moon Jae-in government proposed the establishment of a 'Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Platform' (hereinafter referred to as 'NAPCP') as a successor to the NAPCI for the previous Park government. The NAPCP project proposed its strategic objectives as follows:

First, create a platform where relevant stakeholders can freely gather to discuss various collaborative initiatives that will promote peace and cooperation in the region. Second, create a multilateral cooperative framework to deal with disagreement and conflict among countries in the region. Third, establish and build up the practice of dialogue and cooperation so that the structure of confrontation and conflict is transformed into one of dialogue and cooperation. Fourth, collectively respond at the regional level against transnational security threats such as infectious diseases, terrorism, natural disasters, and cybercrimes. Unlike the NAPCI, the NAPCP includes both non-traditional and traditional security issues and seeks regional cooperation dialogue in which traditional security gradually gains more importance.

## B. Reasons for Backwardness of Regional Cooperation in Northeast Asia

Northeast Asia is known as the only region where regional security dialogue or cooperation mechanism failed to develop. This is partly due to the region's unique structural and historical characteristics that inhibit regional cooperation.

First, Northeast Asia is absent of structural factors that necessitate and enable regional security cooperation in other regions such as: sharing common external security threats (enemy); sharing common historical experiences (e.g. colonial occupation or targets of great power competition, etc.); common danger of mass destruction as a result of regional competition or war, etc. Since there was no shared sense of being victimized or being in a crisis collectively, the motivation for regional security cooperation was also weak.

Most states in the Southern Hemisphere and the New World, including Africa, Southeast Asia, South Pacific, and Latin America, share common experiences and fears: having been under colonial rule; having been the target of imperialism and great power competition; having experienced the environmental destruction from nuclear tests; and the fear of annihilation by nuclear war. Therefore, regional cooperation organizations (ASEAN, OAS, AU, CAU, etc.) and nuclear-free zones (Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, South Pacific, etc.) have developed extensively in this region. In the case of Europe, CSCE/EU developed against the background of catastrophic devastation not only from World War I and II but also from a looming nuclear war.

In contrast, Northeast Asian countries lack a common denominator such as recognition of the danger of a region-wide war or nuclear war, or a shared experience of harm at the regional level. Instead, intra-regional competition in the region has been more prominent, and the US, an out of the region state, exerted great influence on regional politics, making regional cooperation more difficult. For example, South Korean governments called for regional security cooperation in the post-Cold War era, Japan called for regional security cooperation in the 1990s, and China called for regional security cooperation in the 2010s. However, the responses from neighboring states were either unresponsive or non-cooperative. This is because it was regarded that China, Korea, and Japan were calling for regional security cooperation as a means and method to pursue their own political and diplomatic interests, rather than genuinely seeking common regional ones.

Second, historically, Korea, China, and Japan competed with each other for more than 1,500 years in a confined geographical space called Northeast Asia. The result was fierce nationalism and nationalistic sentiments which now act as impediments to regional security cooperation. If one looks into those cases of regional security cooperation in other regions, there were a number of small or medium-sized countries which led the regional security cooperation process. However, the three countries in Northeast Asia - Korea, China and Japan - are vastly different in terms of national power and have competed against each other as independent states for longer than a thousand years. Such historical and geopolitical characteristics of Northeast Asia are not conducive to regional security cooperation.

Traditionally Northeast Asia was structured by a hierarchical regional order in the order of national powers. Therefore, there is apprehension that a hierarchical order based on the size of national power could resurface once a regional community is formed – a fear which is also an obstacle to regional cooperation and community-building. This fear also shows the lack of trust among Northeast Asian countries. In Europe, neutral and small and medium-sized countries such as Switzerland, Belgium, Sweden, and Austria played leading roles in the formation of the OSCE. In Northeast Asia, it will be difficult for Korea (or Mongolia or Japan) to play this role by itself.

In the region, the historical rivalry and conflict between China and Japan and between Korea and Japan, Korea's memory of Japanese aggression and occupation, Korea and Japan's fear of China's rise as a regional hegemon, and the contempt these countries have against the others' cultures make it difficult for these three countries to engage in regional security cooperation on equal footing.

Third, although most other regions have also experienced intra-regional conflict and war in the past, strong vision and leadership often made it possible to overcome such historical animosity. Northeast Asia, however, lacks the strong vision and leadership that can rally support from the region.

In the case of European integration, visionaries such as Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman played a critical role in overcoming the deep-rooted hostility between France and Germany when they advocated for and designed regional integration. Despite their historical rivalry and vivid memories of World Wars I and II, French President Charles De Gaulle and West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer signed the 1963 Élysée Treaty for permanent reconciliation between the two states. The Treaty dispelled antagonism between the two and provided the stepping stone for regional integration.

On the other hand, conflicts in Northeast Asia are more of a political power struggle by nature rather than religious and racial disputes which are almost impossible to resolve. This means that there is hope for a bold political compromise and peaceful coexistence. In fact, looking back on the past history of Northeast Asia, the periods of peaceful coexistence and exchanges among Korea, China and Japan were significantly longer than the periods of conflict.

## **IV. Tasks for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia**

### **A. Establishing a Fund and Center for Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Platform**

In order to fulfill the ROK government's 'Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Platform' project, additional actions are required. This report proposes that a fund and research center for Northeast Asia peace and cooperation be established with the Korean government taking the lead and other regional states joining in. Additionally, the annual Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Forum, hosted jointly

by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of ROK and Korea National Diplomatic Academy, should be vitalized to ensure its central role as a space, offline and virtual, where all entities and individuals meet freely to share their visions and ideas for the common good of Northeast Asia.

More specifically, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Fund will perform tasks similar to those of the Korea Foundation, but with a Northeast Asia regional confinement. The Fund will provide financial support to regional academic and cultural events and visiting and exchange programs. It could all finance the Forum and Center for Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation.

The Center for Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation would conduct policy research on regional multilateral cooperation, security dialogue and community-building, and collaborate and exchange with regional centers from other regions. It will also function as a hub for networks of Northeast Asian think-tanks and experts. The Center could be established in the Korean National Diplomatic Academy.

The Center will be staffed with researchers from Northeast Asian states and other regions as well. To fulfill its mission of regional cooperation, the Center should adopt an operating principle that all research projects and activities at the Center should be multinational and collaborative. Then the Center will be an achievement in itself and a symbol of the Northeast Asian community.

The Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Forum, currently being an annual two-day event, is a representative outcome of the ROK government's Northeast Asia regional policy. However, the level of interests within the government and among experts group in South Korea on the Forum is gradually diminishing. Even its mid-to-long-term sustainability is unclear. Therefore, the ROK government needs to reinvigorate its interests and reconfirm its commitment to its Northeast Asia peace and cooperation policy in general and the Forum in specific.

## **B. Building a Northeast Asia Epistemic Community for Common and Comprehensive Security**

If regional cooperation is to make any substantive advancement at a time of pervasive conflict and mistrust in Northeast Asia, discourse on Northeast Asia peace and security cooperation must first be developed and disseminated to gain broad support. For this, it is essential for the academia, politicians, and NGOs to play leading roles.

Currently, the dominant discourse in Northeast Asia was inundated with vocabularies of geopolitical conflicts, great power politics, nuclear armament, balance of power, military security, deterrence, etc., leaving little room for those of regional community, peace regime building, common security, security cooperation, nuclear weapon-free zone, etc. In short, the discourse was based on realpolitik of great powers and nationalism at the center. Thus Northeast Asia is a barren land when it comes to non-traditional 'new security' concepts such as common, comprehensive,

cooperative, collective and human security that require transnational, regional and global cooperation to produce results.

If the epistemic community and politicians in Northeast Asia fail to realize and agree on an alternative discourse for regional cooperation, the region cannot escape from a trap of recurring regional conflicts and war crisis. The Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Forum and Research Center could play a key role in developing a different vision and discourse for the region and sustaining the regional epistemic community.

### **C. Invigorating Existing Regional Cooperation Mechanisms**

In order to leverage the currently operating cooperative mechanism between Korea, China and Japan as a key pillar for promoting peace and cooperation in the region, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat's capabilities should be enhanced, and regional cooperation projects need to be further vitalized. Toward this end, first, the Korea-China-Japan summit and foreign ministers' meetings should be held regularly to repeatedly reaffirm and disseminate the overarching principles of regional peace and cooperation. This report reemphasizes the role of the governments here, because, given the strong state-centered and nationalistic traditions of the region, it is essential for states to lead regional cooperation.

The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), established in Seoul in 2011, is the only intergovernmental regional body in Northeast Asia, yet its potential is not fully utilized. Further efforts need to be made by the governments in order to fulfill the full potential of the TCS for regional cooperation. As concrete measures, this report proposes the increase of TCS's project fund, promotion of independent regional cooperation projects by TCS, making TCS more autonomous by re-establishing its relationship with the member states, and strengthening research capacity for regional cooperation policies.

Next, this report proposes to promote the activities of the Network of Trilateral Cooperation Think-Tanks (NTCT) and leverage the Network to expand the epistemic community for regionalism. The establishment of the NTCT was decided at the 7th ROK, China, and Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting in March 2015. Soon NTCT was launched with the participation of three institutes: Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) of Korea National Diplomatic Academy, the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR), and the Chinese Academy of Diplomacy. In 2020, the annual NTCT meeting decided to conduct trilateral joint research in three areas, comprising regional security, economic and environmental cooperation.

### **D. Promoting Northeast Asian Peace Cooperation Pilot Projects**

In order to make real progress in peace and cooperation in the region, this report proposes that Northeast Asian states should select and implement a few pilot projects. Good examples for the pilot projects would be a Northeast Asian Disaster Management Community which could prepare for various large-scale natural

disasters or nuclear accidents in the region, an East Asian Railway Community aimed at connecting the railways in East Asia, and a Northeast Asian Infectious Disease Control Community which would respond to infectious diseases such as the COVID-19.

First, the idea of 'East Asian Railway Community' was proposed first by President Moon Jae-in in 2018 as one of the 'New Northern Economic Cooperation' initiatives. If the East Asian railway community is formed, South Korea will be directly connected to Eurasia transportation networks by land. It also has political effect of connecting the two Koreas and opening up North Korea to the region. To explore this idea, the ROK Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport plans to host the 'East Asian Railway Community International Forum' in the second half of 2021.

Second, the ROK government also proposed the 'Northeast Asia Cooperation Initiative for Infectious Disease Control and Public Health' in September 2020 at President Moon's speech to the UN General Assembly. Following the proposal, disease control and health officials and experts from the region met virtually in December 2020 to share their best practices in the response against COVID-19, and to discuss regional cooperation policies for public health crises.

Third, on April 13, 2021, the Japanese government unilaterally announced a plan to discharge into the Pacific radioactively contaminated (treated) water from the 2011 Fukushima nuclear power plant accident. This triggered a heated debate on the environmental and health consequences from the discharge and possible regional responses. This incident once again shows the needs for a Northeast Asian disaster management community so that the region could be prepared to deal with the future natural and manmade disasters more effectively and cooperatively than without one. Especially, considering the high density of nuclear power plants and population in Northeast Asia, it is essential to form a regional cooperative mechanism for information exchange and joint response to nuclear accidents.

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