

*An Evaluation of and Issues Concerning the
ROK's Initiative for Northeast Asia:
Towards the Realization of an East Asian Economic Community
(Summary)*

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The Roh Moo-hyun administration of the ROK, which came to power in 2003, has set forth a new state agenda in the form of the "Initiative for the Era of Northeast Asian Peace and Prosperity", which pursues the realization of a "peaceful and prosperous East Asian community". The following looks back at the trajectory of the ROK's initiative for Northeast Asia and free trade agreement (FTA) policy over the last three years, and identifies priority issues relating to the realization of the East Asian community.

In the ROK government's vision for Northeast Asia, firstly, the importance of economic cooperation in shifting the focus of this initiative from strengthening competitiveness (primarily promoting the economy) to security cooperation (external cooperation) has been overlooked, so it has been difficult to promote consistent economic cooperation from a long-term perspective. As a result, proposals for practical, attractive projects that will be of interest to neighboring countries have been inadequate. Secondly, there has been confusion about whether to make Northeast Asia or East Asia the main space for economic cooperation. Thirdly, the strategy for ensuring that bilateral FTAs ultimately become something that promotes intra-regional economic integration has also been inadequate.

The biggest requirement for the ROK to contribute to the realization of a regional economic community is a shift in its perspective, from thinking mainly in terms of FTAs to thinking in terms of an economic community. In other words, if the government of the ROK sees the "formation of an era of Northeast Asian peace and common prosperity" as a diplomatic objective of the utmost priority and will promote the formation of a regional community as part of

this, it should develop a new awareness of FTAs as a useful means of achieving this and be proactive in making use of them.

In view of the various constraints in Northeast Asia, the ROK should envisage an East Asian economic community that takes East Asia, rather than Northeast Asia, as the main stage for cooperation, for the time being. It would be more practical if this began with an FTA at a low level of integration (East Asian FTA) and was then developed into an economic community both in name and reality; with regard to this direction, it will be necessary to secure agreements between the countries of the region from this point onwards.

Until now, the ROK has tended to paint a picture of a regional economic community that revolves around itself. In the future, it will have to take a more objective viewpoint and induce neighboring countries to participate by presenting clear targets for an economic community with which all members of the region can empathize, as well as clarifying the prospective benefits and specific, practical cooperative tasks.

However, no matter what the space for economic cooperation, there can be no doubt that Northeast Asian cooperation is critical and that it must demonstrate the initiative appropriate to its economic scale. In particular, it will be difficult for an FTA to succeed unless relations between Japan and China improve. What is required is for the ROK to faithfully take on the role of a bridge in Northeast Asia, in order to ensure that Japan and China work towards economic cooperation.

(Translated by ERINA)