

研 究 報 告

How and What to Cooperate to Advance SDGs in Northeast Asia in a Multipolar World

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Abstract

This paper explores the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Northeast Asia, focusing on Japan, China, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea and Russia, while recognizing the limited participation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, due to the border closure under COVID-19. The region is characterized by deep heterogeneity in terms of population, geography, economic capacity, and income levels. Such diversity creates both obstacles and opportunities for regional cooperation, highlighting the necessity of building frameworks that ensure inclusivity and mutual benefit. Within the context of a shifting international order marked by the relative decline of U.S. hegemony and the emergence of multipolarity, cooperation in Northeast Asia is increasingly shaped by global normative frameworks provided by the United Nations.

The study emphasizes three core methodological principles prescribed by the United Nations: the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), the pledge to Leave No One Behind (LNOB), and the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. HRBA reconceptualizes development not as a form of charity but as the realization of rights, situating individuals as rights-holders and states as duty-bearers (UN, 2003). LNOB prioritizes those at greatest risk of exclusion, including the poor, women, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, insisting on inclusive and equitable policies (Turunen, 2021; UNDP, 2018). Gender equality, codified in SDG 5, is recognized as both a stand-alone goal and a cross-cutting condition for achieving all other goals, encompassing women's participation in decision-making, recognition of unpaid care work, and the protection of sexual and reproductive rights (UN DCO, 2021; UNSDG, n.d.).

The analysis concludes that advancing the SDGs in Northeast Asia requires moving beyond hierarchical models of aid and instead fostering horizontal knowledge-sharing and mutual respect among states. Regional cooperation should be designed to leverage diversity as a collective strength, ensuring that no country or vulnerable group is left behind in the pursuit of sustainable and inclusive development.

Keywords: SDGs, principle, cooperation, Northeast Asia

Introduction

The Economic and Social Research Institute for Northeast Asia, University of Niigata Prefecture (ERINA-UNP) has been conducting research on the realization of SDGs in Northeast Asia with the initial goal of covering researchers from all countries in

the region (China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Japan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea and Russia). However, due to ongoing COVID-19-related quarantine measures, it is extremely difficult for researchers to visit DPRK. Therefore, the current research covers researchers from the five Northeast Asian countries excluding DPRK. Through mutual reports on

¹ Here's the transcript of what Putin and Trump said in Alaska, *CBS NEWS*, August 15, 2025 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-of-what-putin-trump-said-in-alaska/>

Joint press conference of the President of Russia and the President of the United States, *President of Russia*, August 16, 2025 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/77793>

the current status of SDG awareness and efforts by governments and private companies to achieve SDGs in these five countries, we have clarified that various efforts are being made toward SDG realization, albeit with differences among countries.

The international situation in Northeast Asia has undergone rapid and significant changes since the start of the second Trump administration in the United States. The decline of US hegemony has become apparent, and it has become clear that we have entered an era of multipolarity in which important issues are decided through negotiations between major powers. The era in which a rules-based international order functioned under US hegemony is coming to an end. The United States itself has begun to unilaterally set tariffs without regard for World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements, leaving many countries, including the United Kingdom, Vietnam, Japan, and the European Union (EU), with no choice but to follow the current administration in the United States. Although the United States is outside the Northeast Asian region, its economical, military and political relations with Northeast Asian countries and its influence in the region are as significant as those of countries within the region. The United States and Russia have been rivals since the end of the Cold War, but since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the Ukraine conflict in 2022, they have been in an adversarial relationship. However, following the US-Russia summit talks held in Alaska on August 15, 2025, US-Russia relations appear to be returning from a hostile relationship to a rivalry based on cooperation where each side takes a principled stance on issues¹. Such changes are likely to have a certain impact on US-China and US-DPRK relations, increasing the likelihood of changes in the international order in Northeast Asia.

This paper aims to examine what perspectives are important for international cooperation toward achieving the SDGs in Northeast Asia amid the turbulent changes in the international situation.

The three core elements required for achieving the SDGs as defined by the United Nations²

In addition to the goals themselves, the United Nations has established methodological approaches that should be prioritized in the process of achieving the SDGs. These include the Human Rights-Based Approach, Leave No One Behind, and Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. While it is important to determine which of the 17 goals to prioritize in promoting international cooperation on SDGs among the six countries in Northeast Asia, it is equally crucial to consider how to realize these three core principles.

(1) Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)

The UN Sustainable Development Group's website provides an overview of the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)³. According to this, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at its third General Assembly on December 10, 1948. This is considered the first step toward the standardization of human rights. The document on HRBA⁴ categorizes those involved in development as "rights-holders"⁵ and "duty-bearers"⁶. Under the HRBA, people who are the targets of development are not recipients of charity or favors, but rather entities that are rightfully entitled to internationally recognized rights, and accordingly, states and other entities are obligated to fulfill those rights. Therefore, development is understood as a process of social change through the realization of rights, rather than one-sided aid or charity. Based on this approach, the focus of development cooperation shifts from "meeting needs" to "guaranteeing rights." For example, education and healthcare are not seen as "things provided because they are needed," but rather as "rights that should be guaranteed." Consequently, development challenges are redefined as "human rights violations," and their resolution means the realization of rights. The HRBA is not merely an ideal, but a common language among United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations

² <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>

³ UN Sustainable Development Group, Universal Values—Principle One: Human Rights-Based Approach <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>

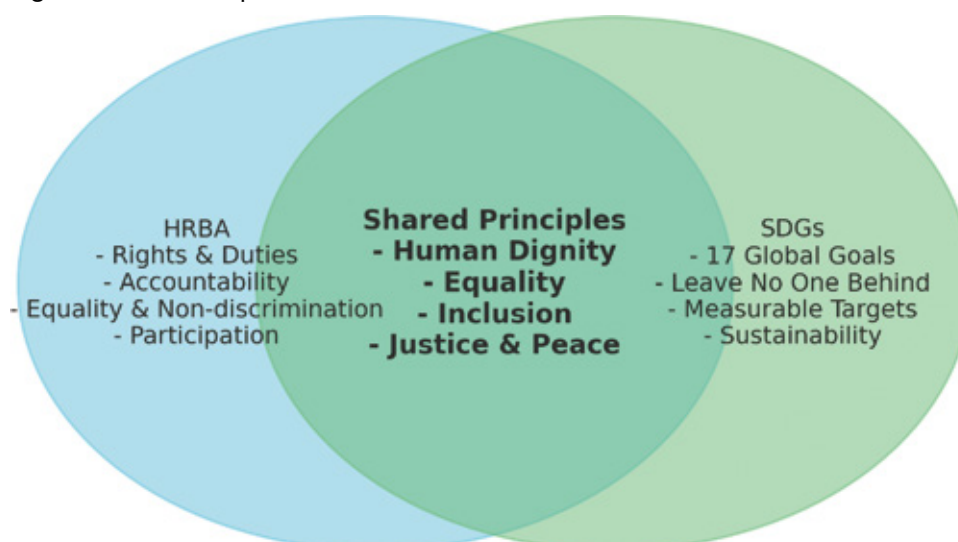
⁴ UN Sustainable Development Group, The Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation Towards a Common Understanding Among UN Agencies, September 2003 <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/human-rights-based-approach-development-cooperation-towards-common-understanding-among-un>

⁵ All human beings are rights holders and enjoy the rights guaranteed by international human rights law.

⁶ Obligors are primarily states (governments), which bear the legal responsibility to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights. Additionally, the international community and private entities also play certain roles.

⁷ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has developed the Universal Human Rights Index (UHRI) to assess countries' efforts in the field of human rights and the status of human rights realization by the international community. The human rights realization status highlighted in the UHRI is diverse, and even the Nordic countries, which are leading the way in achieving the SDGs, are no exception. Additionally, the SDG numbers related to the points highlighted are also listed, providing useful reference. For more details, please refer to <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en>.

Figure1 Relationship between HRBA and SDGs



Source: Created by the author based on the United Nations website

High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the World Health Organization (WHO) when they collaborate⁷. It is also used uniformly in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). It is required to be incorporated into all aspects of development cooperation (analysis, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation). In this regard, HRBA goes beyond "results-based" development evaluation and provides a mechanism for measuring the legitimacy and quality of development from a rights perspective. Development cooperation should be evaluated not only in terms of GDP growth and infrastructure development, but also in terms of progress in the realization of human rights.

HRBA and SDGs are related as shown in Figure 1. The content of human rights indicated in HRBA is not limited to civil liberties but includes all social rights and various other rights that have been established since then. Therefore, rather than using human rights as a tool to criticize other countries, as in so-called "human rights diplomacy," the concept should be understood as centering on the idea that development is not a form of "charity," but rather an endeavor to guarantee or restore the rights that all human beings inherently possess. Some countries in Northeast Asia have been criticized by Western countries for their human rights records. As a result, they are quite sensitive to the term "human rights" and some even feel a sense of rejection toward it. However, a search of the Universal Human Rights Index (UHRI) database reveals that the United States, EU countries, the United Kingdom, Japan, and ROK also have numerous issues pointed out. The purpose of HRBA is not to point out such issues, but to emphasize that the focus of development should be on human

beings, that the people who are the subjects of development should be the protagonists of development, and that development exists to help them regain the rights they inherently possess.

(2) Leave no one behind (LNOB)

Leave no one behind (LNOB) is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁸. This principle calls for "not only reaching the poorest, but also addressing discrimination and inequality within and between countries, as well as their root causes."

LNOB identifies two key perspectives: the subject perspective and the action perspective. The former, the key question, is "Who is being left behind?" LNOB identifies groups that are most vulnerable and marginalized—such as persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, migrants, older persons, women and girls, and the poor. These groups are often subject to multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion, making them more likely to be overlooked in policymaking and development efforts. The latter is "How do we ensure that no one is left behind?" UNDP [2018] defines LNOB as the principle of "reaching the furthest behind first." This means that development efforts must prioritize those most excluded. LNOB also requires analyzing and addressing structural drivers such as discrimination, residential exclusion, socioeconomic status, governance gaps, and vulnerabilities to shocks.

LNOB is closely linked with inclusiveness, justice, human rights, equality, and non-discrimination. These are universal values underpinning the SDGs as a whole, and they align with the UN's normative mandate to promote human dignity and

⁸ United Nations Sustainable Development Group, Universal Values—Principle Two: Leave No One Behind <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind>

Table1 Data on population, income, etc. of countries in Northeast Asia

Country	Population (2023)	Total Area (km ²)	Population Density (per km ²)	Nominal GDP (billion US\$, 2023)	GDP per capita (US\$, 2023)
Japan	124,516,650	377,974	329	4,213	33,836
ROK	51,712,619	100,440	515	1,713	33,121
China	1,410,710,000	9,600,183	147	18,270	12,951
Russia	143,826,130	17,098,250	8	2,072	14,403
Mongolia	3,481,145	1,564,116	2	20	5,839
DPRK	26,418,204	120,538	219	n/a	n/a

Sources: Japan, ROK, China, Russia, and Mongolia: World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI); DPRK:

Population from the World Health Organization (WHO), Area from the CIA World Factbook

Note: Nominal GDP and GDP per capita for DPRK are left blank due to lack of reliable statistics from major international institutions.

equitable development⁹. In actual projects, it is necessary to incorporate such normative concepts. Therefore, when proposing the necessity of projects in this area in research on international cooperation for the realization of SDGs in Northeast Asia, it is essential to consider this concept.

(3) Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment

“Gender Equality & Women’s Empowerment” is a foundational universal value in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, explicitly reflected in SDG 5: “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls¹⁰.”

SDG 5 sets a dedicated global goal to eliminate discrimination against women and girls and empower them to live lives free from violence and inequality. It includes nine targets and fourteen indicators, including:

- Ending all forms of discrimination (5.1)
- Eliminating violence and exploitation (5.2)
- Banning harmful practices like child marriage and FGM (5.3)
- Recognizing unpaid care and domestic work (5.4)
- Ensuring women’s participation in leadership (5.5)
- Securing sexual and reproductive rights (5.6)
- Guaranteeing economic resources and property rights (5.a)
- Empowering through technology (5.b)
- Strengthening laws and policies for gender equality (5.c)

What I felt when attending an international conference on SDGs was that, while the urgency of gender equality in Northeast Asia is relatively low compared to other regions in Asia, this does not mean that there are no issues in Northeast

Asia. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2024), the figures for Northeast Asian countries on gender equality were generally low to moderate, or no data was available. Therefore, when considering methods for international cooperation to achieve the SDGs in Northeast Asia, it is necessary to discuss this issue as a topic of discussion.

Preliminary Conclusion: Northeast Asia's Diversity and Leave No One Behind

As can be seen in Table 1, the six countries in Northeast Asia are extremely diverse in terms of population, land area, and income. The population ranges from China, which has one of the world's largest populations at over 1.4 billion, to Mongolia, with a population of only 3.5 million, a difference of about 400 times. In terms of land area, there is a difference of about 170 times between Russia, which has the largest land area in the world, and ROK, which has a land area of just over 100,000 square kilometers. In terms of population density, Mongolia and Russia are significantly lower than the other countries¹¹. In terms of GDP, the difference between the largest, China, and the smallest, Mongolia, exceeds 900 times. When looking at GDP per capita, Japan, ROK, and Russia are classified as high-income countries, while China and Mongolia are classified as upper-middle-income countries. DPRK has no data available but is likely classified as a lower-middle-income country.

When applying the LNOB perspective at the national level, DPRK and Mongolia, which have low GDP per capita, are likely to become priority targets for support. Additionally, Mongolia

⁹ United Nations Development Group (2016) *Policy and Operational Support for UNCTs on Human Rights in SDG Implementation* <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-operational-support>

¹⁰ United Nations Development Group, Universal Values–Principle Three: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment>

¹¹ Metreau, E., Young, K. E., & Eapen, S. G. (2024, July 1). *World Bank country classifications by income level for 2024–2025* [Blog post]. *World Bank Data Blog*. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/world-bank-country-classifications-by-income-level-for-2024-2025>

has a small population, and has a vast territory with the lowest population density among the six countries. Considering various constraints in development, Mongolia is also likely to be a priority for support.

LNOB requires consideration not only at the national level but also at various other levels. In this sense, there are also marginalized people, groups, and classes in Japan and the ROK. Furthermore, in line with the aforementioned HRBA, it is important that the recipients of support are the protagonists,

and that hierarchical or master-servant relationships do not exist. Therefore, in cooperation among Northeast Asian countries for the realization of the SDGs, it is important for each country to share its wisdom and cooperate horizontally. In our research, it is also important to build a system that covers all six countries in Northeast Asia and enables horizontal cooperation, while producing outputs that are mindful of the three pillars emphasized by the United Nations.

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