

Building and Sustaining Peace at the Regional Level: The Network Approach to Regional Coordination in Northeast Asia

Hybrid Discussion | 8 December 2022

Summary Note

The responsibility of sustaining peace lies primarily with Member States, as underscored in the dual 2016 and 2020 resolutions on peacebuilding and sustaining peace (A/RES/70/262-S/RES/2282; A/RES/75/201-S/RES/2558). However, both resolutions clearly underline that sustaining peace cannot be ensured by the Member States alone and requires a variety of multi-stakeholder partnerships, including at the regional level and with (sub-)regional partners. As such, inclusive regional peacebuilding structures that engage different actors - national actors, local peacebuilders, development partners, and regional and sub-regional organizations - are crucial to support the states in sustaining peace.

Recognizing the necessity of regional peacebuilding structures and in the absence of such a structure in Northeast Asia, the Ulaanbaatar Process was officially launched in 2015 by GPPAC, co-convened by Peace Boat, GPPAC's Regional Secretariat for Northeast Asia, and the Mongolian NGO Blue Banner. The process aims to complement official dialogue processes, bringing together peace activists and experts from the former Six Party Talk member countries (China, DPRK, Japan, ROK, Russia and the US) and Mongolia, including women and youth, to promote communication and cooperation, build and strengthen constituencies for peace, and jointly develop recommendations for civil society, regional governments and the international community regarding conflict prevention and peacebuilding on the Korean Peninsula and in the broader Northeast Asian region.

There are various benefits demonstrated by such regional coordination. The platform has proven effective in changing the prevailing narrative surrounding the contentious geopolitical relationships in the region. The safe space for dialogue has allowed participation from all parts of the region, demonstrating that sincere and constructive dialogue is possible in Northeast Asia. The platform provides opportunities for partnership and collaboration, engages policy-makers, facilitates their access to pro-peace stakeholders at the local level, and informs global peacebuilding policy, including as directed towards the region.¹

Based on the experiences from Northeast Asia, the following key elements build an effective regional peacebuilding architecture:

- **Multi-stakeholder coordination is required and must be based on complementarity among partners.**

Even in highly politicized contexts such as Northeast Asia, there is a possibility to unite government actors, the private sector, and civil society organizations around a shared vision for

¹ The Ulaanbaatar Process, GPPAC, <https://www.gppac.net/ulaanbaatar-process>.

peacebuilding and prevention priorities in the region. The regional approach is best suited where it is politically impossible to bring together different actors through bilateral mechanisms. This comparative advantage is exemplified by the case of the Korean Peninsula: it is usually not possible for citizens of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) to meet or exchange directly, the regional approach of the Ulaanbaatar Process provides such chances in a safe and constructive space. Given the dynamic nature of the geo-political and geo-strategic regional environment, there is a need for regional actors to form partnerships as a means of fostering greater coordination toward the realization of shared goals. A shared narrative is essential to make joint steps toward sustaining peace. It may be easier to begin outlining this shared narrative in a regional context rather than in a more contested bilateral one: while the discussion on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is very sensitive, it is easier to share visions toward common objectives in a regional context, such as the creation of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Northeast Asia.

A regional peacebuilding network, such as GPPAC, is a critical convenor, as exemplified by the Ulaanbaatar Process. This is enabled through the active role of actors positioned to convene space for dialogue and coordination; Mongolia's initiatives to provide such space and encourage dialogue are key to making this possible. At the same time, the strong engagement of and technical and political support from the UN is critical to making steps toward sustaining peace more frequent and more impactful. Therefore, one way to enhance the role of the UN at the regional level is to encourage *the UN's role as a convenor and not as an implementer*.

- **The network approach to peacebuilding must be at the core of regional coordination.**

Due to their structure, networks have the opportunity to be inclusive to various stakeholders that represent a diverse set of perspectives and support building a common vision of the future among these stakeholders. Pooling resources, knowledge, and experiences together make networks particularly impactful and enables individual members to access opportunities for capacity development and for improving their methodologies and action.

Using a network approach at the regional level can help address political dynamics and competition that often consume regional peacebuilding dialogues. Adopting such an approach means challenging the convening modalities to focus on *meaningful inclusion, trust and a transformative approach* that is achieved through *authentic partnership*. It is an opportunity to empower the knowledge and expertise that stems from the region to stand on its own, with global donorship not directing what peacebuilding looks like but rather seeking to support what peacebuilding does look like at the local level.

The Ulaanbaatar Peace Process models the organisational power of local peacebuilders when they are given adequate resources and capacities and shows the key role of civil society organizations when there lacks an inclusive regional cooperation mechanism, as is the case in Northeast Asia. Local peacebuilders usually have the ability to fill the gaps in expertise and analysis in peacebuilding dialogue. They have the ability to unite governments and other stakeholders from a more balanced position and raise awareness around the complexity of

peacebuilding and prevention issues. However, such roles are often not recognized and not supported, because the impact of work of peacebuilders often cannot be measured in the short-term, and peacebuilders usually lack significant visibility at the decision-making level.

Inclusivity is key for effective regional peacebuilding networks

Sustainable peace is only achievable if every voice is heard and included on equal terms into the conversation. Relevant efforts have been made to effectively engage into the discussion about peace in Northeast Asia different groups that have been and still are sometimes overlooked, such as women and youth. An example of this is the Futuring Peace in Northeast Asia project², an initiative by the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA), that gathered youth of the Northeast Asia region to co-design and co-facilitate a participatory process to identify challenges and opportunities and develop concrete policy recommendations for policymakers, regional institutions, and governments³. Youth participants recognized the urgency of building shared regional experiences that would enable a peaceful future, and the need for institutionalized youth engagement within the region. Their creative ideas offer innovative approaches to finding entry points for dialogue in the context where traditional approaches prove to be not so effective.

Efforts of women peacebuilders for mutual regional learning around National Action Plans (NAP) on the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security is another interesting example of the beneficial effects of inclusivity. Collaboration between GPPAC and the UNDPPA has provided a space for UBP participants, such as Seoul-based Women Making Peace, to engage in exchange of relevant experiences and best practice to advance the WPS agenda in Northeast Asia. This includes the process of implementation of existing NAPs in each respective context, as well as encouraging advocacy towards development of such plans in countries as yet without. This has also inspired discussions toward the long-term vision of establishing a Regional Action Plan for Northeast Asia as a platform for dialogue and sharing a common vision of peace based on human security.

It is evident that inclusivity reinforces peacebuilding networks, promoting the exchange of experiences and lessons learned, advancing the progress towards the achievement of their shared goals, and generating more peacebuilding resources and capacity. Therefore, efforts to ensure inclusivity should be further made and supported.

Recommendations

Based on the lessons learned from Northeast Asia, the following recommendations have been identified for the strengthening of the regional peacebuilding mechanisms:

- **The UN should take a more active convening role** to bring together regional actors, the UN, national governments, and civil society, among others, to coordinate actions better and ensure a stronger impact of peacebuilding activities. Where regional

² Futuring Peace in Northeast Asia, UN DPPA, <https://futuringpeace.org/NEA/>

³ Policy brief: "The Future of Regional Narrative building in Northeast Asia - Policy recipes by youth peacebuilders", December 2022 https://dppa.un.org/sites/default/files/project_brief_future_of_regional_narrative_building_in_northeast_asia_-_2022.pdf

peacebuilding networks play an essential role in building the foundation for regional dialogue, the UN should provide technical and political accompaniment to ensure the commitment to action.

- **Improved funding mechanisms are needed to support the civil society organizations' network approach.** A network approach creates empowering and equitable spaces for exchanging expertise for more impactful and informed action, sharing resources and access points at various levels, and enabling and supporting communities committed to peace. Donors should reflect on how to improve funding mechanisms to support better civil society organizations engaged in regional peacebuilding networks, allowing them, through effective funding, to fill the gaps in the regional peacebuilding infrastructure. It is crucial to ensure that all regions are fairly represented in the international discussion on peacebuilding and are given international attention, as this also impacts funding availability.
- **The inclusion of women and youth is key in regional peacebuilding networks and should be supported.** Although women are strongly affected by conflicts, they are often excluded from negotiations and peace processes, especially in highly patriarchal contexts. The inclusion of local women within peacebuilding initiatives is essential to ensure that their unique perspectives can have a real impact at the decision-making level. Likewise, the meaningful participation of young people in dialogue on equal terms is essential to achieve and sustain peace. Young people in all their diversities should be considered as drivers for change, and their contributions should be held as relevant and valuable. Donors should prioritise supporting regional peacebuilding dialogues that ensure the meaningful participation of women and youth at all stages of the process. The UN and its Member States should use their influence and international platforms to ensure that the unique perspectives of local women and youth peacebuilders are heard and taken into account in the decision-making processes.