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Hwang, Y.J.; Shih, C.Y.

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Beyond the Asian NATO: historical legacies, discursive binaries, and the possibility of a relational security community in Northeast Asia

Yih-Jye Hwang¹ · Chih-yu Shih^{2,3}

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Abstract

This article critiques proposals for an “Asian NATO” by arguing that Northeast Asia lacks the historically legitimate common ground—reconciliation narratives, shared threat perceptions, and settled recognition politics—that NATO-style collective defence presupposes. It further shows how the revisionist/status quo binary operates as an ordering discourse that normalizes militarized alignment and narrows regional imaginaries. As an alternative, the article develops a Relational Security Community (RSC) framework that conceptualizes security as a historically grounded practice of relationship-building. RSC specifies three mechanisms—historical recognition, desecuritized connection, and multi-level relational governance—and illustrates them through three cases: the Shanghai–Taipei City Forum, China–ROK environmental cooperation, and transnational memory platforms. Across cases, the analysis focuses on relational durability: the survival, reactivation, and gradual thickening of interactional channels through episodes of re-securitization.

Keywords Relational security · Asian NATO · Security community · Revisionist vs. status quo · Decolonial IR

✉ Yih-Jye Hwang
jayhwang@live.co.uk
Chih-yu Shih
cyshih@ntu.edu.tw

¹ Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands

² Tongji University, Shanghai, China

³ National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan



Introduction

In recent years, the concept of a security community in Northeast Asia has resurfaced as a pressing topic in both policy and academic circles, particularly amid intensifying geopolitical tensions and growing strategic uncertainty in the region (e.g., Wang and Stevens 2021; Natalegawa 2024). China's expanding military footprint in the East and South China Seas, its increasingly assertive posture toward Taiwan, and its broader ambition to reshape regional power configurations have all been singled out by China watchers to fuel debates over how best to construct a stable and cooperative security architecture (e.g., Fravel 2019). Amid this climate of anxiety, the idea of an "Asian NATO" has gained renewed traction, especially in Japanese political discourse (He and Feng 2012; De Cuyper and Driessens 2021; Yuichi 2024; Jimbo 2025). For instance, Shigeru Ishiba (2024), the then-leading figure in the 2024 Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership race, advocated for such an alliance at the Hudson Institute, citing China's rise as a systemic threat that demands a collective military response.

The renewed appeal of NATO as a ready-made template is understandable. NATO remains one of the most institutionalised and symbolically powerful security alliances in modern history, often treated as the paradigmatic solution to regional insecurity through collective defence, institutional cohesion, and dependable expectations of mutual support (Cha 2010; McCalla 1996; Adler 2008; Schmitt 2019; Walt 1987; Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002). Yet this paper starts from a more cautious premise: the question is not only whether a NATO-like structure can be assembled in Northeast Asia, but whether NATO itself should be treated as a universally stable, exportable model of alliance order. Recent transatlantic frictions, most vividly the 2026 controversy triggered by U.S. pressure to acquire Greenland, have unsettled allies and raised open questions about alliance solidarity when the strongest member directs coercive power at another member's sovereign territory (Curtis and Fella, 2026). The binary between war and peace is no longer sufficient to capture the common security concerns among members. In other words, even in the region where NATO is most entrenched, its political foundations can be strained by shifting domestic agendas and contested legitimacy. That fragility matters all the more for Northeast Asia, where the social and historical prerequisites for alliance cohesion are far thinner and the binary between war and peace far more obscure (Acharya 2016).

Against this backdrop, calls to treat NATO as a ready-made template risk obscuring a central point: Northeast Asia's security dilemmas are sustained not only by material rivalry, but by unresolved historical injustices, contested memories, and competing claims to legitimacy—factors that shape who counts as a "normal" security actor and which forms of cooperation appear credible. These wounds inhibit trust among China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan and impede any shared strategic identity or coherent threat perception. Postwar Europe, by contrast, enabled NATO's consolidation through a convergence of reconciliation, dense institutionalisation, and a baseline consensus on the legitimacy of a cooperative order that privileged peace over renewed conflict (Checkel 2005; Hogan 1987). Northeast Asia remains marked by layered colonial legacies, wartime violence, uneven normalisation, and persistent disputes over apology, commemoration, and territorial sovereignty (Lind 2008; He



2009). Under these conditions, collective defence cannot be separated from the moral and historical politics that define “common security,” where recognition—more than shared rules or values—is intrinsic to trust-building.

At the same time, Northeast Asian security politics is shaped by discursive frames that narrow regional imaginaries in advance. Dominant security discourses, especially the binary classification of states into “revisionist” and “status quo” powers (e.g. Davidson 2006), obscure the complex realities of Northeast Asian international relations (Garcia 2023; Hopewell 2025). Widely employed in Western and Japanese strategic thinking, this dichotomy casts China as an inherently destabilising actor, while positioning the U.S., Japan, and their allies as natural defenders of a liberal rules-based order, which simultaneously immediately excludes the intensive interactions between their majority of the other world population from security concerns. Yet such labels echo the colonial obsession with spheres of influence, conceal the historical exclusions embedded in the colonial as well as postwar order, and foreclose possibilities for alternative regional frameworks rooted in diplomacy, mutual recognition, and inclusive dialogue. Rather than neutrally describing strategic behaviour, this binary functions as an epistemic technology that legitimizes militarized solutions while relegating relational, civic, and ethical practices to the margins of “serious” security thinking.

This paper, therefore, argues that the limits of NATO-style thinking in Northeast Asia cannot be addressed by simply tweaking institutional design or recalibrating deterrence. Empirically, the paper focuses on Northeast Asian states and governing institutions, using other Asian regional contexts only for contrast. The deeper task is to reconceptualise security as a historically grounded and ethically embedded practice of building relationships capable of sustaining coexistence in difference. To this end, this paper introduces the concept of a Relational Security Community (RSC) as an existential and strategic alternative to both the NATO template and the binaries of status quo versus revisionism. Drawing on decolonial critiques and ethical-political traditions in East Asia (Adamson 2020; Barkawi and Laffey 2006), the paper reconceptualises security not as the elimination of threats or defence of liberalism’s sphere of influence, but as a process of historical redress, ethical coexistence, and non-militarised interdependence. Rather than relying on treaty-based alliances or shared ideologies, this relational model emphasises pluralistic practices of coexistence (Tusicisny 2007; Powell 2019), such as grassroots exchanges, civil society cooperation, transnational memory work, and municipal-level partnerships, that already exist across the region but remain marginalised in mainstream security thinking. It foregrounds the ethical labour of “being-with-others” and recognises historical fragility, difference, and vulnerability as constitutive, not threatening, features of regional life.

To sharpen the theoretical identity of the RSC framework, the paper specifies mechanisms and principles that distinguish it from established “security community” approaches (e.g., Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002; Tusicisny 2007). Whereas conventional security-community accounts often emphasize elite convergence, shared collective identity, and institutionalized expectations of peaceful change (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002; Tusicisny 2007), RSC foregrounds (a) historical recognition and redress as conditions of legitimacy, (b) de-securitized connection as a practical infrastructure that enables sustained interaction outside threat-based logics, and



(c) multi-level relational governance through cities, civic organizations, and transnational networks as core (rather than peripheral) carriers of security-building. RSC is thus not simply “non-military cooperation,” and it should not be reduced to a comprehensive-security move—understood here as broadening security beyond military threats—that merely expands the menu of security issues (Chapman 2012; Ullman 1983). Rather, it offers a relational account of security-building: it explains how recognition and redress, de-securitized infrastructures of connection, and multi-level civic governance can generate legitimacy, restraint, and political resilience even absent treaty-based alliance integration.

The paper is structured around three interrelated questions that guide its critique and normative proposal. First, what specific historical, political, and institutional differences separate Northeast Asia from postwar Europe, and how do they undermine the viability of NATO-style security integration? Second, how does the binary classification of regional powers into “revisionist” and “status quo” actors distort strategic thinking and foreclose imaginative alternatives? And third, what would a decolonial and RSC in Northeast Asia look like in practice, and how might it emerge from existing ethical, cultural, and political practices already underway in the region? By addressing these questions, this paper aims to challenge the presumed universality of Western security models and contribute to a more historically sensitive, ethically grounded, and politically plural vision of regional cooperation. It ultimately argues that meaningful security in the relational scope labeled as Northeast Asia cannot be imposed through externally derived institutions or hegemonic discourses, but must instead emerge from the region’s own histories, struggles, and aspirations for coexistence.

Why an “Asian NATO” doesn’t travel

The 2026 Greenland controversy offers a concise reminder that alliance cohesion is not a settled institutional property but a continuously reproduced political relationship, vulnerable precisely when hierarchy and legitimacy become explicit. When the strongest member publicly pressures an ally over the status of an autonomous territory, paired with threats of economic retaliation, friction emerges not because NATO lacks formal rules, but because the moral-political boundaries that make “solidarity” meaningful are suddenly contested (Curtis and Fella, 2026). What this episode makes visible is that the peace–war dichotomy is an increasingly inadequate lens for capturing how alliances can be strained from within, through coercion, credibility crises, and contested recognition. This section takes that insight as its point of departure: rather than treating NATO as a transportable institutional fix, it examines why any attempt to “install” a NATO-like order in Northeast Asia would confront deeper and more persistent legitimacy problems from the outset.

This insight matters for the “Asian NATO” discussion because NATO’s original consolidation was embedded in a much broader reconciliation arc that managed (never eliminated) the disruptive potential of historical trauma (Hogan 1987; Checkel 2005; Kaplan 2019). The postwar European experience, from which NATO emerged, was characterised by a unique convergence of historical trauma, ideological alignment, and institutional innovation (Risse-Kappen 2010). The devastation wrought



by two world wars, including the Holocaust, the collapse of fascist regimes, and the violent reconfiguration of borders, produced a broad consensus among European elites on the necessity of reconciliation and regional cooperation. Nowhere was this more evident than in the Franco-German rapprochement, which became the normative and institutional foundation for both NATO and the European integration project (Checkel 2005). Drawing on shared experiences of suffering and mutual destruction, former adversaries pursued a vision of peace based not merely on military deterrence but also on economic interdependence, cultural exchange, and supranational governance. Organisations such as the European Economic Community (EEC) and, later, the European Union (EU) institutionalised these commitments and fostered a dense network of regional institutions that facilitated trust, legal harmonisation, and democratic consolidation. The broader lesson is that this settlement must be continually reproduced through restraint and mutual recognition; institutions cannot substitute for that political work. If NATO can be shaken even with decades of reconciliation narratives and dense institutional linkages, the assumption that a NATO-style model could be “installed” in a region without comparable reconciliation foundations becomes far harder to sustain.

In Northeast Asia, the absence is not merely institutional; it is a deficit of historically legitimate common ground (Gries et al. 2009; Midford 2008; Jager and Mitter 2007). Northeast Asia has never experienced a comparable reconciliation process capable of producing such common ground. How, practically, is it that a region lacks a relational consensus? The region remains marked by enduring historical antagonisms, unresolved territorial disputes, and competing nationalisms rooted in divergent memories of imperialism and war. Japan’s colonial domination over Korea and Taiwan, and its wartime atrocities committed in China and Southeast Asia, have left deep scars that continue to shape contemporary diplomatic relations (He 2009; Cumings 2021). Public controversies over the treatment of “comfort women,” history textbook revisions, official visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, and territorial disputes over Dokdo/Takeshima and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands have recurrently disrupted bilateral relations and undermined trust (Lind 2008; Kim 2013; Hwang and Frettingham 2019; Han et al. 2013). Unlike the postwar reconciliation process in Europe, which was reinforced through shared institutions and long-term dialogue, Northeast Asia has lacked a stable, inclusive framework for addressing historical grievances. Under these conditions, any attempt to build a collective-defence bloc is likely to be read not only as a response to a threat, but as a moral-political alignment that reactivates unresolved questions about apology, responsibility, and recognition, especially regarding Japan’s security role and the terms under which former colonisers and formerly colonised polities are asked to act “together” (Lind 2008; Midford 2008; Hughes 2009a, b; Suzuki 2007).

A decolonial reading sharpens this point by shifting attention from “missing institutions” to inherited hierarchies of legitimacy (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Adamson 2020; Richmond and Rumelili 2015). The legacies of colonialism have also produced an enduring asymmetry of power and legitimacy that renders the NATO model inapplicable. NATO, at its core, was a pact among former colonial metropolises. By contrast, an “Asian NATO” would necessarily involve former colonisers and their former colonies, generating an inherently unequal and contentious alliance structure.



For example, Japan's conservative wing pursues "normal statehood" through an Asian NATO, seeking to reclaim sovereign entitlement to wage war (Oros 2008; Hughes 2009a, b). This necessarily securitizes Beijing's quest for reunification with Taiwan—framed as China's final step in decolonization—especially given that the Taiwan issue originated in Japan's colonization of the island (Ching 2001). In this way, an Asian NATO reflects and entrenches a lingering colonial security dilemma. This is not a rhetorical complication; it shapes the everyday plausibility of solidarity. Alliances are sustained not only by capabilities but by a shared sense that collective commitments are legitimate, reciprocal, and non-humiliating (Cooley and Nexon 2020). Where historical justice remains contested, alliance commitments can easily be interpreted as instruments of hierarchy rather than mutual protection.

Finally, even at the level of strategic coherence, Northeast Asia lacks the focal-point consensus (Schelling 1980) that made early NATO solidarity politically intelligible. Threat perceptions do not converge: Japan often centres China and the "Taiwan contingency" (Schulze 2018), while South Korea remains primarily oriented toward North Korea and often treats China as both a constraint and a necessary partner rather than a single overriding threat (Pacheco, 2023; Maduz 2023); Taiwan's priorities are shaped by cross-strait coercion, and China frames the issue as sovereignty and reunification (West and Insisa 2024). This absence of a shared threat perception undermines the strategic coherence required for a NATO-like alliance (Gries et al. 2009; Kim et al. 2024). The consequence is straightforward: if NATO's cohesion can be strained even after decades of reconciliation and institutional density—as the Greenland episode makes visible—then an "Asian NATO" built atop unresolved colonial legacies and unsettled recognition politics would face deeper, more persistent crises of legitimacy from the outset.

Discursive constraints: "revisionist" vs. "status quo" in Northeast Asia

Beyond these institutional and historical constraints, security ordering in Northeast Asia is constrained not only by institutions and material power, but also by the interpretive frames through which regional politics is made intelligible. One of the most pervasive is the binary classification of states into "revisionist" and "status quo" powers (Mearsheimer 2001; Brooks and Wohlforth 2008), a conceptual lens rooted in realist strategic thought and widely employed in the policy and academic discourse of the United States and its allies. Within this framework, China is frequently cast as a revisionist actor seeking to undermine or overturn the liberal international order, while the United States and Japan are positioned as its principal defenders.

The effect of this kind of framing is not simply analytical simplification; it is a disciplinary narrowing of political possibility. Once "order" is imagined as something that must be defended against revisionist disruption, policies of sphere-of-influence management, alliance tightening, and militarised deterrence become the default horizon of legitimacy, while alternative vocabularies of coexistence are pre-emptively coded as naïve, secondary, or strategically unserious. More importantly, it reinforces antagonistic modes of thought that foreclose the possibility of alternative, inclusive approaches to regional security (Campbell 1998). In this sense, discursive constraints are no less significant than material ones in limiting the imagination of cooperative



security in Northeast Asia. It also flattens the strategic landscape into rival blocs or alliances and obscures the diverse interests, historical experiences, and normative aspirations of regional actors.

Another problem is conceptual. “Revisionism” is treated as an objective diagnosis of intent, rather than as a contested label attached to certain aspirations and behaviours. Yet the category of “revisionist” is deeply subjective, contingent, and ideologically loaded. The label functions more as a political designation than an objective assessment of foreign policy behaviour. What is deemed “revisionist” is often that which deviates from U.S. preferences or challenges American strategic primacy, rather than an actor’s actual commitment to international norms as such (Laffey & Welders, 1997; Barkawi and Laffey 2006). Meanwhile, the “status quo” being defended is itself historically produced and unevenly legitimate across the region. What this binary logic obscures is that both “revisionism” and “status quo” are relational, historically situated, and strategically constructed.

In other words, the very notion of “maintaining” order presupposes a particular configuration of power, values, and institutional arrangements. When those arrangements are rooted in colonial hierarchies, Cold War alignments, or postwar settlements that excluded regional voices (Acharya 2014b; Cooley and Nexon 2020), such as the Chinese Communist Party, which was not represented at San Francisco in 1951, then defending the “status quo” becomes indistinguishable from defending a legacy of exclusion. Put differently, the binary makes it difficult to ask a prior question: whose order is being defended, and at what historical and ethical cost? The binary also stabilises a convenient asymmetry: it renders the ordering practices of the “status quo” side as neutral guardianship, while treating challenges to that order as uniquely destabilising.

Moreover, the binary classification of regional actors as either “revisionist” or “status quo” powers naturalises the roles of the United States and Japan as defenders of the existing order, thereby obscuring their own revisionist tendencies. The United States has repeatedly reinterpreted international law to serve its strategic interests, circumvented multilateral institutions, and engaged in unilateral uses of military force (Ikenberry 2011; Erakat 2020). Its presence in Asia and elsewhere is not neutral but hegemonic, sustained by an extensive network of military bases, bilateral alliances, and deterrence doctrines that prioritise American strategic objectives over regional self-determination.

In the Japanese case, the revisionist/status quo binary produces a particularly striking paradox. Right-wing projects that would materially revise the postwar settlement—such as moves to amend the “peace constitution,” endorsements of the “Taiwan contingency is Japan’s contingency” formula that discursively folds cross-strait conflict into Japan’s self-defence remit,¹ or proposals to roll back long-standing nuclear restraints such as the non-nuclear principles—are frequently narrated as prudent measures to “maintain” the regional status quo (Oros 2008, 2017; Hughes

¹ As a recent illustration of how a Taiwan scenario is discursively folded into Japan’s self-defence remit, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi argued in parliamentary testimony that a Chinese use of force against Taiwan could constitute a “survival-threatening situation” for Japan, implying that Japan could respond militarily (Central News Agency, 2025).



2009a, b). The analytic problem is not whether any one of these policies is defensible on security grounds, but how the binary relocates them in advance onto the “status quo” side: revisionist change is reframed as defensive necessity, while alternative positions are cast as irresponsible softness (Hagström and Hanssen 2016; Gustafsson et al. 2019). In effect, this rhetorical inversion depoliticises Japan’s shifting security posture and obscures the fact that such moves can reorder regional hierarchies of legitimacy, activate memories of imperial violence, and reopen historical anxieties in neighbouring societies.

Domestically, these discursive constraints are reinforced by political incentives that reward hawkish clarity over historical nuance. The impact of this binary discourse extends beyond the realm of interstate rivalry and deeply shapes the ways in which domestic audiences interpret international events. In the United States, the construction of China as a revisionist threat serves to consolidate bipartisan consensus around strategic competition, justify ever-increasing defense budgets, and deflect criticism of the U.S.’s own inconsistent behavior in global governance (deLisle and Goldstein 2021; Maull et al. 2023). In Japan, similarly, the emphasis on China’s “aggression” plays into narratives of victimhood and regional responsibility, enabling the state to gradually shift public opinion away from postwar pacifism toward a more assertive national security posture (Suzuki 2007; Wirth 2009).

These domestic dynamics illustrate a broader point: the revisionist/status quo binary is not merely a flawed description; it is an ordering device that shapes what can be said, funded, legitimised, and institutionalised. The insistence that certain actors are defenders of order, while others are subversive threats, forecloses opportunities for normative dialogue and produces a securitised environment in which diplomacy is seen as weakness. The performative power of this discourse has real strategic consequences (Hansen 2006). By constantly framing China as a revisionist power, it becomes easier for Washington and Tokyo to justify military build-ups, alliance tightening, and deterrence posturing as necessary acts of defence. Simultaneously, the very existence of these moves is interpreted by Beijing as encirclement, confirming its belief in the hostile intentions of the U.S.-led order. The result is a mutually reinforcing cycle of suspicion and militarisation, in which both sides view the other as the source of instability (Song 2015). Meanwhile, South Korea, often caught between the two poles, finds itself under increasing pressure to “choose sides,” despite its ambivalent historical relationship with both the United States and Japan. Conceptually and politically, this is the discursive bottleneck that the subsequent section addresses: an RSC approach seeks to displace binary alignment as the primary grammar of security, and to reopen space for historically situated legitimacy, ethical recognition, and de-securitised connection as analytically central rather than normatively ornamental.

Relational security community

To overcome the longstanding institutional gridlock and structural constraints in Northeast Asia, it is imperative to fundamentally reconceptualize the meaning and practice of “security.” The concept of pluriversal security offers a critical pathway beyond the confines of mainstream modern IR thinking. Rather than treating security as the universalization of a single civilization, normative framework, or institutional



model, pluriversal security envisions it as a dynamic and negotiated space shaped by historical experience, ethical relationships, and political dialogue (e.g. Kurki 2022; Trowsell et al. 2022). This reframing begins from a simple but often neglected premise: security is never only about capability and deterrence, but also about the moral terms under which political actors recognize each other as legitimate co-inhabitants of a region. In Northeast Asia, where the afterlives of empire, occupation, and Cold War alignment remain embedded in everyday public memory, security projects that ignore those moral terms tend to reproduce the very hierarchies and suspicions they claim to manage (Jager and Mitter 2007; Wang 2008).

A pluriversal approach, therefore, rejects the liberal peace and realist order, both grounded in Western dominance, as universally applicable paradigms, and instead challenges civilizational hierarchies and the teleological logic of linear modernization (Trowsell et al. 2022; Kurki 2022). It shifts the analytic focus from whether Northeast Asia can approximate an idealized Euro-Atlantic trajectory to how security is actually practiced and contested through historically situated ethical worlds. It attends to empirical practices of ethical governance informed by coexistence in diversity, and by the construction of a security imaginary rooted in the recognition of historical vulnerability, reciprocal responsibility, and ethical-political engagement (Capan 2017; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Adamson 2020). Such a move does not deny the reality of power and coercion; rather, it insists that the meaning of power, and the legitimacy of coercion, are themselves historically and culturally mediated.

Security, in this view, is not about the exclusion and deterrence of the Other, but about continuous negotiation and coexistence, a practice grounded in local memory, communal ties, and cross-cultural understanding (Trowsell et al. 2022; Kurki 2022). As the preceding sections have shown how NATO-style projects are constrained by unresolved histories and by discursive binaries that harden enmity, the theoretical task here is to articulate a framework that treats relationship-building as constitutive of security rather than as a secondary “confidence-building” add-on. Such a reframing does not define security through the logic of militarization or sovereign boundaries but understands it as a relational process. Security emerges not from abstract institutions or imposed norms, but from the ethical labor of “being-with-others,” a practice of inhabiting the world with others based on mutual recognition, historical accountability, and affective solidarity.

Relational security communities are not always beautiful, fair, or long-lasting—even loved ones can harm one another, let alone those divided by belief. Yet practically, clashes coexist with joint rescues, fury with care, and sanctions with aid. War and peace do not form a binary; they are not an either-or condition (Hagström and Hanssen 2016; Hansen 2006). In the name of peace, exploitation and suppression often proceed with full justification. This epistemological realization—that mutual relations defy simple dichotomies—prompts us to consider one another beyond self-interest. A purely self-centered quest for security inevitably backfires in the long run. Thus, every war must end: adversaries come to terms, adapting practices of mutual belonging despite lingering dissatisfaction. Without the historical baggage of imperial and colonial expansion, IR theory might never have fallen into the conceptual trap of mutual threat (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Capan 2017; Adamson 2020). Relational security communities simply open the door to everyday practices of interconnection,



even across nationalities (Koro 2023). Existential threats are not natural between postcolonies, as they are between colonizer states.

It is within this horizon that the concept of an RSC can be developed. The starting point is to take seriously the idea that Northeast Asian security cannot be reduced to the presence or absence of a formal regional institution. The absence of an “Asian NATO” does not necessarily mean an absence of security practice; it may instead indicate that security is being pursued through different social and ethical repertoires that do not translate easily into alliance-centered vocabularies (Wang and Stevens 2021; Park 2011).

In Northeast Asia, although formal regional institutionalization remains elusive, several non-militarized and informal modes of cooperation have already emerged, offering practical illustrations of pluriversal security at the micro-level (Wirth and Jenne 2022; Wang and Stevens 2021). These practices matter not because they are perfect substitutes for state-based diplomacy, but because they reveal how cooperation can persist despite geopolitical tension, and how actors can sometimes bracket securitized identities to address shared vulnerabilities. Their political significance is often underestimated precisely because they unfold in registers that dominant strategic discourse treats as marginal, e.g., municipal partnerships, technical cooperation, civil-society solidarities, and transnational memory work (Adler 2008; Risse-Kappen 2010; Acharya 2009).

What unifies such practices is not simply that they are “non-military.” Their core feature is the refusal to anchor interaction in threat construction as the default mode of relating. Collectively, these practices form what may be called a “politics of desecuritized connection,” a mode of engagement that refrains from defining the Other as a threat and instead treats them as co-bearers of historical burdens and potential partners in coexistence. The phrase “desecuritized connection” is meant to capture a concrete political-ethical posture: it is not an idealistic denial of risk, but an effort to build relations that do not require the continual reproduction of an enemy figure in order to sustain collective identity. In this sense, relational security is not a call to abandon strategic prudence; it is an attempt to widen the repertoire of what counts as security-building by taking ethical connection seriously as an infrastructure of regional life.

It is within this framework that the idea of an RSC may be proposed as an alternative vision to NATO-style regional architectures. Such a community does not depend on military integration, treaty-bound alliances, or ideological convergence. Rather, it is constituted through long-term, historically grounded *relational* processes. The vision of an RSC does not dismiss the value of institutional cooperation. However, it insists that all institutional arrangements must be grounded in historical recognition and ethical responsiveness. Without addressing asymmetries of memory and the unresolved legacies of colonialism and wartime violence, institutional models risk reproducing the very exclusions and hierarchies they seek to overcome.

Analytically, the framework identifies three mechanisms through which relational security is produced. First, *historical recognition* refers to practices that acknowledge asymmetrical harm and build a minimally shared grammar of responsibility, seen in sustained memory dialogues, joint archival or educational projects, commemorative exchanges, and routinized apology/acknowledgement that stabilize memory



politics (He 2009; Lind 2008; Wang 2008). Second, *desecuritized connection* denotes cross-border engagement that brackets threat-based identity claims and organizes cooperation around shared vulnerability and practical interdependence, visible in crisis-resilient channels, expanding municipal/professional networks, and shared problem-definitions that shift from “enemy intent” to “common risk” (e.g., public health, environmental governance, disaster relief, urban management) (He 2009; Lind 2008; Wang 2008). Third, *multi-level relational governance* captures how cities, civic organizations, epistemic communities, and transnational networks sustain security-relevant cooperation when intergovernmental ties are strained—evidenced by dense cross-border platforms, diversified participation, civic initiatives translated into durable routines or policy templates, and coordinating nodes that outlast single events (Acharya 2014a; Adler 2008; Checkel 2005).

Taken together, these mechanisms specify a conceptual pathway from recognition to de-securitized interaction, to networked governance, through which relational security becomes durable over time. When these conditions accumulate, they generate relational durability: the ability of interaction to survive episodes of re-securitization, to maintain predictable channels of communication, to restore or reconfigure coexistence after breach, to mediate between parties of conflict without the pressure of taking sides, and to expand cooperation incrementally without requiring ideological convergence or formal alliance commitments. In this way, RSC offers both an analytic lens and a normative horizon for interpreting how security can be built through the resilience of relationships, rather than through the transplantation of alliance templates.

RSC is therefore best understood as a framework for identifying how durable security emerges from the depth, continuity, and resilience of political relationships rooted in historical responsibility rather than from the speed of institutionalization (Acharya 2014a; Adler 2008; Checkel 2005). The analytical wager is that, in a region where institutional deadlock is recurrent and where hegemonic discourses narrow the space of legitimate diplomacy, relational processes can still generate forms of political resilience: sustained channels of interaction, routinized cooperation on shared vulnerabilities, and ethical vocabularies that make coexistence thinkable even when strategic competition intensifies. This is also why affect and memory are not treated here as “soft” variables. They are part of the political material through which legitimacy is formed, contested, and sometimes repaired over time (Gries et al. 2009; Jager and Mitter 2007; Wang 2008).

East Asian intellectual resources should not be treated as essentialized cultural foundations; rather, they can be approached as repertoires of relational practice that illuminate how security might be pursued without defaulting to coercive interventionism. This perspective draws from East Asian relational traditions that emphasize contextual role-making over the enforcement of universal norms (Shih 2022; Qin 2018). Practices such as *renyi guanxi* (relationships based on benevolence and righteousness), *wa* (harmony), *nunchi* (social attunement), *renqing* (reciprocal sentiment), *engi* (interdependent arising), and *guanxi* are not expressions of fixed cultural identities but forms of improvised and historically contingent relational engagement (Hwang 1987; Kasulis 2002). Their analytical value lies less in any cultural label than in the political logic they instantiate: negotiated role-making, mutual attunement, and



Table 1 Catalogues the three initiatives by actor, issue area, and observable outcomes. The remainder of the section unpacks each case in turn, tracing how these outcomes are produced and sustained over time

Actor(s)	Issue area(s)	Observable outcomes
Shanghai & Taipei municipal governments (working-level bureaus)	Public health; climate adaptation; urban management	Regularised working-level contact (recurring meetings/workshops); designated counterparts; cooperation can be paused and reactivated despite cross-strait political tension
PRC & ROK environmental authorities; expert communities	Transboundary air pollution; environmental monitoring; data-sharing	Working-level protocols (monitoring/data exchange); recurring expert meetings; joint research agendas; sustained technical coordination under low strategic trust
Civil-society groups across ROK–Japan–Taiwan–Hong Kong (and partners)	Historical injustice; remembrance; responsibility/apology politics	Repeated commemorations/forums; durable cross-border civic networks; shared interpretive frames; persistence despite backlash/legal constraints and nationalist counter-mobilisation

the management of difference through restraint rather than categorical exclusion. In the Confucian framework, such practices operate through role-casting, gift-giving, and name-bestowing, mechanisms that foster mutual acceptance rather than assert coercive authority (Qin 2018; Shih 2022). They offer a vocabulary for understanding security as an accomplishment of relation—fragile, contingent, and repeatedly renegotiated—rather than as a condition imposed by institutional design.

Seen in this light, RSC does not romanticize harmony or presume an easy reconciliation. It begins from the recognition that Northeast Asia’s political landscape is irreducibly plural and historically fractured. The question, then, is how forms of coexistence can be cultivated that do not require uniform identity or ideological convergence. Rather than codifying relations through sovereign-centric rules or interventionist norms, security in this context emerges from ongoing interpersonal negotiations and self-restraint, aimed at minimizing estrangement and maintaining symbolic resemblance within a plural relational universe (Shih 2022). Transposed to the regional level, this suggests a different way of evaluating security outcomes: not only by alliance membership or deterrent capability, but also by whether relations become more durable, less dependent on enemy-making, and more capable of absorbing crises without collapsing into totalized securitization.

Empirics of a relational security community: three cases

This section grounds the RSC framework in Northeast Asian practice. Rather than positing a linear “transition” toward a fully formed community, it traces relational security through recurring initiatives, durable channels of interaction, and the incremental thickening of cross-border networks under strategic rivalry and contested historical memory. It first sketches the region’s existing landscape of cooperation, and then develops three illustrative cases selected for their fit with the mechanisms specified above—historical recognition, desecuritized connection, and multi-level relational governance. Together, the cases show how cooperation can be made workable through identity antagonisms and sovereignty disputes, and why such relational practices can remain politically consequential even when deeper conflicts persist Table 1.



Even under enduring sovereignty contestation and periodically reactivated identity antagonisms, working-level cooperation can persist in selected domains. The cases below capture this variation across registers: the Shanghai–Taipei City Forum illustrates how municipal problem-solving can routinize contact and partially bracket high politics; China–ROK environmental governance shows how technocratic necessity can sustain protocols and epistemic coordination under low strategic trust; and transnational remembrance networks demonstrate how civil-society memory work can widen the field of legitimacy through practices of recognition. These cases are not presented as “success stories” that dissolve antagonism; rather, they serve as empirical sites for observing how relational security is enacted, constrained, and nonetheless reproduced over time.

The Shanghai–Taipei City Forum illustrates a desecuritized connection in a particularly stark form because it operates in a political environment where sovereignty remains explicitly contested and where identity antagonisms are periodically reactivated by electoral cycles, cross-strait crises, and elite discourse (Ding and Huang; Wu and Chen 2020; Sullivan 2024). Its relevance for RSC lies precisely in its ability to sustain a working grammar of cooperation without requiring agreement on ultimate political status (Yen 2020; Wu 2026). In practice, the forum functions as a municipal platform that routinizes contact across policy domains where problem-solving logics can partially bracket high politics (Madoka 2022). When public health, climate adaptation, or urban management becomes the focal point, the “object” of cooperation is framed less as national recognition and more as shared vulnerability, professional competence, and administrative learning.

Over time, repeated interaction generates a thin but durable infrastructure: recurring meeting schedules, designated bureaucratic counterparts, sectoral workshops, and a repertoire of technical language that allows officials and experts to keep talking even when national-level narratives harden (Acuto 2013). The empirical signature of relational durability here is not the absence of crisis, but the survival of channels through crises: whether working-level contact persists, whether cooperation can be reactivated after interruptions, and whether the forum’s routines can be maintained without escalating symbolic disputes. In this sense, the forum does not “solve” cross-strait antagonism; it demonstrates how cooperation can be embedded in multi-level governance arrangements that protect certain domains of interaction from being fully captured by securitized identity claims, thereby producing a limited but consequential form of resilience.

The environmental cooperation case between China and South Korea offers a different window into desecuritized connection because it is anchored in technocratic necessity rather than municipal diplomacy (Gao and Teets 2021; Ministry of Environment, Republic of Korea, 2022). Transboundary air pollution, environmental monitoring, and related governance problems create an empirical condition in which attribution of harm is complex and unilateral solutions are limited (Lee and Paik 2020). This makes environmental cooperation an especially plausible site for the emergence of shared problem definitions that shift discourse away from “enemy intent” toward “common risk” (Shapiro and Yarime 2021; Lee and Paik 2020). The practical mechanics are often mundane—expert meetings, data-sharing protocols, joint research agendas, and working-level agreements—but these mundane forms



matter for RSC because they cultivate interactional continuity in a domain that directly implicates public welfare (Lee and Paik 2020).

Here, the most visible mechanism is the stabilization of epistemic and bureaucratic networks that can continue to function even when strategic trust is low (Adler 2008). The indicators are therefore located in the persistence and density of technical contact: whether monitoring practices become routinized; whether working groups continue to meet across periods of diplomatic tension; whether cooperative language becomes institutionalized in official communications; and whether new linkages form between ministries, local governments, and expert communities. Crucially, environmental cooperation also clarifies an important boundary condition of relational security: it is easier to sustain when the cooperation is structured around measurable harms and shared vulnerabilities, and harder when the issue is easily recoded as a sovereignty dispute or as evidence of strategic manipulation. Yet precisely because environmental governance can be politicized, sustained cooperation in this domain signals a modest but real capacity for restraint and continuity, an empirical footprint of relational durability that does not depend on ideological convergence.

The memory-platform case, exemplified by transnational networks such as the Asian Women's Peace Forum and the collaborations sustained by the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance (2025), foregrounds historical recognition as a mechanism of relational security. Unlike municipal diplomacy or technocratic cooperation, memory platforms operate in the normative register of responsibility, acknowledgment, and the politics of remembrance. Their contribution to RSC does not lie in producing intergovernmental "settlements," but in cultivating a shared grammar through which asymmetrical harm can be named, narrated, and carried across borders in ways that resist both erasure and instrumentalization (He 2009; Lind 2008; Dudden 2008).

The empirical texture here is found in repeated commemorative practices, cross-border forums, joint statements, and the formation of durable activist and civic networks that outlast governmental cycles. These practices are often contentious; they can provoke backlash, encounter legal constraints, and be targeted by nationalist counter-mobilization (Jager and Mitter 2007; Szczepanska 2014; Kim 2013; Dudden 2008). Precisely for that reason, their continued reproduction is analytically revealing: it shows how relational security can be enacted through civil society even when official reconciliation remains partial or politically fragile. In RSC terms, the memory platform does not "de-secureitize" the past by depoliticizing it; it does the opposite by insisting that coexistence requires a politics of recognition. The empirical contribution of this case is therefore to show how relational durability can be built not only through problem-solving cooperation but also through sustained ethical engagement with contested history.

These three cases, considered together, also clarify how the RSC framework differs from Adler and Barnett's classic formulation of a "security community." Whereas security-community scholarship is typically anchored in the consolidation of a shared collective identity, the institutionalization of dependable expectations of peaceful change, and the progressive normalization of non-violent dispute settlement through elite-level convergence (Deutsch et al. 1957; Adler and Barnett, 1998; Acharya 2014a), the RSC lens foregrounds a different empirical object: relational durability under conditions of unresolved antagonism. In Northeast Asia, where sovereignty



disputes and identity conflicts are not residual anomalies but recurring structuring conditions (He 2009; Lind 2008), the salient question is not whether a community identity is approaching completion, but whether interactional channels can be reproduced, reactivated, and thickened without presuming reconciliation or political closure. Across these sites, security is observed less as the absence of crisis than as the survival of channels through crises—a patterned capacity to absorb episodic re-securitization without collapsing into totalized enemy-making. In this sense, RSC shifts the analytic focus from community as an achieved end-state to community as a cumulative effect of relational practices that generate legitimacy, restraint, and endurance in a historically fractured region (Acharya 2014a; Adler 2008; Hansen 2006).

The cases further sharpen the distinction between RSC and earlier debates on “comprehensive security.” While comprehensive security approaches widen the security agenda beyond the military domain (toward environment, public health, economic interdependence, and other “non-traditional” issues), they often retain a largely state-centric, managerial optic in which security is treated as the coordinated governance of issue-areas (Dewitt 1994; Caballero-Anthony 2016). The RSC framework, by contrast, is not defined by the breadth of topics addressed but by the mode of relating through which cooperation is organized: the mechanisms of historical recognition, desecuritized connection, and multi-level relational governance specify how ethical legitimacy, interactional infrastructure, and cross-border networks can be built and maintained when intergovernmental ties are strained (Hooghe and Marks 2003; Buzan et al. 1998).

RSC therefore treats security-building as an ethically embedded and historically mediated practice—one that cannot be reduced to technocratic problem-solving or substituted by institutional design. By foregrounding recognition politics and desecuritized infrastructures of interaction, it provides a way to analyze how cooperative security can remain politically meaningful precisely because it must work through—rather than assume the resolution of—identity antagonisms and sovereignty disputes (Hansen 2006; He 2009).

Taken together, the landscape inventory and the three cases clarify what it means to “observe” an RSC in the making without mistaking it for a teleological project of institutional convergence. The empirical claim is limited but consequential: even in a region marked by unresolved colonial legacies, competing nationalisms, and high-stakes strategic rivalry, there exist practices that (a) widen the field of legitimacy through recognition work, (b) sustain interaction by bracketing threat-based identity claims in specific domains, and (c) embed cooperation in multi-level networks capable of absorbing episodic re-securitization. Collectively, these practices form what may be called a “politics of desecuritized connection”, a mode of engagement that refrains from defining the Other as a threat and instead treats them as co-bearers of historical burdens and potential partners in coexistence. The value of the RSC framework is thus not that it predicts imminent regional integration, but that it provides a structured way to map, interpret, and compare the uneven yet observable relational infrastructures through which Northeast Asian actors already pursue coexistence under conditions where alliance templates and reconciliation narratives cannot be assumed.



Conclusion

This paper argues that “Asian NATO” proposals misread both the historical conditions that made NATO feasible in postwar Europe and the constraints that continue to shape security ordering in Northeast Asia. The key obstacle is not a deficit of institutional design or deterrence, but the absence of a historically legitimate common ground—reconciliatory narratives, minimally shared threat perceptions, and a settled grammar of solidarity—that NATO-style alliance thinking presupposes. Moreover, even within NATO, cohesion is a politically reproduced relationship rather than an automatic institutional property; episodes of coercion and legitimacy contestation reveal how fragile “solidarity” becomes when hierarchy is made explicit. Treating NATO as a universally exportable template therefore obscures Northeast Asia’s distinct moral-political landscape: unresolved colonial legacies, competing memories of violence, and asymmetries of recognition that condition the plausibility of cooperation.

A second contribution is to show how dominant interpretive frames—especially the revisionist/status quo binary—operate as discursive constraints. By defining “order” as something defended against “revisionist disruption,” the binary normalizes militarized alignment as the default horizon of legitimacy while marginalizing vocabularies of coexistence. It also conceals the uneven legitimacy of the “status quo” in Northeast Asia, where order remains entangled with imperial afterlives, Cold War exclusions, and contested moral authority. In doing so, the binary not only simplifies analysis but stabilizes security imaginaries in which threat construction becomes the primary grammar of political possibility and diplomacy is repeatedly read as weakness rather than as the ethical-political work of living with difference.

In response, the paper proposes the RSC as an analytic lens and normative horizon for moving beyond NATO templates and binary alignment logics. RSC starts from the premise that security is built through historically grounded relations that generate legitimacy, restraint, and resilience over time. It shifts attention from community as an achieved end-state to community as a cumulative effect of relational practices under conditions of unresolved antagonism. Distinct from “non-military cooperation” and from comprehensive-security approaches that merely expand issue agendas within a state-centric managerial optic, RSC specifies three mechanisms through which relational durability can be produced and observed: historical recognition, desecuritized connection, and multi-level relational governance. These mechanisms highlight how security-relevant cooperation can be enacted even when sovereignty disputes and identity antagonisms remain structurally present.

The empirical analysis illustrated these claims through three cases that map uneven but existing infrastructures of relational security in Northeast Asia: municipal problem-solving platforms that routinize contact under sovereignty contestation; technocratic environmental cooperation that sustains protocols and epistemic coordination under low strategic trust; and transnational memory networks that cultivate a grammar of responsibility through civic practices of recognition. These cases do not dissolve antagonism; rather, they demonstrate that, even amid unresolved colonial legacies and intense strategic rivalry, practices can (i) widen legitimacy through recognition work, (ii) sustain interaction by bracketing threat-based identity claims



in specific domains, and (iii) embed cooperation in multi-level networks capable of absorbing episodic re-securitization. The central empirical indicator is therefore not the absence of crisis, but the survival and reactivation of channels through crises—whether interaction can be reproduced, reopened, and gradually thickened without presuming reconciliation or political closure.

Two implications follow. Analytically, Northeast Asian security should be studied not only through alliances, balance-of-power dynamics, or institutional deficits, but also through the relational infrastructures that make coexistence practicable: routines of contact, repertoires of language and problem-definition that redirect attention from enemy intent to shared vulnerability, and civic or municipal networks that sustain cooperation when national politics harden. Normatively, security-building cannot be separated from the moral terms of recognition. Where historical injustice remains contested, alliance commitments are easily read as instruments of hierarchy; where acknowledgement and responsibility can be sustained—even partially—space for legitimate cooperation widens and the political necessity of enemy-making diminishes.

At the same time, relational security is fragile and reversible: domains can be re-securitized, civic memory work can trigger backlash, and municipal platforms can be paused or symbolically weaponized. RSC should therefore be used to diagnose possibilities and constraints without presuming linear progress. Its purpose is not to predict imminent integration, but to map and compare the uneven relational infrastructures through which Northeast Asian actors already pursue coexistence, where alliance templates and reconciliation narratives cannot be assumed. Future research can extend this approach by broadening the comparative scope, developing finer indicators of relational durability (e.g., routinization, network density, crisis-reactivation patterns), and examining how recognition work interacts with technocratic cooperation and subnational governance across political contexts.

In closing, the “Asian NATO” debate misdiagnoses Northeast Asian insecurity as a problem of missing architecture rather than fractured legitimacy and narrowed political imagination. More durable security, if it emerges, is unlikely to come from importing external alliance templates or hardening binary alignments. It will depend on the slow and contested labor of relation: confronting historical injustice without zero-sum moralism, building desecuritized infrastructures of connection without denying coercive realities, and cultivating multi-level networks capable of sustaining coexistence amid enduring difference.

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.



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