

Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Northeast Asia
– The way forward under the GTI Framework

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Abstract

This paper is elaborations on the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI)'s current situation and future development as a vehicle mandated to promote regional economic cooperation between China, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Korea and Mongolia. GTI is the only active intergovernmental mechanism in Northeast Asia. Hence, its future holds special importance for the region as a whole, including Japan and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. To assess GTI's current state of play, its prospects, and challenges, we reviewed the wealth of official documents and studies of GTI as well as scholarly literature on the topic. The authors additionally draw from their long-standing involvement in the regionalization process in Northeast Asia. Based on the review, we highlight several success factors as well as challenges and propose four areas for improvement. Examples from GTIs work in four key sectors: transport, trade, energy, and business cooperation are utilized to highlight the importance but also the shortcomings of GTI. To justify the role of GTI in regional cooperation and integration, we emphasize capacity enhancement for project-oriented activities, improving operational processes, strengthening its institutional structure, and streamlining activities across sectors to achieve the set goals. GTI's strategic development framework is also proposed, consisting of the institutional development plan and operational plan. The implications of this research can inform the institutional update of GTI to enhance operational output with a view to creating tangible results for regional integration.

Keywords

regional integration, northeast asia, organisational development, economic cooperation, international trade

JEL Classification

O19 (International Linkages to Development, Role of International Organizations)

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1 Introduction: regional cooperation and integration in Northeast Asia

Regional integration is not a single dimension undertaking. Economies, regions, and communities differ according to their background, i.e., socio-economic structure, the scale of economies, different stages of development, and even with different development agendas dictated by specifics of economic factors and economic resources (UNESCAP 2017: V). Despite the geographic proximity, this holds especially true for Northeast Asia (NEA). The region is uniquely diverse, not only in terms of economics but also concerning political systems and culture (GTI/KIEP 2016). Nevertheless, “economic regions” within a particular geographical region, are connected through belonging in the same value chain – vertical cluster, belong to the same industry – sector clusters (UNESCAP 2017: v), or sourcing from the same resource level – horizontal cluster. As such, countries and regions try to establish and strengthen links through such economic clusters to achieve a more mutually beneficial economic exchange through seamless connectivity.

With this aim, the member countries have set up the GTI mechanisms with a mandate to coordinate, facilitate, and organize policy dialogue and exchange. Through dialogues, these intergovernmental arrangements foster economic exchange and develop further integration through projects and programs. Against this backdrop, GTI is the only active regional cooperation mechanism active in Northeast Asia.

The process essentially means a process through which “economies in a region become more integrated.” (ADB 2014: VIII) In the first stage, regional integration initiatives tend to focus on removing trade barriers, increasing the movement of people, labor, goods, and capital across borders. Harmonizing policies on more broad fields are the next step. However, especially in Asia, political declarations towards increased cooperation were often ahead of the political and economic realities (Rothacher 2004: 133). Regional initiatives are a tool for states to foster these endeavors. Economic integration aims for the improvement of terms and environment for economic exchange and cooperation by having conventional institutions and rules – development, upgrade, and harmonization of systems.

1-1 The Greater Tumen Initiative GTI – a platform for regional integration in Northeast Asia

There are a variety of mechanisms and institutions in place that take over the role of organizing and fostering regional economic cooperation and integration in Asia (UNESCAP 2017: 64-66). Among those are superregional frameworks with a unified internal market such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to institutional structures such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These bodies reflect their particular purpose but also the history and regional characteristics of its members. Here, we provide a brief overview of GTI, its geographical scope, history, membership, and institutional framework. Then we will discuss the unique structure

of GTI as a regional integration mechanism in its early institutional stages in order to highlight areas for further development.

Northeast Asia (NEA) as a sub-region of East Asia comprises of China, Japan, Mongolia, Republic of Korea, the Russian Far East (Li/Cribb 2014), and DPRK (Rozman 2004: 3f). It encompasses leading economies but also low and lower-middle-income countries. In this diverse region, the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI) remains the only established mechanism that deals with issues of regional economic cooperation and integration in a practical manner (Brod/Zolzaya 2019: 57f). Tumen refers to the crucial and eponymous border river between China, the Russian Federation, and DPRK. (Yacheistova 2017: 33, UN 1995) These three countries form the Tumen Region. The name Greater Tumen Region in GTI's context refers to the territory covering Northeast China, Eastern Mongolia, the east coast of the Republic of Korea, and the southernmost part of the Russian Far East.

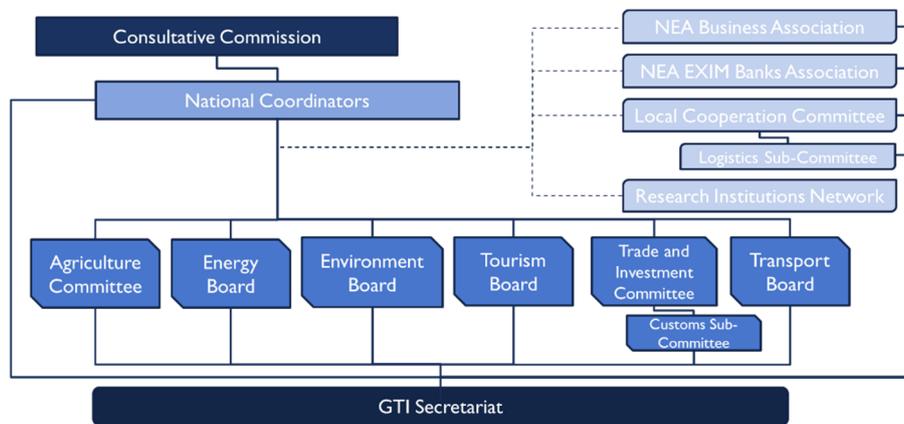
GTI's origins lay in the Tumen River Area Development Programme (TRADP) under UNDP in 1991/1992. (Tsuji 2004) The TRADP initially focused on the intersection of DPRK, the Russian Federation, and China (McDougal 2000: 121f) and aimed at developing the Tumen river area as an important economic hub comparable to Hong Kong or Singapore (Guo 2012: 310). The UNDP-backed program entered a new stage of development in 2001 as the member countries changed the name to GTI at the same time as its 10-year extension in 2005 (Lim 2017: 71). The cooperation mechanism expanded its scope to include the issue of economic cooperation and evolved into a member-driven mechanism since 2006 (Li 2017). As of 2019, the membership comprises of China, Mongolia, Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation. The initial founding member DPRK left GTI in 2009. However, the remaining members have stated that the re-integration of DPRK into the initiative is an option (GTI 2011). The political will to re-integrate the country is crucial for regional cooperation. The members frequently renew the pledge for re-integration (GTI 2018a). The membership of Japan, which has also been invited, (Ibd.) is also debated. For this reason, the envisaged GTI membership matches the composition of Northeast Asia as a sub-region.

The mechanism focuses on six focus areas: transport, tourism, trade and investment, energy, environment, and agriculture. In these fields, GTI's sectoral boards and committees organize or support regular policy dialogue, exchange, and development activities. The GTI Secretariat has supported all activities as the initiative's administrative body since its establishment in 2005 (Yacheistova 2017: 30). Additional strength derives from GTI's cross-cutting functional structures, i.e., affiliated bodies. These are the NEA EXIM Banks Association (EBA) and Research Institutions Network (RIN), and local governments in the Local Cooperation Committee (LCC).²

² Members of LCC are Heilongjiang, Liaoning and Jilin provinces, and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China, Dornod, Khentii, Sukhbaatar, and Selenge provinces of Mongolia, Gangwon Province, Busan Metropolitan City and Jeju Special Self-Governing Provincial Government of the Republic of Korea. Primorsky and Zabaikalisky territories of Russia currently maintain observer status. Moreover, Tottori Prefecture of Japan is a member of the committee for cooperation for local governments.

Given its current level of development, evolving and expanding institutional structure (Figure 1), GTI can play an instrumental role in further advancing the member countries regional integration agenda in NEA. The horizontal structure is an antonym to vertically integrated top-down structures. In comparison to other international multi-sectoral cooperation mechanisms, GTI does not hold summit events of national decision leaders or meetings of heads of states. (Li 2017: 13) While the GTI platform is legitimized on ministerial-level at the annual Consultative Commission Meeting, (UN 1996) the sectoral cooperation is dependent on problem-centric cooperation on a voluntary level. This flexibility is a consequence of, as well as a factor of the grassroots-based approach.

Figure 1. Organizational Structure of GTI



Source: GTI

GTI's boards and committees have an overarching mandate, which gives them enough flexibility in operational direction, focus area, and modalities to be employed. From this base, regional issues should be tackled with a longer-term vision from a policy perspective. This vision can guide the different avenues or set(s) of actions to solve the problem. Boards and committees comprise of ministries' representatives, i.e., policymakers in respective fields. They are in a position to give a good insight into a problem and come up with a strategy to address it. Whereas, actual practitioners, who are involved in policy implementation combined with research capacity and technical expertise, would come up with practical actions and approaches.

1.2 The unique structure of GTI in Northeast Asia

Through the history of the development of GTI's mechanism, member countries have recognized the significance of GTI's existence and the potential for re-

gional integration. Beginning from 2006, the members have embarked upon a transition process to gain more ownership (GTI 2005),³ transform it into a member-driven initiative (GTI 2012) supported by independent operations (GTI 2010), and further develop GTI as “an independent intergovernmental organization.” (GTI 2014a, GTI 2016a) GTI stands out as the only existing platform that brings together the countries in the NEA region including Japan, through current collaboration on the local government level, and the potential re-engagement of DPRK (GTI 2010, GTI 2011a, GTI 2012, GTI 2013a, GTI 2014a). Such recognition of GTI and its prospects, in turn, created expectations from GTI for more tangible results in the form of jointly implemented regional development projects.

We will now carve out three unique features of GTI that separate the mechanism from other regional integrations platforms. These are the non-binding nature of GTI cooperation, the grassroots approach to regional cooperation, and the horizontal structure of the mechanism. These three points will inform the following discussion of strengths, weaknesses and further development of GTI in Northeast Asia.

When looking at the current institutional structure of GTI, surprisingly, it does not operate on binding treaties or conventions between the members. Moreover, it has been noted as the only sub-regional mechanism that operated at the vice-minister level for twenty years. (Li 2017: 13) Instead, non-binding Memorandum of Understandings (MoU) serves as the legal basis for GTI boards and committees. The non-binding nature of these treaties allows for the flexible development of new boards or committees to accommodate the needs of the members in specific areas. It also allows GTI to function with a relatively small secretariat and avoiding dispersing resources on cumbersome negotiations and legal arguments about the wording of international treaties. Even though the non-binding nature – in theory, does not bear any obligations – GTI serves as a platform for the exchange of views, lessons, and best practices. Hence, it serves as a way to consolidate regional objectives and the political will of the member countries. Cooperation under GTI functions as a catalyst for broader cooperation projects, which at times can take on the form of legal treatise.⁴

Through this composition, GTI is very well suited to accommodate practical on-site problems and issues of cross-border cooperation in the region. Compared to larger cooperation mechanisms like ASEAN or ADBs Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), the complexity of decision-making is greatly reduced. Especially under the LCC framework, cooperation activities serve real problems of the local level. The proximity to the border regions leads to a very pragmatic cooperative approach from a bottom-up perspective. However, the coordination of activities is hampered, and projects lack a strategic outlook or programmatic approach.

³ The main GTI documents dating back to 2005 are available from the initiative’s website at <http://www.tumenprogramme.org/?list-1527.html>.

⁴ For example, the China-Mongolia-Russia Transit Agreement was facilitated with financial support from UNESCAP.

The composition of the boards, their names, and scope have been changing and transforming GTI throughout its history. New boards or affiliated bodies were founded or at times left for inactivity.⁵ Hence, GTI is an evolving institution in the making, both in terms of institutional set-up and sector-wise. However, this fluid form also bears issues, such as the inadequacies of serving specific development goals. A challenge for GTI remains to evolve in a way that will serve as a structure for programmatic activities that utilize the strength of grassroots approaches while keeping the more significant strategic outlook in mind.

For this reason, GTI requires strengthened institutional structures and developed and improved processes for effective planning, coordination, and facilitation. In order to support the implementation of project and program initiatives, GTI needs a strategic framework that would combine these two streams. Section III will address this issue in more detail.

2 Project development: the programmatic approach of GTI co-operation

Given the unique positioning of the GTI mechanism in NEA and the broad mandate of its secretariat, the main output has been organizing dialogues on policy issues and concrete objectives of regional cooperation and integration. GTI provides the platform for initial discussions and reciprocal information exchange. Policy dialogue and exchange conducted within the committees and boards of GTI has been informative and an important tool for policy alignment in the region. However, these exchanges fall short in producing practical initiatives for collective efforts to tackle the development challenges in the region.

With numerous issues that need to be addressed for fostering regional integration, mere awareness-raising of sector-wide specific problems failed to spur discrete solutions. To overcome the issues at hand, the GTI member countries need to engage in concentrated collaborative efforts. Such efforts need to include identification of solutions to specific needs and problems, set targets, and objectives to address them, and tackle these challenges in an organized manner.

2.1 Development theme-specific focus

Compared to the operation of large-scale and complex regional organizations, the strength of GTI lies in being a coordinative platform with an eye for concrete regional challenges. It brings stakeholders together to collectively think with a target and goal-oriented approach to achieve a specific development objective of regional integration in NEA.

NEA is a highly trade-dependent sub-region. (UNESCAP 2014) Previous GTI projects in the field of trade facilitation have shown the great need and prospect for cooperation in this area. Especially in the area of single window, risk management,

⁵ For a comprehensive overview see: Lim/Kim 2017: 72

knowledge sharing, e-commerce, and regional value chain development (Adhikari 2015). The reduction of lead time customs clearance, especially for agricultural products, holds great prospects for increasing intraregional trade. Such a task would require modifications and improvements in various fields. Streamlining customs clearance procedures demands close cooperation between customs agencies across borders and the transparent exchange of data and information. Minimizing transshipment time calls for the improvement of border facilities and the expansion of logistical networks. All endeavors need to increase human and technological capacity at the border and the harmonization of regulations and policy at the central level. The changes need to be in line with the actual market demand needs of customers, aligning upstream and downstream. From the example of trade facilitation, we can see the need to move ahead from singular projects to broader programs.

2.2 Moving from projects to programs

To achieve long-term development results, GTI cooperation needs a programmatic approach. That is the coordinated work on several projects in contrast to ad-hoc projects that serve only geographically limited purposes. Hence, members need to agree to a coordinated scheme to manage all the processes involved in sequence and systematic order. The GTI mechanism should adopt a programmatic approach to cooperation that aims at a greater level of economic integration in the region, attainable by linking smaller processes, groups of processes, or sub-projects under the framework of a program. (World Bank 2017: 4)

The task of program building would be taken over by the thematic committee or board. The committee will devise and design the program by linking specific projects in its framework. In the case of cross-sector programs or projects that involve several institutions within the GTI framework, one of the relevant committees should take a leading role in the overall planning and management of the program. Further, depending on the framework and operational aspects of such a cross-sector project, joint task forces, or working groups comprising of stakeholders from relevant sectors could be set up for improved efficiency.

2.3 Planning and Strategic Outlook

Other platforms for regional integration, such as CAREC and GMS, under the ADB, show the benefit of a sound steering structure for their thematic work (ADB 2016). Strategic directions and mid-term policies are laid out in GTI's mid-term strategy and respective policy documents by sectors. These constitute general directions and the mandate for collaboration between member states. Selected projects within a program framework will realize the area-specific focus within each sector. The main task remains to ensure a strategic outlook. Hence, by mirroring the ADB's approach, steering of regional integration in NEA under GTI would ensure that the overall strategy for regional cooperation is followed.

The six focus areas of the GTI mechanism provide detailed strategic directions in their programmatic documents. They will serve as a base for the development of

an operational plan elaborated by national experts in the respective boards and committees. The operational plan defines the impacts and outcomes of regional cooperation activities, identifies operational directions which cover specific areas in sectors of engagement, and different parameters, if necessary. An implementation plan supports the realization of an operational plan. In turn, the operation plans can be broken down in elements such as support structures and processes, the sequence of actions and activities, resources, division of labor and responsibilities, and monitoring and reporting.

In the annual cycle, each of the committees needs to come up with their practical action plans and roadmaps to feed into the implementation and operational plans. When combined, the six sectoral action plans would constitute the overall operational framework for GTI. In the following, we will elaborate on the specific approaches based on terms of references, strategies, and action plans across each sector of GTI.

2.4 GTI as Regional Cooperation Platform in NEA

In this subsection, we will argue the thematic focus of trade and regional infrastructure to display the developing programmatic approach and strategic outlook of GTI cooperation. The following four cases are only examples, however central to regional integration, of GTIs past and ongoing work and show the importance of sound steering, project planning, and implementation of cooperation under the GTI mechanism. Regional integration is a multi-level undertaking that needs to address the full range of focus areas of GTI cooperation on all levels: local, regional, and central. The scope includes both: the practical challenges of cross-border cooperation and more significant projects which have a region-wide impact and visibility in terms of regional integration in Northeast Asia. In the following section, we highlight four examples of GTI activities to illustrate the approach past and present.

a. Integrated transport network Programme

Looking at NEA, we see that Mongolia is a landlocked country, Korea is a politically divided peninsula, China depends on Russian ports for access to the Japan Sea (East Sea) and Japan is located on several islands. Given these extreme geographic specifics, the region, in general, is a multidimensional economic cluster. The development of transport corridors and the network evolves around intermodal transport, i.e., sea-land intermodal transport. In this context, seamless connectivity between sea and land modes of transport and logistics is an essential aspect of forming the framework for the regional transport network. However, several challenges have slowed down integration in the region. (Li 2017: 14)

From the outset of dialogue between GTI members, the development of transport corridors, and achieving the full use and realizing the potential of transport corridors in the GTR has been one of the main topics (GTI 2013b). The main issue in the creation of transport corridors is the realization of concrete construction projects and the upgrade and development of transborder infrastructure. However, even in cases where the interest of the member spurred several small-scale projects

– mostly studies – minimal progress was made in the transport sector. Hence, it is essential to move towards the strategic realization of project corridors in a sense, that all individual projects work towards this common goal and improve the corridor and infrastructure in general. The specific infrastructure projects can under this concept be evaluated not as a standalone basis as localized commercial projects but under the frame of the identified economic corridors.

The programmatic approach provides a framework to consider projects and investment proposals. As such, projects are connected as parts of the grander scheme, connecting all projects within a pipeline. The macroeconomic impact for the region will be guiding the evaluation and financing of measures. The programs would effectively serve to realize the transport corridors and attract further investment by reducing risks.

Infrastructure development, especially cross-border infrastructure, requires extensive engagement on different layers. The first layer would be the national policies of the member countries, the second one regional arrangements between the governments, the business operations form the third layer. GTI serves as the fourth layer coordinating and facilitating the exchange and cooperation by tying these ends together. At times, this can take the form of public-private partnerships. (van den Broek 2014) When it comes to intergovernmental cooperation, GTI serves as a platform on which regional agreements can first be discussed on a technical level and then later agreed and signed at the ministerial level. These agreements effectively showcase political support to removing inconsistencies and obstacles for project development and implementation and align and harmonize cross-border systems and procedures.⁶ The importance of intergovernmental agreements for regional integration cannot be undervalued. The GTI transport board convened a study on this topic in 2013 (Gautrin 2014).

Several different corridor projects have been conceptualized (GTI 2013c) in several documents covering the four GTI member countries as well as Japan: the Tumen Corridor, the Suifenhe Corridor, the Siberian Land Bridge Corridor, the Dalian Corridor, the Korean Peninsula West Corridor, and the Korean Peninsula East Corridor (Gautrin 2014: 7-12). However, after limited progress, the proposed plans need revising and updating. Earlier attempts to justify the launching of transport corridors by identifying the required minimum cargo volume came short of providing perspectives for development curbing investment interest. Despite this issue, the corridors provide a regionally integrated idea to be taken up by the national governments in their planning. For the past few years, GTI countries have progressed in analyzing perspectives of logistics development, forecasting cargo volumes and flows, and the development of more efficient logistics schemes. These new developments and findings from each member should be drawn upon by the GTI

⁶ Political Will as one of the key success factors in regional integrations has been highlighted inter alia in Casella, Paulo Borba (2003). “The Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR): Models and Qualitative Mutations for Consolidating an Integrated Economic Area”, (2003) 9 Annual Survey of International and Comparative Law

Transport Board to come up with a new integrated transport network strategy for GTI.

Vision: Integrated multimodal transport network for NEA

Overarching the development of transport corridors is the need to update this idea for the future development of an integrated transport and logistics network in NEA. Under the notion of spatial infrastructure, transport network constitutes part of integrated infrastructure, which besides transport and logistics, includes communication and energy interconnection. The vision for an integrated network guides the development of separate projects under the program. However, the development of an integrated transport network, i.e. set of logistic routes, is more challenging than the realization of separated corridors. However, regional integration, largely dependent on the seamless movement of goods and people, would be disabled without a far-sighted approach. As such, the notion of an integrated transport network (GTI 2013c: 1) should guide the work of the transport board when developing the program of transport connectivity of the region.

Apart from the more policy-oriented exercises under the GTI framework, one grassroots project was concerned with the development and subsequent utilization of a tool for trade and transport cooperation at a provincial level. Tottori Prefecture of Japan proposed the Pilot Transport Project at the LCC Logistics-Subcommittee in 2016 (GTI LCC 2017). The project is a real-life test on existing infrastructures and systems and protocols in place. By sending cargo along the corridors, it brings to surface any impediments and bottlenecks along the way. This model replicated in many different directions alternative to established routes could be used as a robust experimental tool to test further, identify and develop sea-land routes in NEA as part of the broader plan for an integrated transport network.

With this programmatic concept and vision in mind, GTI needs to develop a new integrated strategy for the development of the transport network and connectivity. The developed testing methods can guide the strategy development involving both transport corridors and sea-land routes in the GTR, preferably with more elaborated prognosis and scenarios to justify the economic viability of corridors and routes and a program or project pipeline proposals. Such a study would combine and build on the frameworks and findings of previous studies in the development of transport corridors (GTI 2013c) and study on sea-land routes (Lee et al 2014).

b. Cross-border trade facilitation in NEA

The GTR and NEA region includes the world's stronger trading economies. However, the costs of trade among each are higher than those of other sub-regions (De 2006). Moreover, a significant portion of the costs is associated with non-tariff barriers (UNESCAP 2017a: 14). There is a vast scope of action for trade facilitation in the region, which is almost overwhelming (CAIT 2018: 124, GTI 2017b). GTI,

with the support of its development partners, including UNESCAP and Germany⁷ (Brod et al 2020), among others, has been tackling issues of trade facilitation in different formats and on different levels. The focus of cooperation in trade has been on the harmonization and alignment of rules and processes and the development and improvement of seamless cross-border transaction systems.

Harmonization and alignment of systems supporting trade, from the perspective of regional cooperation efforts in the region, could mainly be divided into two layers: technical and regulatory. The technical level would include the harmonization of data and documentation for cross-border transactions and clearance of goods, adhering to international standards for the format of electronic documents. The regulatory level would be tackling issues arising from discrepancies and differences in trade and investment laws, rules and regulations, procedures, and resources.

In its Partnership with UNESCAP, GTI has been concentrating efforts on the promotion of cross-border paperless trade and development of single window systems for cross-border electronic transactions, cross-border electronic data, and transaction documents exchange. The parties recognizing that with a comprehensive system for cross-border paperless trade and single windows, significant gains in export and reducing costs and time could be achieved by more than 30 percent, respectively (UNESCAP 2017b: 18). There are ongoing capacity-building projects on cross-border paperless trade and single window implementation by UNESCAP. For future development, GTI needs to set up a dedicated expert group suggested to analyze and identify a framework of cross-border electronic data exchange in NEA.

With the accession to WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement, member countries of GTI committed to the implementation of provisions of the agreement. This global agenda provided some impetus for regional cooperation, as well. Hence, member countries have to implement some measures to align regulations, rules, and procedures with the requirements of the agreement in respective areas. Countries ought to revise the "scope, contents, institutional framework, and forms of their trade regulations" per the agreement. (CAIT 2018b: 1) The framework of this agreement provides GTI member countries with many opportunities and avenues of collective action in capacity building activities, including addressing non-tariff barriers (GTI 2018b: 70). The Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific by UNESCAP could also serve as a comprehensive guide on the improvement of systems and environment for trade facilitation (GTI 2017b: 2).

One particular project on the harmonization of systems and rules between GTI member countries was the GTI AEO Cooperation Scheme under the Customs Subcommittee of the GTI Trade Facilitation Board in 2018. Under this project, a regional AEO Working Group was set up to draft a standardized Mutual Recognition Agreement of Authorized Economic Operators (AEO). The project was initially

⁷ Germany support to regional integration in Northeast Asia is provided through the Support for Regional Economic Cooperation in Asia Project (2012-2021) funded by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. For more information see also www.connecting-asia.org

proposed by the Chinese side and jointly financed by Korean Customs with contributions from all member countries, the WCO and Germany (Roh 2018: 5). The working group comprised of technical experts of the respective Customs Agencies of all member countries.

Mirroring the diversity of NEA, there is still a significant variation between systems, regulations, and technical capacity within the region. Still, the joint drafting process served as a proxy for customs authorities and others to upgrade their respective systems to fully adhere to the framework and provisions for the operationalization of the AEO scheme. The outcome is the first draft text of a regional Multilateral Recognition Agreement (MRA). It is to be expected that the signing of the document will be accompanied and facilitated by the AEO Working Group as a standing body under the GTI mechanism. A Multilateral Recognition Agreement Implementation Guidelines will detail the actions, and the range of procedures on establishing the necessary framework (Roh/Park 2017). The process and the agreement pushed member countries who have not adopted the AEO system to remain firmly committed to implementing their national program in the immediate future. In this sense, the project spurred national commitment for trade facilitation for the collective benefit of the region as a whole. This AEO scheme exercise proved that countries had set clear-cut common objectives of compliance and security of the supply chain (Roh 2018: 29-32).

c. Regional Public-Private Dialogue on Trade and Investment

One of the cross-cutting challenges for GTI has been to include the private sector in regional cooperation. To create an enabling environment in the region it is crucial to identify the needs and the challenges faced by businesses. The main driver for increased cooperation and communication with the business community is the establishment of a regular platform such as a committee for business involvement. In the past, GTI operated the Business Advisory Council (BAC) and conducted the NEA Economic Cooperation Forum as a platform for dialogue between the private sector and the governments of member countries (Yacheistova 2017: 29). BAC was founded in 2007 to ensure such dialogue, however, it became inactive after 2010. The inactivity was also a reaction to the heightened tensions in the region during that time. Subsequently, all efforts to revitalize the process have failed. GTI needs to enhance and expand its mechanisms and platforms for business-to-government and business-to-business dialogues. In some instances, boards and committees have included the private sector in their work, acknowledging the fact that the cornerstone of successful trade promotion and facilitation is the involvement of the private sector. However, both sides seeing eye to eye remains a challenge in the region.

Developing a platform for public-private dialogue is especially challenging in a regional setting. Under the GTI mechanisms, many different platforms try to tackle this issue. There is one GTI branded trade fair, the annual GTI Trade and Investment Expo in Gangwon, Republic of Korea. At the same time, the China-

Northeast Asia Expo in Changchun provides a venue for GTI events. A third platform is the Trade and Investment Roundtable Meeting. Revitalization of GTI's platform for cooperation with the private sector is overdue. Having a regular body of the private sector from the region and active in the region can serve as a critical driver to identify specific issues to tackle in trade facilitation and investment promotion as well as formulating strategies and actions to address them.

GTI's Trade and Investment Roundtable Meeting initiated by the Ministry of Commerce of China and held in Changchun, China, in August 2017 indeed became an innovative approach and milestone event for GTI's Trade and Investment Committee. It reviewed the progress in the area of promotion of regional trade and investment, became a juncture to analyze and brainstorm on perspectives of trade cooperation and provide recommendations and directions for the future. The Trade and Investment Roundtable Meeting should be regularized, augmented with its primary output tool, the proceedings of the meeting (GTI 2018b). The report can become the main instrument to collectively monitor the progress of regional integration by highlighting the viewpoints of all members, development partners, the private sector, and academia. A true reflection of the state of play can become instrumental support to the work of the Trade and Investment Committee of GTI. The meeting provides a crucial platform for monitoring the development of trade and investment promotion among member countries. (Ibd.: 7) Assessing and analyzing the performance and outcome of different development activities, and providing policy recommendations, the document becomes clear practical guidance and proposal for follow-up action. A biannual frequency would ensure reasonable time to monitor and see results of actions proposed by the previous meeting to enable more insightful, informed, and organized assessment and recommendations.

Improving communication and cooperation between businesses and governments and especially between the private sector in the region, is crucial for regional integration. The necessity has led to the endorsement of actions to initiate discussion and preparations for the establishment of a new platform for business cooperation and exchange. (GTI 2018a) Recent attempts to revamp the dialogue and exchange with the private sector is the NEA Business Association (NEABA). With a flexible approach in terms of membership and composition, the business associations and bodies that represent the private sector and particular industry taking part in the mechanism are manifold. Participants involved in discussions would be working-level officials from national chambers of commerce or similar institutions. Meetings are open to a local-level chamber or similar organization as well as national chambers of non-member countries from the NEA region. The Business cooperation association could and should work in different directions. With inputs and contributions from NEABA, the GTI Trade and Investment Committee will promote and develop B-2-B and B-2-G exchange platforms such as regional expos and forums (GTI 2018b: 70) and improve the content and structure of current events, in turn, making them more productive and result-oriented.

d. Energy Interconnectivity

There are many challenges and obstacles in building energy interconnectivity, including the ones stemming from national security considerations (Wang 2017: 64f). However, based on geographical situations and complementarities, there is a potential for achieving energy integration on a regional level, as seen in the process of ASEAN integration (IEA 2019). Looking at NEA, we see that Russia and Mongolia, as well as DPRK, are net exporters of energy. China, the Republic of Korea, and Japan are net importers of different energy commodities (UNESCAP 2017a: 33).

Given the significant gaps in energy demand and un-realized energy supply potential among NEA countries, businesses and institutions have proposed several projects for power interconnection in the region, namely, “Northeast Asian Region Electrical System Ties,” “Asian Super Grid,” and “Gobitec and the Asian Super Grid for Renewable Energies in Northeast Asia.” (UNESAP 2017a: 36) During the past two decades, these initiatives and other potential projects in power interconnectivity have been advancing. Based on the proven cooperation between UNESCAP and GTI in the field of capacity building (GTI 2016b), both parties have upgraded their cooperation within the NEA Regional Power Interconnection and Cooperation Forum. While UNESCAP effectively serves as its secretariat, GTI joined the steering committee as a member.

Through this platform, GTI is making efforts to create synergies by utilizing the GTI Energy Board as a platform for the NEA regional power interconnection mechanism. While previous cooperation fostered networking and exchange between technical experts and government officials, the purpose of this cooperation shifted towards the creation of a joint mechanism for regular dialogue and exchange, as well as to provide institutional support to the realization of energy connectivity projects. Cross-border cooperation like this could serve as a starting point for intensive investment projects. For instance, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has labeled power grid infrastructure development as an “essential component of their connectivity strategy and promotion of regional cooperation.” (AIIB 2018: 14) Aligning with investment strategies and processes of prospective development, finance institutions are instrumental in securing financial support.

Summarizing this section and our brief review of four areas of cooperation, we emphasize that in order to fully expand and develop these practices, the GTI mechanism needs to be upgraded in central parts. This process is an expansion of the previous path of GTI as an organization, platform, and mechanism. The dynamism of the region, which is reflected in GTI, needs the full support of all members in order to grow into sustainable regional integration projects: not only on the local level or the level of policy dialogues. For this matter, we develop four key areas that need strengthening in order to fulfill the needs laid out in this part. The four areas are 1) legal transformation and expansion, 2) investment facilitation function, 3) knowledge management, and 4) structural enhancement. All of them are crucial to staying on course with the ambitious goals under the broader theme of trade facili-

tation and regional infrastructure. These steps are necessary next steps in the evolution of GTI in order to fully embrace the benefits of the development themed focus, the programmatic approach and the strategic steering of regional cooperation under the GTI framework. We will elaborate on this proposal in the next section.

3 Institutional development: the way forward

In order to fulfill its development objectives, the GTI mechanism focused on using its institutional and operational framework for the development and implementation of projects, i.e., facilitation, coordination of, support to these operations. The demand for tangible output, in turn, demanded a more enhanced and streamlined operation. (Choi 2017: 50-52) For further institutional enhancement, better service, and so-called institutional preparedness, the concept of strengthening of project-oriented operations and functionality of the GTI Secretariat was developed and endorsed for development (GTI 2017a) This mechanism should be embedded in the functional framework of the GTI Secretariat.

GTI needs to improve capacities to develop into a project-based organization, i.e., project development and investment facilitation activities (Li 2017: 20). Capacities to directly manage projects, and relevant data, information, knowledge, and expertise need to be enhanced in the center of operations of the Secretariat and GTI as a whole.

For the overarching goal, sectoral boards and committees need to be more output oriented. To effectively tackle development challenges and realize projects, the modus operandi has to be altered. Henceforth, we propose a thematic approach in the work of committees and boards (GTI 2018a). A focus on a specific topic would enable the boards to develop infrastructure projects with tangible results rather than a mere exchange of information on policy development as in the current setting. As such, strengthening internal processes and overall operations and workflow of the GTI Secretariat and the work of sectoral boards and committees in the area of knowledge management has been recognized as an important dimension of institutional development. (ibd.)

Further, development and realization of any development initiatives require improved communication and professional exchange and effective collaboration between relevant authorities and agencies, research institutions, investors, and the private sector. Therefore, further development and improvement of the institutional framework and streamlining and focusing of the work of the GTI bodies are needed.

Based on the above, GTI would be not only a regional forum for policy dialogue and exchange but an efficient and robust mechanism for project and program development and investment and implementation facilitation. To make progress in the previously laid out fields, there are specific strategic steps necessary. We have structured the necessary steps in four areas. These are legal transformation (1), development of an investment facility (2), development of knowledge management (3), and structural enhancement (4).

3.1 GTIs legal transformation and expansion

Seeing through the process of institutional development, GTI's next phase of development would be transforming itself into an independent intergovernmental institution. A new legal structure would effectively counteract the uncertainties of the flexible GTI approach towards outside financial institutions (Choi 2017: 46). Considerable progress has been made to consolidate the multilateral negotiations regarding the new organization involving drafting legal documents and drawing up roadmaps. At this current phase, members need to finalize pending intra-governmental and intergovernmental discussions and negotiations, reach consensus and make necessary decisions (GTI 2018a) for further actions.

A legal transition would also lead to more visibility, which can bring with it, positive effects. (Kadochnikov / Gushchin 2017: 95) Especially with recent positive developments on the Korean peninsula, attention to GTI has been "regained" and steadily rising among the regional community. Besides progress during summit negotiations between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea, Japanese political leaders have sounded their positive perspectives regarding GTI, stating that utilizing GTI would be a "realistic approach for Japan to build alignment in the NEA region." (Nikai 2018) Through an intragovernmental consultation in the form of a special interim intergovernmental structure, GTI could facilitate and streamline this discussion. The structure should take on the form of a committee that would specifically engage in issues of legal transition of GTI and comprise of officials from foreign ministries, national coordinating ministries, as well as subject matter experts.

While political developments are taking their turn, GTI can serve as a building block for cooperation through the expansion of involvement and re-engagement within the region. (Shao 2017:260) Although GTI is a member-based institution, its activities could involve participation by Japan and DPRK. At current, the flexible character of GTI detailed in section I allows for very different levels of engagement, i.e., full-membership, observer status, involvement in GTI projects, participation in GTI dialogue, and attendance at GTI events. Engagement of both Japan and DPRK, could take on the form of participating in and contributing to studies, participation in capacity building and professional exchange activities, and joint project implementation, especially pilot projects.

3.2 Investment facilitation functionality

GTI's work has been criticized before for a lack of result-orientation (Choi 2017: 50-52). The initial concept for augmenting GTI Secretariat comes from the prevalent "hard project gap" and "institutional gap." (GTI 2017c) Meaning that 1) the lack of necessary infrastructure projects and 2) the institutional set-up and readiness of GTI to deal with this challenge. These two gaps are the reason why, despite ideas being submitted through boards and committees, these ideas are rarely developed into concrete proposals able to attract funding from financial institutions. A lack of capacity, function and organizational arrangement within GTI are the reason for these gaps. (Kim 2017: 223)

Functions of GTI's investment facilitation mechanism⁸

Instead of demanding from GTI the necessary functions for hard project development and management with all its complexity, efforts should be focused “to equip GTI with project-oriented facilitation and coordination functionality, i.e., augment, within GTI, regional investment facilitation capacity for NEA.” (GTI 2018d) GTI should not assume the role of a financier or implementing agency. Instead, it should serve as a facilitating body actively seeking to match priority GTI investment proposals with potential investors.

Adding the function of an investment facilitation mechanism within the Secretariat would help to modify the existing system of soft project activities under the GTI framework in order to facilitate “hard project” implementation. To fulfill this role, GTI would need to either build up or tap into available expertise on investment cycles of international financial institutions and multilateral development banks. Further, GTI ought to strengthen communications with the government agencies responsible for financial institutions. GTI can serve as a development designer in Northeast Asia and open up effective communication channels with financial institutions. (Kim 2017: 224f) This positioning would ensure a proper representation of regionally defined investment needs and ensure the submission of proposals according to the schedule of the timeline.

Success factors for an investment facilitation mechanism

Overall, the functionality for investment facilitation would ensure that discussions and proposals in GTI boards and committees are grounded on realistic proposal screening criteria and templates according to the standards of financial institutions. At the same time, the GTI Secretariat would become a “repository of knowledge, a ready source of reference both for project sponsors and investors” for the committees and boards as well as thematic task forces.

In raising capital to sovereign-backed infrastructure projects of GTI, capital contributions by member states are essential to boost attractiveness for development banks (Choi 2017: 47f). Providing the guarantee to the investor that the probability of administrative failure is low should be one of the requirements for evaluation criteria. Member banks of NEA EBA also could play a role in increasing the reliability of the infrastructure project by co-investing. Supporting bodies of the GTI mechanism should include the investment focus in their scope of work, such as the NEABA or affiliated agencies engaged in investment promotion within member countries' governments. Through the exchange with national focus points that also act as stakeholders in development banks, GTI could support the inclusion of hard projects in banks' project pipelines and gaining access to information on and understanding of banks' lending processes. (Procak 2017: 7)

⁸ Notions mentioned in this section and sections on other aspects of investment facilitation mechanism are taken from respective parts of the following report: Establishing a Greater Tumen Initiative Project Office: Rationale, Objectives, and Tasks. Report by Jeff Procak, 21 December 2017. Study conducted with support from Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

The primary step is to develop the necessary capacity within GTI. It is envisioned to build the capacity with an investment operations department of a financial institution, and actual development of prospective project proposal with the support of that department. (GTI 2018e) The cost of capacity building activities for due diligence and selective post-investment support will be shared with investing parties that benefit from investment facilitation, with the precise share determined on a case-by-case basis.”(GTI 2018d)

3.3 Knowledge management

Currently, the data that is generated and channeled through the GTI architecture lacks structure and organization. Which is a contrast to most other established organisations (Mannan et al 2013: 10) There are no procedures for data management, i.e., collection, organizing, storing, and dissemination in place. Hence, valuable data, information, and knowledge remain underutilized. Established regional organizations have structures and processes for retaining and utilizing knowledge. (GTI 2018d) GTI should tap into and harness the power of knowledge management.

However, knowledge management is no end in itself. If GTI wants to initiate and develop regional cooperation projects, it needs close collaboration between the sectors of GTI and its affiliated bodies. The knowledge gathering process would greatly benefit a flexible and grassroots-oriented mechanism like GTI, where different actors might not be fully aware of the knowledge that other institutions possess. (Bouthillier / Shearer 2002: 13)

Knowledge management processes within GTI aims at supporting the investment facilitation unit through serving as a repository of knowledge. This repository will include referencing sources, the library of templates and developed documents. In order to make the final product of a knowledge management service relevant and usable requires that the output meets the needs of the knowledge user. The scope and content of information and the features of value-added output are to be determined and designed accordingly.

GTI’s knowledge management practice for investment promotion

Rules and procedures for collecting, organizing, refining, and enriching, representing and sharing relevant, usable, and up-to-date knowledge, i.e., data, information, and expertise would be mandatory for all levels of GTI. (ibid) The provision of reliable, updated, and comprehensive data and information within the focus areas, and other fields on rules and regulations, processes and procedures, tariffs and fees, would be one of the most valuable elements of GTI’s “knowledge service.” (GTI 2018d: 71)

The data would be available through a digital platform to “inform, connect, motivate, guide, and support an array of partners so that their separate repositories of expertise and ability are mobilized and synchronized.” (Procak 2017: 6) Hence, Knowledge Management serves project development and investment facilitation through improved information and knowledge sharing processes. At the same time, providing systematically maintained data, information, knowledge, and expertise

presented under GTI is an asset for other users in the region, including investment promotion agencies, businesses, and academia.

Knowledge Management Framework

Building the knowledge management framework should be closely linked with the GTI institutional framework, and, therefore, again, synchronized and aligned with project development and investment facilitation processes. The framework itself comprises of two main layers: knowledge management activities and knowledge activities. Main activities of knowledge management evolve in three main domains: 1) data and information management, 2) project development/program development and investment facilitation, this would also include partnership and collaboration activities, and 3) learning and innovation, a process for service and product improvement. Knowledge activities or knowledge approaches include identification of data, information and knowledge products, and the use of supporting tools and systems. As a platform, a website will be a core element in the revival of the repository function and will contribute to transparency and profile-raising (Procak 2017: 9).

3.4 Structural Enhancement: Thematic task forces

The main format of activity of all sector boards or a committee of GTI is their annual meeting. At the meetings, member institutions, i.e., sector ministries, share policy directions and developments and exchange views on potential avenues of cooperation. Through these venues, GTI serves as a “catalyst to expand multilateral policy dialogues among the member countries and to raise attention to issues of regional and cross-border cooperation at the national level.” (Brod et al 2020) The role of providing a room for regional policy discussion and exchange between the member countries is crucial. However, the on and off nature of the event often fails to provide the proper mechanism for proactive efforts in the development and realization of initiatives and sustaining any momentum.

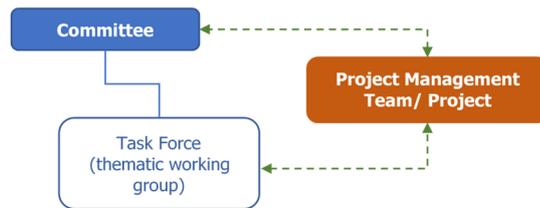
For GTI to deal with the long-term and wide-scope programs detailed in Part II, we propose setting up a designated body or a task force under the GTI respective board or committee. These groups would be mandated to concentrate efforts on a specific topic and maintain the momentum through solutions and measures within a project framework. Each focus sector may establish one or more of such task forces depending on the number of specific areas that they engage in and the resources and capacity available. Some of the institutional structures have already envisaged similar schemes to support the work of the committee/board with technical expertise. (GTI 2016c)

The task force would be in charge of overseeing the development and implementation of the multiphase programs. The process would entail, 1) study, strategy, and planning for the program goal, 2) initiation and development of single projects in combination with cross-cutting measures, 3) monitoring of and support to project implementation, and 4) oversight of operation and performance of outputs and addressing issues for further improvement.

In turn, the primary function of a committee or board would be the identification of issues to engage in and approaches and ways of tackling them. They would have the mandate to initiate task teams. Once project initiatives are in place, the role of committees would be to provide policy support and supervision of project development, and conduct overall oversight of project implementation by the respective task forces. Committees would continue to hold annual meetings. Task forces would be much more intensive and engaged, guided by specific action and project plans.

Task forces and expert groups would comprise of relevant experts selected, financed, and mandated by the GTI members to be involved in the project/program development (Figure 3). Active involvement of EBA member banks, LCC member administrations, and RIN member institutions is the key in this setting. Hence, it should become one of the central aspects of their engagement under the GTI framework.

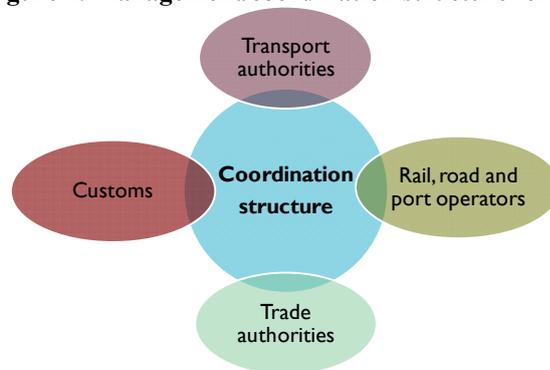
Figure 3. GTI Committee/board’s “enhanced” structure



Source: Authors

For concrete programs, such as the integrated transport network program detailed in section 2, the role of the task force would need to be expanded and transformed into a multinational body that “overlooks functionality of corridors ensuring project implementation and corridor operationality, and controls performance of corridors.” (GTI 2017d: 8) Such a body could tackle arising issues, thus practically becoming a management structure for transport corridors (GTI 2017e, UNESCAP 2017c). This body would comprise of representatives from and carefully work with transport, trade and customs authorities and rail, road and port operators (Figure 4), and aim to draw up intergovernmental arrangements and use them as its primary instrument to facilitate its operations.

Figure 4. Management/coordination structure for transport corridors.



Source: Authors

4 Conclusion

The Greater Tumen Initiative mandated to promote regional cooperation and integration is now facing a phase where it has to revamp itself by developing its unique features while at the same time, overcome its critical challenges. We have introduced GTI as the only active regional integration initiative in NEA and highlighted its special format in comparison with other established regional organizations in Asia. By diving into programmatic cooperation as a framework, we utilized four core examples of ongoing cooperation – transport, trade facilitation, public-private dialogues, and energy – to show the strengths and weaknesses of the GTI mechanism.

Based on our assessment, we propose upgrading operations and institutional processes to deliver practical outputs for regional integration in NEA. An effective upgrading and enhancement of the GTI mechanism encompass the areas of legal transformation, the establishment of investment facilitation functionality, enhanced knowledge management capacities and a structural enhancement through task forces. Improvement in these three areas would ensure that GTI can serve as an effective tool to overcome the evolving needs and tap into the vast potential of the region.

Project development-oriented function and facilitation of project financing of GTI has been recognized as an essential aspect of its future role. All of the detailed directions in the development of GTI in terms of the institution and its operations across sectors are a process for institutional preparedness for future transformation into an independent intergovernmental organization.

As such, GTI, as an institution in-the-making, based on its mandate, legacy, and future perspectives, needs to play the role of robust intergovernmental platform for regional cooperation and integration in Northeast Asia. By enhancing its existing mechanisms for policy exchange, capacity building, and research and developing

the capacities to facilitate infrastructure projects in the region, GTI will expand its position as a cornerstone for regional integration of Mongolia, China, Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation as well as DPRK and Japan.

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