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NEASPEC: Renewed Commitments

Note by the Secretariat

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Annex 1. NEASPEC Framework (adopted in 1996)

Annex 2. NEASPEC Vision Statement for Environmental Cooperation in North-East Asia
(adopted in 2000)

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The independent evaluation of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC) conducted in 2020 recommended reviewing the NEASPEC Framework in a way to enable the full realization of its founding vision to be a comprehensive environmental cooperation mechanism and updating NEASPEC's long-term vision, mission, and goals to align NEASPEC with the ambition and intention of the member States. The evaluation also recommended making values and principles expressed and supported by member States more explicit to better guide NEASPEC's decision-making, action, communications, advocacy, etc. Over 20 years after the endorsement of NEASPEC Framework and Vision Statement, member States have raised their understanding and commitment to subregional environmental cooperation. Thus, it is time to re-envision the main architecture of NEASPEC.

2. This paper provides a concise overview of the institutional arrangements of NEASPEC evolved since its establishment in 1993, with a focus on the long-standing outlook of developing NEASPEC into a comprehensive programme for environmental cooperation in North-East Asia. It also provides conceptual explanations for member States' deliberation on forward-looking and well-functioning institutional arrangements under NEASPEC and on the possibility for renewed commitments and vision.

II. EVOLVEMENT OF NEASPEC INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

3. NEASPEC, emerged as the subregional follow-up to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), was the first intergovernmental mechanism created by countries in East and North-East Asia to promote regional cooperation to address common environmental challenges. Since its inception in 1993, NEASPEC member States have taken a step-by-step approach in defining the programme and building up its institutional structures. Below is an overview of key milestones of NEASPEC institutional developments.

4. **NEASPEC Framework (1996):** Noting the need for an overall strategy and support arrangement for the formulation and implementation of NEASPEC activities, the 3rd Senior Officials Meeting (SOM-3) in 1996 adopted the "*Framework for the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (the Framework)*", which was endorsed by the 53rd Commission Session of ESCAP (ESCAP/RES/53/3) and transmitted to the 19th Special Session of UN General Assembly (Rio+5) in 1997. This was the first agreement adopted by all six countries in North-East Asia on subregional and multilateral cooperation.

5. The Framework stipulates the general provisions, geographic coverage, objectives, governing body, the participation, coordination and management, collaborating agencies, financial mechanism, and criteria for project selection of NEASPEC (see Annex 1). SOM-5 in 1999 considered the Framework as an *interim agreement* that could be developed further as and when necessary.

6. **Vision Statement (2000):** SOM-6 in 2000 adopted the “*Vision Statement for Environmental Cooperation in North-East Asia (Vision Statement)*” and committed to developing the present Framework into a *comprehensive programme for environmental cooperation*. SOM-6 also recommended that both the Framework and the Vision Statement provide policy guidance to NEASPEC in the 21st Century and be effectively implemented.

7. While the actual process of strengthening the institutional arrangements of NEASPEC took longer than initially had planned, NEASPEC has evolved step-by-step into a comprehensive programme for subregional environmental cooperation with a core fund and a permanent secretariat established, respectively, at SOM-6 in 2000 and SOM-15 in 2010; and expanded its programmatic focus starting with air pollution to now five areas covering air pollution, biodiversity and nature conservation, marine protected areas, low carbon city development, and desertification and land degradation.

8. **Strategic Plan:** Further to the progress on the financial and secretariat arrangements, member States recognized NEASPEC as the “only comprehensive environmental cooperation mechanism in the subregion” in the *NEASPEC Strategic Plan 2016-2020*, adopted at SOM-20 in 2016. The Strategic Plan set the objectives and activities in each of the five programmatic areas, specified measures to strengthen NEASPEC institutional support, and put into place a framework on monitoring and evaluation. SOM-24 in 2020 adopted the *Strategic Plan 2021-2025*, that has consistently recognized NEASPEC as a “comprehensive intergovernmental cooperation framework with a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral approach to address subregional environmental challenges”.

9. In addition to the expansion and increasingly structuralized planning process of the programmatic areas, NEASPEC has institutionalized the following platforms and diversified the modalities of its activities in close partnership with multistakeholders to advance the depth of regional environmental cooperation:

- North-East Asian Marine Protected Areas Network (NEAMPAN) at SOM-18 in 2013 to strengthen subregional cooperation on the marine environment.
- North-East Asia Low Carbon City Platform (NEA-LCCP) at SOM-19 in 2014 to enhance collaboration and support municipal authorities for the low carbon transition.
- North-East Asia Multi-Stakeholder Plan on Combating Desertification and Land Degradation (NEAMSP) at SOM-20 in 2016 to scale up the existing efforts and create linkages among stakeholders towards achieving land degradation neutrality in the subregion. SOM-24 in 2020 decided to reorient this programmatic area to the climate and land nexus.
- North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership (NEACAP) at SOM-22 in 2018 to ensure the protection of the environment and human health from air pollution in the subregion.

III. NEED FOR RENEWED COMMITMENTS

10. While the goal of the Vision Statement as to develop NEASPEC into a comprehensive programme for subregional environmental cooperation has been well attained and recognized by member States, it is time to re-envision the outlook of NEASPEC.

11. The comprehensiveness of NEASPEC can be defined in the context of (a) **membership** covering all six subregional countries; (b) **programmatic areas** covering air pollution, biodiversity, climate change, land degradation and marine ecosystems; (c) **participating stakeholders** including governments, local governments, research institutions and civil society organizations; (d) **modalities** of delivering the work from policy dialogues to field projects; and (e) **interlinkages** of the work between local, national, (sub)regional and global agendas.

12. However, each dimension of the comprehensiveness still needs to improve its function as follows to strengthen NEASPEC:

- **Membership:** While NEASPEC consists of all six subregional countries, there are significant discrepancies among countries in terms of their interest and participation in NEASPEC activities. Member states could enhance the level of their roles and contributions by being more proactive in leading programmatic areas where each member State has a major interest and/or capability.
- **Programmatic areas:** NEASPEC has gradually expanded the programmatic areas, but still needs to consolidate its work in each area to make tangible contributions to addressing national and subregional challenges.
- **Participating stakeholders:** In addition to NEASPEC's focal point ministry and other line ministries, the mechanism engages diverse stakeholders as primary partners for developing and delivering its work. However, opportunities and potentials of their participation could be significantly enhanced with the support from member Governments.
- **Modalities:** NEASPEC has carried out various technical and field projects at local and national levels and in transboundary areas. However, it still plays a limited role in facilitating policy dialogue and policy coordination while most programmatic areas have the room for policy dialogues among relevant ministries in member States.
- **Interlinkages:** The establishment of NEASPEC was a joint response of member States to the call of the UNCED. However, NEASPEC had not effectively linked its work with global goals until the adoption of the Strategic Plan 2016-2020. Now, NEASPEC has positioned itself as a subregional mechanism that links between subregional action and global goals, in particular, Sustainable Development Goals. Looking forward, member States could make NEASPEC better connect with their national goals and agendas including the new commitments to climate action, notably achieving carbon neutrality by mid-century.

Figure 1 NEASPEC: making it comprehensive



13. Over its nearly 30 years history starting as the subregional follow-up to the global process on environment and sustainable development, NEASPEC has become one and only comprehensive environmental cooperation mechanism that is tailored to the specific subregional characteristics and needs of North-East Asian countries for concerted efforts to improve environmental sustainability. The cautious step-by-step approach embedded in the founding structure of NEASPEC has evolved into an incremental and pragmatic approach, driven by the mutual interest and policy will of member States, leading to a continuum of building trust and cooperation despite challenging times.

14. Notwithstanding the institutional progress on the establishment of a permanent secretariat, a core fund, and a well-functioning architecture to advance subregional cooperation on priority issues, NEASPEC at present remains a modest cooperation programme which lacks stable and predictable financial resources and human capacity to fully respond to member States' interest in expanding the scope of the programme and its role in policy intervention.

15. Meanwhile, the attention and urgency to address environmental issues have intensified in the past decades. The subregion is increasingly seen as a major source of global environmental challenges as well as solutions. As it is indispensable pursue ambitions and far-reaching transformative changes to address climate change and environmental challenges, member States could connect their national goals and commitments with subregional and multilateral

cooperation such as that under NEASPEC. Member States could reimagine the role of NEASPEC in the context of accelerating subregional efforts for protecting and restoring biodiversity and ecosystem services as a key lesson learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic, that redefines the relationship between human and nature.

16. Having considered the progress and gaps in realizing the founding vision of NEASPEC, it is proposed to adopt a document that stipulates NEASPEC's updated long-term vision, goal, operational modality, etc., as the commemoration of the 25th SOM in 2021 and its 30th anniversary in 2023. Thus, member States could take this opportunity to jointly envision the future and establish new practice of NEASPEC with their renewed commitment.

17. Should the National Focal Point Meeting decide to develop such a document, the secretariat will prepare the draft in accordance with the timeframe and process agreed by the meeting.

IV. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

18. The Meeting may wish to exchange views on the development of a document stipulating updated long-term vision, goal, operational modality, etc. of NEASPEC, and decide the process and timeframe for its preparation towards the SOM-25 in 2021.

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