Asian Precursors of the Arab Spring: A Global Shift to Unarmed Rebellion?

Stein Tønnesson, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
Isak Svensson, Uppsala University (isak.svensson@pcr.uu.se) & University of Otago (isak.svensson@otago.ac.nz)


Abstract
Scholars have suggested several different explanations for the global reduction in the number and intensity of armed conflicts. Most such theories focus on government behavior. However, most armed conflicts are internal and rebels must therefore also be a part of the equation. We argue that one of the causes for the global peace trend may be a shift in rebel behavior away from armed to unarmed tactics. This has led both to a reduction in the violence perpetrated by rebel movements and in government repression since regimes are often more reluctant to use massive violence against unarmed than armed rebels. The paper seeks to establish if there is a global trend away from armed rebellion by focusing on the history of unarmed rebellion in East Asia, while discussing what made rebels opt for unarmed tactics. East Asia is then briefly compared with the Middle East, where it is more uncertain if the originally unarmed Arab Spring will bring a similar shift to unarmed tactics or instead reconfirm a pattern of widespread internal political violence. The study seeks to contribute to the rapidly growing field of empirical research and theorizing on non-violent conflict behavior. With its comparative approach it also seeks to point out some important differences between East Asia and the Middle East.

Introduction
Wars are declining over time. An expanding debate focuses on this phenomenon and the reasons for why armed conflicts both between states and within states are becoming less common. We know from previous research that armed conflicts have declined in frequency, and that armed conflicts within states (civil wars) have declined since the mid-1990s (Mueller 2004; Gleditsch 2008; Goldstein 2011; Pinker 2011). The decline applies to all types of armed conflicts, and of interest in this research project is primarily the decline in the number and intensity of civil wars, where the downward trend has been primarily happened since the 1990s. “The number of civil wars is also shrinking, […] as old ones end faster than new ones begin” (Goldstein 2011:7). For political science in general, and peace and conflict research in particular, the debate on how to explain the declining trend in armed conflict is one of
the most important challenges today. Civil wars represent the largest category of armed conflicts, far outnumbering conflicts between states. If we count all the wars included in the Correlates of War (COW) dataset for the period 1816-2008, then 334 were intrastate, 163 “extra state” (mainly colonial), 61 non-state (no government among the participants), and only 95 inter-state (Sarkees and Wayman 2010: tables 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1). These figures moreover overrate the relative importance of inter-state wars since many civil wars happened within the 95 inter-state wars, without being counted as such. Just think about the civil wars during World War 2 in countries such as Ukraine, China, Burma, and Yugoslavia. The Korean and Vietnam Wars were also a mixture of international and civil wars.

The importance of inter-state warfare has been much overrated not just in the fields of international relations, security and strategic studies, but also in peace and conflict research. It is evidently important to study international wars, armed conflicts and militarized disputes because of the risk they entail for large scale conflagrations or a general breakdown of the international order, but when we study the phenomenon of war and armed conflict in general, seeking to establish or explain upward or downward trends, then the intra-state, extra-state and internationalized intra-state conflicts are more important historically than inter-state wars. The difference is even more stark in the contemporary period, when inter-state wars have become increasingly rare.

Why has the world witnessed a decline of armed conflict? Pinker (2011) outlines five “historical forces” that can help to account for the decline of violence over time (in various forms): the growth of the state (Leviathan), the increase of commerce, feminization processes of societies, higher levels of cosmopolitanism, and the escalation of reason. Pinker’s five factors are clearly applicable to the decline in the frequency and intensity of civil wars. Goldstein (2011) also sets out to explain the declining level of armed conflict (interstate, internationalized civil war, and civil war). He mentions the role of the United Nations, of its peacekeeping forces, and of humanitarian actors in creating the conditions for conflict prevention (leading to less armed conflict) and more robust peace-building practices (leading to less reoccurrence of armed conflict once ended). Mueller suggests that the increasing ability of governments to police “the violent few” (Mueller 2004:201) provides a major explanation for the decrease in warfare.

With the exception of Pinker’s factors 2-5, most of these explanations focus on the behavior of governments. However, intra-state armed conflicts also (by definition) include one or several rebel groups. Hence their tactics need to be taken into consideration. We argue that one of the causes for the global peace trend may be a shift in rebel behavior away from armed to unarmed tactics. This trend is, we suggest, driven by increased costs of waging armed rebellions and reduced chances for success. The cost of unarmed rebellion is generally lower, and the perceived chance of success has increased because a number of successful unarmed rebellions have inspired rebels to try the same elsewhere. Yet many unarmed rebellions have also been violently repressed. This has in some cases led the rebels to resort to arms, but not as often as in the past. While the Chinese Revolution and the Vietnam War inspired whole generations in the 1960s-70s to carry out guerrilla warfare guided by doctrines of “People's War,” with anti-communist rebels taking up the same practice
with US support for so-called “low intensity warfare,” the following generations of rebels have rather been inspired by revolts of the “People Power” or “color revolution” kind. In this study, we examine rebel choice between unarmed and armed tactics in East Asia during the post World War 2 period, with main emphasis on the period after the 1970s. We seek to establish the conditions and situations under which rebels have decided to initiate revolts (unarmed or armed) and discuss whether the conditions underlying such choices have changed in East Asia over time. Since the paper treats this broadly in a region with a rich history of both armed and unarmed rebellions, it cannot go into details with any particular uprising. Its aim is rather to fuel interest in such studies, so systematic comparative research can be undertaken in this domain.

Only scant attention has so far been paid to how the global decline in political violence is related to the occurrence of unarmed manifestations of social and political conflict. Louis Kriesberg (2007) singles out eight conditions that may help explain “the long peace,” one of which is the spread of ideas about conflict resolution (or transformation) with conflicts being “reframed” in terms of “using nonviolent means of struggle such as protests and boycotts” (Kriesberg 2007:102). Zunes suggests that “the decline in armed struggle […] is less a matter of a more tolerable status quo than it is the shifting of the struggle to other means, e.g. nonviolent action.” (Zunes 1994:406). There is a growing debate about conditions that decide the success rate of unarmed campaigns (Ackerman & Karatnycky 2005, Ackerman & DuVall 2000, Ackerman and Kruegler 1994, Chenoweth and Stephan 2008, 2011, Schock 2005, Shaykhutdinov 2010, Zunes 1994), and research undertaken with this in mind has done much to increase our statistical knowledge about unarmed campaigns, and has also contributed to defining key terms. Numerous case studies have been undertaken of specific unarmed campaigns (Stephan 2009, Clark 2009, Robert et al 2009, Wehr et al 1994). Isak Svensson and Mathilda Lindgren have examined the increasing prevalence of unarmed rebellion in and East Asian context. This paper builds on their work (Svensson & Lindgren 2011a; 2011b). The extent to which decline in armed conflict might follow from an increasing prevalence of nonviolent uprisings, or an increasing ratio of unarmed uprisings within the total number of uprisings has, however, not yet been systematically addressed. Few researchers have probed into processes of shift from armed to unarmed tactics and tried to pinpoint the conditions that decide rebels’ choice of tactics. To fill this lacuna we ask the following overall question: Under what conditions do rebels decide to use unarmed rather than armed tactics?

**What is an unarmed rebellion?**

This paper uses the terms “rebellion”, “uprising” and “campaign” interchangeably. The terms “unarmed” and “non-violent” also mean the same although we are well aware that many of our “unarmed” rebellions have included some use of arms, and often rather intense use of spontaneous or planned violence, notably in response to repression. Thus we do not require unarmed or non-violent rebellions to be non-violent in a Gandhian sense (Chenoweth & Stephan 2011, Zunes 1994).1 The main difference between armed and unarmed rebellions in our context is that the use of armed force forms a key part of the basic strategy in an armed rebellion. In unarmed or “non-violent” uprisings, arms are either not used at all but are resorted to in a spontaneous way or as an auxiliary method (often with devastating consequences for

---

1 On the difference between pragmatic and principled non-violence, see Bharadwaj (1998).
the unarmed campaigners).²

We use the NAVCO definition of an unarmed uprising/rebellion: “a series of observable, continuous, purposive mass tactics or events in pursuit of a political objective”, [that is] “primarily or entirely non-violent”, and have at least 1000 active participants (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).³

This means there is room for sporadic use of violence in an unarmed rebellion provided that the organizers do not consider or use armed violence as a part of their tactical repertoire. Although enraged demonstrators in Beijing killed individual soldiers in brutal fashion during the June 1989 military massacre, this was still an unarmed rebellion. Although demonstrators in Yangon and other places beheaded or hacked to pieces those they suspected of working for the Burmese military intelligence service in 1988, their brutally crushed rebellion was also unarmed and non-violent. If it is true that so-called black-shirts used firearms in support of unarmed red-shirt demonstrators in Bangkok April 2011, then this is problematic to the extent that it formed a conscious part of the tactics used by the campaigners. However, since it seems likely that it was done by autonomous groups outside of the red-shirt movement as such, the red-shirt campaign will also here be considered as unarmed and non-violent. We do not, however, include pure riots. If a riot is preceded by an unarmed campaign or happens in response to the suppression of unarmed protests, then the rebellion or uprising remains unarmed and non-violent. But if the movements starts in the form of a riot, then we shall not include it. We must confess some uncertainty as to whether or not to consider the violent riots in Lhasa March 2008 and in Urumqi in the following year as unarmed or non-violent.

When we discuss unarmed rebellions we must keep in mind that the amount of violence it leads to depends both on rebel and government behavior. The dynamic between the two must be considered. In that context we must also remember that it is only the rebel side who is unarmed. The government’s forces of law and order are always or almost always armed when facing a rebel movement. The question is whether or not – and how – they use their arms. Police and military forces will often try to just display their weapons, keep them ready, or use non-lethal weapons while avoiding to fire with sharp ammunition.

Another important point is that the difference between an armed and unarmed rebellion does not reside in the use of unarmed tactics, but in the non-use of armed tactics. Armed violence is not the predominant activity even for armed rebel movements. Most of their time is spent on organizational, logistical and media work (propaganda), and alliance building. Armed insurgents also often use non-violent tactics such as demonstrations with the aim to provoke a violent repression, which in turn makes it easier to recruiting more fighters and followers and win broader political support. Yet the organizational structure of an armed rebellion will also most often differ radically from that of an unarmed movement. Armed rebels often have a stricter form of hierarchy and have to maintain either protected base areas or secret

² The use of violence within unarmed insurgencies is discussed by Schock (2003) and Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) who suggests that a sporadic use of violence should be seen as a variable (degree of non-violent discipline) rather than a factor excluding a case from the category of non-violent campaigns.
³ For the last years of the studied time-period, we have utilised data from GNVAD.
clandestine networks. Unarmed rebels operate far more openly, and their movements are not normally highly centralized. (This is one reason why it is so difficult for their leaders to maintain a strict adherence to non-violent principles.)

It is impossible to study rebel behavior without considering their interaction with their adversaries. Rebels are more than mere opposition movements. They rebel against the existing order with the aim to change it and they use extra-legal means. When rebels resort to arms they always combine armed struggle with unarmed tactics. Armed rebels may use all of the same tactics as the unarmed rebels (although this may be difficult if you operate clandestinely or from the jungle), but unarmed rebels cannot use armed force. If the same rebel movement consists of separate branches, with one specializing in the use of arms while another uses only unarmed tactics and they both operate under a central command, then it is impossible to see the movement as unarmed or non-violent. Yet it may happen, as it did in Timor Leste in the 1980s, that an armed struggle is more or less defeated and then gives way to a predominantly unarmed struggle. The case of Timor Leste, at least from the 1991 Dili massacre onwards, should be included as a case of unarmed rebellion although a small-scale armed struggle also continued. The change in tactics from armed to unarmed struggle in Timor Leste is indeed particularly interesting for a study seeking to establish to what extent such shifts may contribute to explaining the decrease in armed conflict worldwide. We need to study the sequencing in the use of various tactics, and how they contribute to political defeats and victories.

Intrastate armed conflicts in East Asia have not declined much in frequency, but quite radically in intensity. Svensson (2011:173) actually found a similar frequency of armed conflicts between governments and rebel groups in East Asia when comparing the periods before and after 1979. However, there is a shift in terms of frequency of armed conflicts regarding governmental power. Governmental conflicts in East Asia have gradually ended without being replaced with other types of armed insurgency aspiring to create a new government or regime ideology. The governmental armed conflicts after 1979 are the Communist Party of Philippines (CPP) in the Philippines, the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) in Myanmar (with its last year of activity in 1994)⁴, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in Thailand (ended 1982), LRA in Laos, which ended 1973 and with a shorter outbreak of small-scale hostilities in 1989-90 (and which, in fact, a strong ethnic dimension-territorial dimension), FUNCINPEC, KPNLF and Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, which ended with a peace agreement in 1991 (with the Khmer Rouge resuming its armed struggle and continuing until 1998). In the last decade, since 1999, there has been only one governmental armed conflict in East Asia, the CPP in the Philippines.⁵ It may be more feasible to compare the governmental armed challenges with governmental unarmed challenges, than to examine trends of governmental and territorial conflicts without distinctions between these two categories. The dramatic decrease of armed conflicts over government has been replaced by an increase in unarmed rebel challenges against governments.

Towards a theory of shifts to unarmed rebel tactics
Why do rebels choose to use arms in some circumstances and just non-violent means

---

⁴ The previously active rebel group was Communist Party of Burma (CPB).
⁵ Although red-shirts can be sorted here as well, they are not included in the UCDP.
in other circumstances? This paper seeks to generate testable hypotheses on the conditions under which a shift in tactics occurs. Building on insights from previous research, the following explanatory factors should form a part of any theory meant to explain the substitution of armed with unarmed tactics – or vice versa.

*Increasing cost of armed conflicts.* Zunes suggests that the transformation from reliance on armed methods of opposition to largely nonviolent ones is due to the increase costs from counter-insurgency warfare. Technological advancements have made armed conflicts increasingly inapt as a strategic choice for opposition movements and, hence, there is "an increasing realization [...] that the benefits of waging an armed insurrection may not be worth the costs" (Zunes 1994:407). By the same token, Gurr (2000) suggests the emergence of ethnic unarmed insurrections can be explained by the costs and risks associated with armed rebellion. Lichbach (Lichbach 1987) suggests that high degree of government repression will lead opposition to substitute violent protest with non-violent protest.

*Decreased chance for success in armed conflicts.* As showed by Stephan and Mundy (2006), a turn from armed to non-violent struggle may occur after a military campaign has failed to yield positive results. The ineffectiveness of the armed struggle may have failed to fulfill the aspirations of the participants who then either changed tactics or were replaced or eclipsed by other rebels using non-violent tactics. For example, in Palestine, the armed resistance against Israel’s occupation of Gaza and the West Bank failed to reach any tangible results, and this led to the emergence of the largely unarmed intifada, but when this also failed it led to a renewed search for effective violent tactics.

*Learning.* Increased knowledge and awareness of how unarmed conflicts may be used can help explain shifts from bombs to banners. The average success rate of unarmed rebellions has been found to have risen from 40% in 1940-49 to 70% in 2000-2006 (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011:8). Through their greater ability to mobilize widespread support and their potential to be more effective in decreasing the legitimacy of the government, as well as through their ability to weaken the pillars of support for an incumbent regime, non-violent uprisings have certain strategic advantages that may increase their effectiveness relative to armed struggles (Ackerman and Rodal 2008; Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). One important factor here is inspiration or contamination: Success in one campaign may inspire campaigners elsewhere (Gurr 2000:156).

*Normative trends.* Schock points out that the trend of “growing normative concerns about human rights” has contributed to strengthening the non-violent option since those who use it are more likely to gain international support (Schock 2005:xxii). The de-legitimization of the use of arms in pursuing political goals (both before and after 9/11), and the growing human rights agenda, may help explain transformations from armed to unarmed conflicts.

**Regional comparisons**
Chapter three of *Human Security Report 2009/2010* made a timely call for more regional peace and conflict research. Regions are at the same time sufficiently large to provide a basis for calculating trends and small enough to make it possible to acquire
a minimum of empirical knowledge about each conflict. Regions can moreover be fruitfully compared with each other, and as Solingen (2007) has demonstrated, it may be particularly interesting to compare East Asia and the Middle East. The East Asian region (which in our context includes both Northeast and Southeast Asia but not the Indian subcontinent or Central Asia) is more than four times the population of the Middle East (defined broadly as encompassing not just the Gulf countries and the Levant, but all of North Africa and Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan as well). East Asia has 2.2 billion inhabitants while the greater Middle East has 500 million.

In the first thirty years after World War 2 many more people were killed in armed conflict in East Asia than in the Middle East. In 1980, however, East Asia’s armed conflicts died down while they flared up and became far more destructive than before in the Middle East. The difference in the number of casualties in the two regions during the 1980s was enormous, mainly due to the Iran-Iraq war, which cost some 800,000 lives on the battlefield. Figure 1 shows the estimated number of battle deaths in armed conflicts since 1946 in East Asia versus the rest of the world. It shows that the decline from the 1970s to the 1980s in the global figure was due only to the decline in East Asia. The rest of the world instead saw a dramatic increase, which was mainly due to the Iran-Iraq war and the war in Afghanistan.

**Figure 1: Low estimates for number of battle deaths in armed conflicts 1946-2008**

![Diagram showing battle deaths in East Asia versus the rest of the world](image)

*Source: PRIO battle death data. We have chosen to use low estimates, but high estimates show almost exactly the same trend.*

Even after the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, however, in every single year the Middle East continued to have more violent deaths in armed conflicts, one-sided violence or non-state conflict than East Asia (see Figure 2). For more than three decades, East Asia has rivaled the Americas and Europe for the position as the world’s “most peaceful” region (in the sense of low numbers of people killed in
armed conflict.) And if we reckon in percentage of the total population, East Asia is the clear winner of the “regional peace prize.”

The conflict trajectories of East Asia and the Middle East since the Second World War differ radically. In the first three decades 1945-79 the world’s worst wars were the Vietnam War, the Korean War, the First Indochina War, and the Chinese Civil War, and there was widespread internal warfare in many Southeast Asian countries. The only East Asian country that opted completely out of war as soon as World War 2 was over was Japan. The wars in the rest of the region were driven by national liberation struggles against the returning European colonial powers, by internal conflict over the extension and form of the postcolonial states (unitary/federal), by the regional aspirations of the Chinese revolution, and by involvement of the superpowers of the global cold war, notably the United States. US intervention was both direct and by proxy.

Japan benefitted strongly from “embracing” its 1945 defeat (Dower 1999). It created an economic miracle that inspired emulation by other East Asian countries. One after another the East Asian governments undertook the same change of priority that Japan had made in 1946-49, namely to make economic growth their first priority and seek the kind of political and social stability required to achieve economic growth. South Korea did it in 1961, Indonesia and Singapore 1965, Taiwan 1972, China 1978, and Vietnam 1986-87. The crowning event in East Asia’s shift from widespread warfare to a much more peaceful region was the Cambodian peace agreement in 1991, which followed after Vietnam had withdrawn its troops from a war that had lasted 12 years. China at the same time ceased to support the Khmer Rouge as well as other communist guerrilla organizations in Southeast Asian countries, notably in Burma, where the communist party collapsed.

An essential precondition for East Asia’s transition from a region of war to a region of relative stability was the rapprochement between China and the United States from 1972 (Nixon’s visit to China; China’s entry into the UN) to 1979 (the establishment of full diplomatic relations and Deng Xiaoping’s visit to the USA). This allowed the United States to shift its strategic focus from East Asia to the Middle East.

By far the worst wars in terms of number of deaths have been the symmetric ones, those that are fought between armies of fairly equal strength. Such deadly symmetry has often been obtained through external support or intervention. Both East Asia and the Middle East, however, also have a history of many asymmetric conflicts, who have also had a substantial number of casualties. And, what is most important in our context, the two regions combine a history of widespread armed conflict with a historical record of unarmed rebellions. East Asia had many more such rebellions than the Middle East during the last three decades of the 20th century, while the Middle East suddenly saw a leap in the prevalence of unarmed rebellion during the 2011 Arab Spring.

\textit{Figure 2: Number of people killed in East Asia and the Middle East 1989-2010 in armed conflicts, non-state conflicts and one-sided violence}
While the PRIO battle death dataset covers the whole period 1946-2008, based on a careful reading of secondary literature, the UCDP’s estimates of battle deaths in armed conflicts, one-sided violence and non-state conflicts covers the period 1989-2010, and is based on information gathered about each and every battle or incident.

Neither East Asia nor the Middle East have adopted multi-party electoral democracy as a regional norm of governance in the way that most of Europe and the Americas have done. Hence democracy is hardly an explanation for the relative peacefulness of East Asia since 1980.

While North Africa was colonized by European powers in the late 19th century in a similar fashion to Southeast Asia, the central parts of the Middle East were put under colonial control as late as 1919-20 as a part of a mandate system established after the Ottoman Empire had fallen apart in World War I. David Fromkin’s book about the establishment of the mandate system is aptly titled “The Peace to End All Peace.” The Second World War weakened the hand of the European powers in the Middle East just as in Southeast Asia. Yet there were few wars of national liberation of the protracted Southeast Asian kind, with Algeria as the only real exception. Instead the Middle East was characterized in the period of the Korean and Vietnam Wars by unstable newly independent political regimes, several military coups, and embarrassingly unsuccessful wars with the new state of Israel, wars that because of their short duration were not terribly destructive. The Arab, Turkish and Iranian regimes relied on support from opposite sides in the Cold War, but avoided war with each other.

Two events changed the situation in 1979. One was the Iranian revolution, which
seemed to weaken Iran so much that Iraq took the chance to invade it in 1980 with a view to gaining contested territory in oil-producing areas near the Gulf. This was a miscalculation with immensely disastrous consequences. The new Islamic Republic of Iran was able to mobilize its population for an extremely costly war that produced a stalemate lasting until it was institutionalized in a peace agreement in 1988. An additional reason why none of the two parties could win the war in the Gulf was that the United States was adamant that this area must not come under the control of any one state (the Carter doctrine). Hence the USA supported Iraq with arms whenever there was a danger it might lose. The other game changer in 1979 was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which led to a large scale insurgency against the country’s communist leaders, with strong support from a holy alliance of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the USA – as well as China.

The net result was that the world’s worst wars “moved” from East Asia to the Greater Middle East. The latter region was deeply divided, and a basic conflict between Islamists and more secular nationalists began to characterize Middle Eastern politics. Paradoxically, however, in what looked like an inherently unstable situation, with devastating wars, mobilization in support of Palestinians fighting Israel and Afghan Mujahidin fighting the Soviets, and with mostly secular regimes using their revenues on arms and luxury instead of stimulating their economies, there was remarkable political stability. The authoritarian regimes in place as of 1980 were mostly still in place twenty years later. Even the secular regime in Algeria survived both an electoral defeat (which it ignored in approximately the same way the junta in Yangon ignored the Burmese elections in 1990) and a deadly serious Islamist armed insurgency. If we exclude some minor movements in Lebanon, who mobilized successfully to secure a place for their ethno-religious groups in Lebanon’s complex political system, the Middle East did not have one single successful armed or unarmed rebellion between 1980 and 2011. The authoritarian regimes in place were in spite of their lackluster performance strongly resilient. And as time went by, people started to take for granted that the young generations who got far more education than their parents but often could not find any jobs, would be just as compliant as the previous generations. Those of them who joined clandestine organizations were often persecuted, driven into exile, imprisoned or killed.

Meanwhile, the economic growth countries in East Asia experienced a number of failed and successful rebellions, some armed some unarmed, not in a simultaneous regional wave but at different junctures in the various countries. In these rebellions there was a trend away from the rural armed insurgencies of the previous period, although some of them continued at a lower level of intensity, towards more unarmed urban rebellions, which were sometimes quashed sometimes not. The trend can be encapsulated in the phrase “From People’s War to People Power.” The principle of People’s War had its origin in East Asia, although it built in part on a guerrilla tradition with its origin in Europe. The People’s War doctrine was propagated by Mao Zedong, further developed by Vietnam’s main military leader Vo Nguyen Giap (now a 102 year old non-violent critic of the present state of affairs in Vietnam), and People’s war also became the dominant doctrine of the Indonesian and Burmese Armies. As of the late 1970s, when People’s War had succeeded in toppling Western-oriented regimes in many “Third World” countries, it looked like this was the war of the future. The powerless could become powerful by sacrificing themselves in protracted guerrilla struggles and eventually win great victories both against
homegrown repressive regimes and imperialist invaders. The natural inclination for students whose demonstrations were repressed by the forces of order was to leave their families, move into the jungle and join up with a guerrilla organization in the hope of once being able to march proudly back into their city of origin as members of a victorious popular force.

Unarmed uprisings in East Asia
We now know that things turned out very differently from what young rebels expected in the 1970s. The period since then has not seen any victorious guerrilla armies marching into any capital in East Asia. The only rebel victories since then have been unarmed. We shall now go through the main unarmed rebellions in East Asia from the 1970s onward, and discern the moments in time when rebels chose between armed and unarmed tactics. Are there any patterns leading to one or the other? Have conditions changed over time in ways favoring unarmed tactics? The main conceivable patterns of rebel choice are the following:

1. Leaders of an ongoing armed struggle decide to put away their weapons and switch to unarmed tactics. (This is different from entering into negotiations or signing a ceasefire agreement with the government; negotiations and ceasefires are logical parts of armed struggles.)
2. Young radicals launch a protest movement (sometimes violent riots, sometimes non-violent and disciplined demonstrations), and pull more cautious leaders along in organizing a broader unarmed uprising. Some of the older leaders have until then been engaged in armed struggle (guerrilla or terrorist) while others have been using whatever legal means of opposition were available.
3. When an unarmed uprising is repressed, its leaders face a choice of a) taking up armed struggle, b) waiting for the next chance, c) forming a legal opposition, d) giving up the struggle and focusing on their personal career; e) exile.
4. When an unarmed rebellion brings rebels to power, they may create institutions enabling non-violent conflict management, or they can resort to violence against their former adversaries, rival factions within their movement, or new challengers.

Hence the key moments of choice are when a) armed rebels realize that their armed struggle is futile, b) young radicals have initiated a protest movement and older established leaders must decide whether or not to join, c) an uprising is crushed, d) rebels come to power. Moment (d) is different from the others in that rebels are then no longer rebels; yet it must be included in our discussion since the outcome of an unarmed rebellion determines whether or not the use of unarmed tactics contributes to the global peace trend.

At each stage the rebels must in some way gauge the strategic and personal risks and opportunities of both armed and unarmed tactics. Armed struggle will most often involve the greatest personal risk and sacrifice. Yet if a group of rebels have access to weapons, a protected base area, and some external support, then they may see a chance of success. It is important to remember that decision-makers often do not have a solid basis for estimating risks and opportunities. They may base their decisions on
dreams or rumors. The anger felt when seeing friends or family being killed by a brutal government may also be a strong motivating factor in itself.

If we look at East Asia since the 1960s, the political junctures have shifted, with some periods characterized by stability and others by social and political turmoil. The 1960s-70s was a period when guerrilla movements enjoyed a worldwide upswing, under inspiration from the success of the Vietnamese communists’ struggle for national liberation and unification. In that period there were also unarmed rebellions in Bangkok 1973 and 1976, and in Kwangju 1980. The first half of the 1980s brought a stabilizing reaction (Figure 3), but the end of the Cold War created a new period of political change with unarmed uprisings in Manila 1986, Seoul 1987, Yangon 1988, Beijing 1989, Ulaanbaatar 1989-90, Lhasa 1997-89, and Bangkok 1992.

*Figure 3: Unarmed uprisings in East Asia, 1980-2010 (both over government and territory)*

Sources: NAVCO, GNVAD (Global Nonviolent Action Data).

After the massacres in Yangon 1988-89, Beijing 1989 and Dili 1991, there was a new reaction with more stable conditions in East Asia just as the Soviet Union was dissolved and Yugoslavia descended into war. Yet this was also the period when the struggle for democracy in Bangkok ended military rule in 1992.

A new wave of unarmed uprisings followed the Asian Crisis in 1997, with Suharto’s New Order being brought down by demonstrations and riots in Jakarta 1998, and a popular movement leading to Timor Leste’s independence amidst terrible reprisals from militias supported by the Indonesian Army 1999-2000. Then again there was a period of relative calm until monks rebelled in Yangon 2007, Tibetans rioted in 2008, and Bangkok was engulfed in two consecutive unarmed rebellions with opposite political aims, first yellow-shirt in 2006, then red-shirt in 2010.

It must be noted that drawn-out unarmed campaigns have not only occurred in conflicts over government, but also in the secessionist conflicts in Tibet (1987-2008), West Papua (1980-) and Timor Leste, 1987-2000, although these have often happened in conjunction with violent struggles. Sometimes there is a coordinated division of labor. Sometimes the armed and unarmed struggles are conducted by different
organizations who disagree with each other although they share the same aims. And sometimes the leaders of an armed struggle turn to unarmed tactics when they are defeated on the battlefield or are unable to continue to sustain the armed struggle. In Aceh there was an unarmed uprising during 1988-2002, in parallel with the armed rebellion conducted by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). These unarmed uprisings over territory tend to be different in nature and dynamics from the unarmed conflicts over government. Rebels with an ethnically defined constituency and with territorial or secessionist aspirations will normally find it difficult to undermine the central government’s pillars of support, since they are held up by people well outside of the contested territory and who do not share the ethnicity of the rebels. However, when a crisis over government in the ethnic core of a state coincides with a conflict over territory in its periphery, then this confluence may create an opportune moment for secession. This is what happened when the Russian empire was dissolved in conjunction with the collapse of Soviet communism. The same thing happened when Timor Leste gained its independence in the wake of Suharto’s fall from power. East Timor represents a clear case of a successful unarmed campaign, and in the final phase, international support played a crucial role. In the Aceh case, the agreement that put an end to the conflict and gave Aceh autonomy within Indonesia, was negotiated between the armed group and the government, so this was not, or at least not in a direct sense, a victory for an unarmed rebellion, but a negotiated compromise between two armed adversaries.

Before we discuss rebel choices at various historical junctures since the 1970s, we should again emphasize that we deal with a period when East Asia turned vastly more peaceful, with fewer and less intense armed conflicts. Each country’s trajectory within this peace trend varied. Korea has since 1953 been characterized by a stalemate between its southern and northern regime. Although armed rebellions played an important role in the first phase of the Korean War, since it ended in 1953, there have been no armed rebellions in any of the country’s halves. The level of state repressive capacity has made this impossible, and in the 1980s South Korea got a system that was open to legal opposition. Japan has had this kind of system all the time since 1946. Although there were strikes and demonstrations leading to violence in the 1960s-70s and a terrorist campaign by the Aum Shinrikyo cult in the 1990s, Japan’s post-1945 political system has been remarkably stable. The same is the case for the newer states of Singapore and Malaya/Malaysia, although their peace was established on the background of a slowly decaying communist insurgency, whose main phase had lasted from 1948-1953, at a time when Malaya and Singapore were still under British rule. Only in 1989 did the leaders of the communist insurgency formally give up their struggle, which had been waged from base areas in southern Thailand.

China had its own kind of profound instability during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution from 1966-75, instigated from the top by Mao Zedong. It led to a temporary ascendancy of the People’s Liberation Army as the only functioning state institution. It is a rather striking fact that the People’s Republic of China has not faced any serious armed rebellion since the Tibetan uprising in 1959. Chiang Kai-shek’s government tried in vain to stimulate internal armed rebellions in China during the 1950s-60s. His own Republic of China on Taiwan has also not had any internal armed

---

6 For a lucid discussion of the historical reasons for the much higher level of social and political stability in Singapore and Malaya/Malaysia than in the Philippines and Thailand, see Dan Slater (2010).
rebellion since the ethnic Taiwanese rose up and were slaughtered in 1947. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam faced a small-scale rebel guerilla movement (FULRO) in the Central Highlands for many years after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. However, most internal opponents (or victims) of the communist regime’s repression and economic policies chose to flee as “boat people” rather than fight at home. This social or ideological “cleansing” contributed to Vietnam’s rigid stability, which stifled its economic and social development, and allowed the Vietnamese refugees to make a “comeback” from 1987 onward as investors in the country’s market economic reforms. Laos has followed a similar trajectory with a small scale armed rebellion of mainly ethnic Hmong for a number of years, but then with stable political conditions since the beginning of the 1990s. After the Khmer Rouge seized power in Cambodia 1975, Democratic Kampuchea faced a rebel movement in the border region to Vietnam. When Vietnam invaded its neighbor and established a new Kampuchean People’s Republic in 1978-79, the Khmer Rouge resumed their armed struggle in an alliance of convenience with other Khmer nationalist factions, this time from base areas along the border to Thailand, and with Chinese support. After a short interruption in their armed fighting at the time when various Cambodian factions contributed to the UN-brokered Cambodian peace agreement of 1991 and internationally monitored elections, the Khmer Rouge resumed their armed struggle. Six years later, in 1998, they succumbed to internal division and exhaustion. Since then there has been no armed rebellion in Cambodia, just violent political rivalries between the party of the country’s strongman Hun Sen and his opponents.

What we have seen is thus a steady regional decline in internal armed conflict, except in the Philippines where it has not been steady, and in Thailand who instead has seen an increase from zero in the 1990s to several thousand casualties in the 2000s. We think a partial explanation for the decline is that rebels have increasingly chosen unarmed instead of armed tactics when seeking to obtain radical political reforms, bring down a government or obtain independence for a certain territory. It is paradoxical that the two countries who have not followed the general peace trend also have a rich tradition of unarmed rebellion. The Philippines and Thailand seem to provide the most appropriate cases for in depth studies of rebel choice, since over long periods it has been possible for opponents of those two countries’ governments to choose between electoral politics, unarmed rebellion, and armed struggle. This was also the case in Burma during the tragic years 1988-90, and again from 2011.

In this paper there is no room for in depth studies, just for an attempt to discern the main moments in time when rebels made their choices between armed an unarmed tactics. Let us emphasize that such choices are not of course new. They have been made through the whole long history of rebellion and repression. When rebels have resorted to violence, they have most often first tried to get justice from the existing authorities. Peasants sent appeals to the King, Raja or Sultan to rectify misdeeds perpetrated by his local representatives. When there was no response, they staged protests. And when repressed they resorted to violence.

In the 20th century the international communist movement held a continuous running seminar on the question of how to organize a successful revolution. Historical failures and successes in the various European capitals during the revolutions of 1848, the Paris commune in 1971, the Russian October Revolution in November 1917, and the Guangzhou commune 1927, were discussed in excruciating detail so as to draw the
correct lessons. The correct sequencing of revolts was seen as a kind of science. Rival schools were promoting legal struggles for reform, city based mass uprisings, and rural guerrilla struggles aiming to build an army converging on the cities and taking them from the outside. Within the Communist International (Comintern), Vietnam’s later leader Ho Chi Minh (under the pseudonym A. Neuberg) contributed to a book discussing these various options in light of historical examples (Neuberg 1971). Mao Zedong was the leading proponent of rurally based “People’s War” as an alternative to the Russian model. The Vietnamese communists maintained a position between the two, aiming to combine guerrilla warfare in the countryside with mass mobilization in the cities. This failed in 1968, when the Tet offensive did not unleash the expected uprisings in Hue and Saigon, but seven years later the North Korean forces could march into Saigon.⁷

There are clear linkages between the situation in Vietnam and the two paradigmatic unarmed uprisings in Bangkok 1973 and 1976. One was a success case, the other a failure. Students played an essential role as initiators. In a climate of widespread international sympathy for the Vietnamese liberation struggle after the Christmas bombings of 1972 and the Paris peace agreement in 1973 leading to the US withdrawal from Vietnam, Bangkok’s leftist students felt they had the wind their sails and organized massive demonstrations in the streets of Bangkok against the military regime. Although a small scale armed struggle had for some time been carried out by a group of Maoists in the north, it was not at the 1973 juncture an attractive option for the students in the capital to move out and join the guerrillas. They launched their own non-violent rebellion, which brought the military government down and ensured a return to democracy. However, three years later, the situation had changed both internationally and domestically. Communists had taken full control of all three Indochinese countries, and this had spread fears among Thailand’s middle classes. When left wing students now went out on the streets again in 1976, they were met with a determined repression by the Army and aggressively violent mobs. Many were killed or disappeared. The Army then used the turmoil as an excuse for seizing power once again.

This created a new moment of choice, where many activists decided to leave the capital and join the communist forces among the Isan (ethnic Lao) people in the north. This led to an intensification of the armed struggle and the only period in Thai history when there has been real fighting between the Army and communist insurgents. The Army took the threat seriously and dedicated sufficient resources and brutality to its counter-insurgency campaign so the rebels began to realize the futility of their struggle. In 1980 they were offered an amnesty. Then they seeped back to Bangkok one by one, where some of them again became a democratic force. However, they enjoyed little leverage during the 1980s when General Prem Tinsulanonda dominated Thai politics. An important factor was also the Sino-Thai cooperation in assisting the insurgent coalition in Cambodia, which led China to keep its support for Thailand’s communists at a minimum and end it completely by 1989. So while the events of 1973 confirmed the value of choosing unarmed tactics, 1976 led to the opposite

⁷ Yet the Tet offensive contributed to the victory of the Vietnamese communists in 1975 by breaking US public opinion’s will to continue the war in support of the Saigon regime. While it has since often been said that this was also the main intention behind the Tet offensive, this is doubtful. Both militarily and politically the Tet offensive was a defeat for the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLF) and North Vietnam.
conclusion. Then there was a waiting pattern until “1973” repeated itself in 1992. Although the struggle of the Malay Muslims in Thailand’s south was of a different kind, aiming for the creation of an independent or autonomous “Patani” state, it also followed a trajectory away from the more violent tactics used in the 1970s to a more cautious strategy in the 1980s-90s, due both to reduced capacity and General Prem’s successful co-optation of Malay Muslim elites. This situation persisted for the rest of the century, a time when there was little attention either in Bangkok or the rest of the world to the Thai monarchy’s discrimination of the Malay Muslim population.

The next paradigmatic unarmed rebellion happened at the time when the Cold War entered its final phase, with rapprochement between the West and a Soviet Union trying to reform itself, and which scaled down its support for “Third World” socialist regimes and national liberation movements. This was part of the international background for the People Power uprising in Manila 1986, which forced the dictator Ferdinand Marcos from power (Schock 2005, Boudreau 2004, Zunes 1999, Mendoza 2009). When he declared martial law in 1972, Marcos gave as one of his reasons an ongoing small scale armed insurgency by the Maoist National People’s Army (NPA), which had been formed in 1969 by veterans of the Hukbalahap rebellion in the 1940s-50s. However, the immediate background for the martial law declaration was the unarmed so-called First Quarter Storm 1970-72, with students demonstrating in the streets against the United States and the participation of the Philippines Army in the Vietnam War. Once martial law was declared, no such demonstrations were possible any longer. This led thousands of students to boost the ranks of the NPA, whose armed campaign thus gained in intensity. This was the Cold War pattern of unarmed demonstrators being repressed and then choosing armed tactics, just as in Thailand 1976.

However, the armed struggle of the Philippine Maoists did not really threaten Marcos. It was more like a convenient excuse for dictatorship. What happened in the People Power revolution of 1986 was again similar to Bangkok 1973, with the difference that in Manila the rebellion had its background in a political assassination and a fraudulent election. Just as in Thailand, the Marcos government faced both a Maoist and Islamist armed rebellion simultaneously, the former mainly in Luzon and the latter in south Mindanao. Neither here nor there had the armed rebels gained sufficient strength to seriously threaten the regime. Hence, when someone in Marcos’ entourage arranged for the assassination of his main political rival Benigno Aquino, who belonged to the country’s leading families, and Marcos was pronounced the winner of presidential elections against the candidacy of Benigno’s widow Corazon, an alliance was formed between left wing activists, liberals within the middle classes and much of the highly influential Catholic Church to mobilize an unarmed rebellion in support of Corazon’s bid for the presidency. The United States and the Philippines Army turned away from Marcos, and he was forced to flee.

The success of People Power created a moment where the communist insurgents as well as the Moro rebels considered the option to refrain from armed tactics and join up with others in legal political mobilization. It would seem, on the background of People Power, that such tactics had a greater chance of success than a continuation of the armed struggle, which might serve as an excuse for a return to authoritarian rule. Several factors seem, however, to have prevented the rebels from giving up the armed struggle. One was that the main communist leaders were in European exile, and
would only return if the government agreed to their radical demands. A related reason was that People Power failed to address the key issue of land reform. And a third factor was the decentralized nature of the state, with local landowners and their militias dominating much of the country. Local dynamics in the Philippines ensured the continuation of armed conflict. Additionally, since the communist and Moro rebels had invested many years of their lives in the armed struggle, they wanted to get something in return for laying down their arms, not just the opportunity to participate in legal political organizing. This led to a recurring cycle of ceasefires, peace talks, breakdown of talks, and resumption of armed struggle that has continued to this day. Hence the Philippines developed a political system with a scope for legal politics as well as unarmed political campaigns but still unable to overcome the scourge of the country’s armed struggles.

South Korea had its “People Power” transition in 1987 but moved much more decisively than the Philippines to a system of democratic governance. A rebellion had been quelled in a massacre in the large city of Gwangju 1980. The rebels aimed to end the dictatorship of General Chun Doo-hwan, who had seized power in a coup in December 1979, after the previous dictator had been assassinated. At the outset the Gwangju rebellion was unarmed. An enormous demonstration was held on 18 May, led by students. They were met with massive repression, but were still able to take control of the city. The demonstrations then spread to many other cities. However, when the army prepared to take back Gwangju, the rebels organized and armed a civil militia who managed to resist the army for 90 minutes before it was crushed. No one seems to have contemplated the possibility of moving out in the countryside of the heavily urbanized Korean society. In June 1987, a similar scenario repeated itself as in 1980, but now with the main movement in the capital Seoul. As much as a million students and other demonstrators took to the streets to demand an end to the dictatorship after the political opposition had won a majority in parliamentary elections 1985. Chun’s designated successor yielded to the pressure and promised reforms leading to direct presidential elections and respect for civil rights. This led to the adoption of a new constitution. South Korea thus followed the reverse order of Thailand 1973-76. First came a revolt that was defeated through the use of massive violence and then, seven years later, a successful unarmed rebellion leading to a durable electoral democracy.

Taiwan’s transition to democracy differed in that it did not involve any unarmed uprising but was carried out from above by the incumbent dictator (Chiang Ching-kuo) through the introduction of constitutional reforms and open elections. Taiwan’s trajectory does not thus offer any model for rebels, but has a potential for inspiring authoritarian regimes wanting to carry out democratic reform in order to forestall likely rebellions. The military government in Naypyidaw tried something similar after the introduction of the Republic of Myanmar’s third constitution in 2008.

The motivation of the aging General Than Shwe, when he arranged for the introduction of a constitutional government in 2008-11 and chose as his successor the least ambitious and least corrupt of all of his general officers (Thein Sein), was clearly to prevent any re-occurrence of the strikes, demonstrations, riots and the electoral victory of a democratic opposition party in 1988-90, and to get rid of the sanctions imposed against his country by the United States and Europe since then. At the same time it was an overriding principle for Than Shwe and for the Tatmadaw in general to
make sure that the Union of Myanmar would never succumb to a Yugoslavian scenario, with some its component states seizing the chance to secede while the country’s ethnic core was engulfed in a conflict between the army and a democracy movement. Burma/Myanmar offers a particularly interesting case of rebel tactical choice since the threshold has always been lower than elsewhere for resorting to violence. This has two main reasons. One is the extremely violent character of the army (the Tatmadaw). When an army is engaged in constant human rights violations of the worst order against its own population, then there will also be little moral inhibition among opponents of the regime against the use of armed force. There is a radical difference on this account between Myanmar and North Korea. While the population of North Korea has in general either been indoctrinated, subdued or has offered its enthusiastic support to the regime of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung and his successors, the great majority of people in Burma have resented the Tatmadaw and offered many kinds of resistance. Hence the mode of repression has also differed. While the secluded labor and prison camp has been the dominant mode of repression in North Korea, in Myanmar it is shootings, beatings, torture and rape, often in the full view of local populations.

The population of Yangon, until 2005 the capital of Burma, got their revolutionary moment in 1988, the year after Seoul. The country had been under a military dictatorship since 1962, and there was constant warfare between the army and a communist rebel movement as well as a number of ethnic armed groups, and drug financed local armies. In 1974, the military violently suppressed anti-government protests at the funeral of UN Secretary General U Thant. Student protests had continued in 1975, 1976 and 1977, and their suppression led many students to join up with communist guerrillas in the countryside. In the 1980s, however, the China-supported communist rebels lost terrain and were driven closer to the Chinese border, where they increasingly relied on soldiers recruited from among the highland minorities as well as Chinese volunteers. On August 8, 1988 (8.8.88), dock workers in Yangon went on strike, and students began to demonstrate openly. Riots followed, and the movement was so brutally repressed that probably more than 1,000 people were killed (Lintner 2011: 47-54; Beer 1999, Shock 2005, Boudreau 2004). This just led to a broader movement, and expectations for the reestablishment of democracy got a boost when the country’s dictator, General Ne Win, much to everyone’s surprise announced his resignation. This led, however, to a movement that was too radical for the younger army generals to tolerate. A State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC) was established, which clamped down violently on the demonstrators. Some leaders then fled to the countryside with the intention to join the armed struggle of some of the ethnic militias, notably the Karen. To join the communist insurgency was no longer much of an option. It collapsed in an internal ethnic mutiny in the following year. Many remained in Yangon, and took part in organizing the electoral campaign of the National League for Democracy, who won a resounding victory in the parliamentary elections of May 1990, which however were just ignored by SLORC.

Some of the students who joined the ethnic guerillas in the countryside nurtured illusions of being helped by the United States. Such expectations were soon frustrated, and the armed groups of the ethnic minorities entered a difficult period having to choose between war with the Tatmadaw and ceasefires on rather generous terms. A whole system of ceasefires agreed upon by SLORC and the armed ethnic
groups during 1989-94 led to a substantial reduction in armed fighting within the country’s borders, with much fewer people killed than in the past. In 2007, the next round of mass protests occurred, this time led by monks. They were also brutally repressed. Yet, the repression had a negative influence on the moral image and legitimacy of the government (Fink 2009). This was at a time when its dominant figure, General Tan Shwe, was determined to carry out a seven-step plan announced in 2003 for an orderly transition to constitutional rule, with the adoption of a new constitution by referendum and the election of a National Assembly and independent assemblies in each of Myanmar’s fourteen regions or states. As of 2012 it seems that Myanmar has entered a process of quite radical political reform, but contested elections or mass mobilization in the streets could easily again lead to cycles of repression and renewed violence both in the main cities and at the frontlines between the army and the armed ethnic groups, notably in the Karen, Shan and Kachin States.

Tibet also saw tumultuous events in the final phase of the Cold War. The big uprising in 1959, which led to the Dalai Lama’s flight to India, had been met with extreme repression amidst the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward, and was followed by a guerrilla campaign with external support from the CIA. It died down in the early 1960s, and Tibet was then relatively calm for many years, partly due to the Dalai Lama’s non-violent principles. He waged a patient struggle from his headquarters in India aiming to build broad international support for Tibet’s struggling for genuine autonomy. Between September 1987 and March 1989 the internal movement in Tibet was radicalized, and four major demonstrations occurred in Lhasa against Chinese rule. The largest demonstrations began on 5 March 1989, shortly before the 30th anniversary of the 1959 uprising. Police and security officers attempted to put down the protests, but tensions just escalated. After three days of violence, martial law was declared on 8 May 1989, and the forces of order put an end to the protests. This did not, as in 1959, lead the Tibetans to resort to armed struggle.

The Tibetan protests were put down shortly before the death of former Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party Hua Guofeng. His funeral provided an occasion for non-violent demonstrations by students in the streets of Beijing, followed by a campaign that centered on Tian An Men Square, with increasingly radical demands for democracy. For several weeks the world held its breath while the Chinese students were allowed to occupy the central square of the Chinese capital. The reason they were tolerated was that the communist leadership was split, with Party Secretary General Zhao Zhiyang sympathizing with the students’ demands. The protests were entirely non-violent. However, party elder Deng Xiaoping decided that it was intolerable for anyone to challenge the Communist Party’s monopoly on power, and therefore undermined Zhao Zhiyang, whom Deng himself had promoted in the past. Deng now used more conservative leaders to order the Army – against the will of some of the Generals - to remove the students from the streets of Beijing. Huge armed forces moved reluctantly into the city, where they were met my massive popular demonstrations in support of the students. This led to the Beijing massacre in which an unknown number of civilians were killed. Some angry demonstrators responded by murdering the soldiers they could get hold of. After the clampdown many democracy activists were arrested, while others fled. There is no indication, however, that anyone attempted to initiate a new People’s War against the People’s Republic and its People’s Liberation Army.
It is difficult to say to what extent the unarmed uprisings in East Asia in the 1986-92 period were inspired by each other or by the dramatic contemporary events in Central and Eastern Europe, where one communist regime after the other was obliged to give up power or reform itself drastically and allow for democratic elections. In East Asia the country under the strongest Russian influence was Mongolia. Demonstrations began in Ulaanbaatar on 10 December 1989 with calls for “perestroika” and “glasnost”. Further demonstrations were held in January-February, when the first opposition parties were formed, and a group of demonstrators chose the well-known non-violent tactics of a hunger strike. There was sympathy for the calls for democratization also within the regime, and on 9 March 1990 the communist government resigned, while announcing elections to be held in July. In these elections a reformed communist party won a majority, so it could form a new government. It carried through with democratic reforms, and in 1993 the opposition gained victory at the polls. Mongolia thus saw a classic transition with a de facto alliance of unarmed protesters on the outside and a reform faction inside the incumbent regime overcame the resistance from hardliners and successfully established a democratic political system. What happened in Ulaanbaatar 1990 is what could have happened in Beijing just a few months earlier if Zhao Ziyang had not been deceived by his mentor Deng Xiaoping.

The Vietnamese Communist Party was also closely connected to Russia, but avoided the Soviet, Mongolian and Chinese scenarios of collapse, reform or violent repression by keeping its population under tight control, excluding the leading proponent of democratic reform (Tran Xuan Bach) from the Party, and abiding strictly to what would later be known as “the Deng Xiaoping model”: Radical market economic reforms, but no pluralistic democracy. Laos basically followed the Vietnamese pattern. A mostly ethnic Hmong rebellion petered out, and a tiny democracy movement was repressed in the 1990s, after which the regime became gradually less repressive, although it continued not to tolerate any systematic opposition.

Thailand had been politically quite stable under the long premiership of General Prem Tinsulanonda from 1980-88. Politics returned to the street, however, in May 1991, “Black May” as it would be called. In 1990 the Army had seized power from the market oriented visionary General Chatichai Soonhavan, who had succeeded General Prem as Prime Minister two years earlier. The coup first led to the establishment of an interim government under a respected leader, but then the much less respected General Suchinda took over as Prime Minister. A massive rally was organized on 18 May, reminiscent of the huge demonstrations in 1973, and loud demands were heard for Suchinda to step down. The demonstrators were met with a massive Army crackdown, with more than fifty people killed, but the struggle for democracy had a prominent leader in the Mayor of Bangkok, Chamlong. After he had been arrested the royal family intervened to reconcile the adversaries. The King instructed the Prime Minister and Mayor to work together. General Suchinda complied and then resigned so democracy could be reintroduced. Much work was subsequently put into the drafting of a new democratic constitution, which was adopted in 1997, just before the Asian Crisis struck (Satha-Anand 1999; Schock 2004).

The three countries where the Asian Crisis had the greatest impact were South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia. In all three countries it led, at least in the short run, to democratic change. In South Korea it led to the electoral victory of the long-standing
democratic activist Kim Dae-jung, who had spent many years in jail for his convictions. In Thailand the crisis led to the establishment of a new broad party, the Thai Rak Thai, which won a resounding electoral victory in 1999, allowing its leader, Thaksin Shinawatra to form Thailand’s next government. The greatest change came in Indonesia, where General Suharto was forced to resign amidst massive demonstrations and riots in Jakarta (Boudreau 2004; Martin, Varney & Vickers 2001). Power was first transferred to his vice-president, who presided over the dismantling of the so-called New Order so democratic reforms and decentralization of powers could be carried out over the next few years, reforms that are still in force today. There was a lot of ethnic violence in the revolt against Suharto, and during Indonesia’s transition to a constitutional democracy there was a temporary upsurge of political and ethno-religious violence in several parts of the country. Radical Islamist and Christian groups were using terrorist or violent means to further their causes. Today we can see that this was indeed temporary. A main effect of Indonesia’s democratization was to overcome some of the violent conflicts that had plagued the country for many years.

In East Timor, where the armed struggle had more or less ended in defeat some years earlier, amidst massive unchecked use of violence by the Indonesian army and affiliated militia groups, a new movement arose for the country’s independence. Indonesia was forced by great power intervention to accept the holding of a referendum, which resulted in an overwhelming majority for independence. This provoked a frenzy of violence by the Indonesian army and its allies, but this could not prevent the establishment of a new independent state in 2000. Sadly, it would later have to go through its own internal violent struggles.

In the 2000s there were unarmed uprisings in four East Asian countries: The Philippines, Myanmar, Tibet and Thailand. In 2001 there was a “second People Power” revolution in the Philippines that forced the elected president Joseph Estrada to resign unconstitutionally and yield his powers to his vice-president. This was not, however, a popular rebellion of the 1986 kind, but a piece of theatre staged by highly influential power brokers who saw no other way to get rid of an ineffective president who did not belong to the traditional elite, but engaged brazenly in the same kind of rampant corruption that the elite was used to tolerate within its own ranks.

We have already mentioned the so-called “Saffron Revolution” of monks in Myanmar 2007 and the Tibetan demonstrations and riots in 2008. The most noticeable and interesting political developments in the whole region during the 2000s happened in Thailand, an electoral democracy who developed a polarized split between two main factions, the yellow-shirt and the red-shirts, who both carried out unarmed rebellions, the yellow-shirts against Thaksin Shinawatra and his supporters, who dominate the heavily populated northeastern part of the country, and the red-shirts against what Duncan McCargo has called the “network monarchy,” meaning a traditionalist alliance of the royal family, the top brass of the military, much of the state bureaucracy, a substantial part of Bangkok’s middle classes and the Democrat Party, who enjoys strong support from Thai Buddhists in the southern part of the country. Political power alternated between the supporters of Thaksin and the “network monarchy” because each and every election gave a majority to the pro-Thaksin parties while court decisions and a military coup in 2006 returned anti-Thaksin politicians to power. In depth research is needed to establish why the 2005-2006 yellow-shirt rebellion was not repressed but led to a temporary victory for the rebels while the red-
shirt campaign in Bangkok March-May 2010 ended in a military crackdown so the number of people killed in the streets reached the level of 90. It also belongs to the story that some of those who had taken part in the demonstrations in 1976 and who had been with the communist guerrillas for some time thereafter, engaged themselves actively in the red-shirt movement while others joined the yellow-shirts. The longer-term outcome of the May 2010 crackdown is also interesting. Neither the red-shirts nor the government lost much support from the violent confrontations, but the Puea Thai Party, led by Thaksin’s sister Yingluck won a new resounding victory at the polls in 2011.

Since 1989, there have been an increasing number of local incidents in China and Vietnam, most of which concern land rights. There have also been innumerable local protests over various kinds of government abuse, and some cases of terrorist attacks, notably by clandestine Uighur rebels in Xinjiang. It is quite remarkable, as already mentioned, that the Chinese communist regime has met so little armed resistance internally in a country of 1.3 bn inhabitants. No one expects any armed insurgency in China, not even in Xinjiang or Tibet. If there is to be turmoil, it is likely to resemble the riots in Lhasa 2007 and Urumqi 2008, with cycles of demonstrations, repression and government reform rather than a pattern of civil war. In March 2012, a rather nasty incident occurred in the Vietnamese port city of Haiphong, with protesters firing back at the military when it intervened to end their protest against a case of land grabbing.

Something happened in East Asia during and after the Cold War, that made city-based unarmed rebellion a more attractive tactics for rebels than guerrilla struggles waged from the periphery. An important factor behind this change was that the great powers ended their support to insurgencies in each other’s sphere of influence. Armed rebels were able to continue their struggles for quite a few years even without such support, but found it difficult to gain new recruits, and had little to show for themselves in terms of results or benefits. Another important factor was that some unarmed rebellions succeeded. The most prominent ones were the People Power revolutions in the Philippines 1986 and South Korea 1987, the return to democracy in Thailand 1992, the successful revolt against Suharto’s New Order 1998, and the nonviolent uprising in Timor Leste. The impression started to spread that perhaps unarmed city based struggles were more likely to yield results than jungle-based armed insurgencies. When the Burmese military regime repressed the country’s democracy movement in the years 1988-90, there were also strong doubts among those who followed the old habit of joining up with armed groups in the countryside. There clearly started to be doubts about the likelihood of making any headway with guerrilla tactics. The shifting pattern of the Cold War obviously contributed to this development. With the de facto Sino-American alliance from the 1970s onward the United States no longer felt much need to support rebellions against communist regimes or prop up non-communist dictators facing popular protest movements or. In the Philippines, Indonesia (Timor Leste) as well as in Thailand, the US thus withheld some of its support to the regimes when they abused of basic human rights. The more isolated regimes in Myanmar and North Korea were also under strong US pressure, although this seemed at times to be counter-productive.

In the last few years, Thailand presents the most interesting East Asian case for the study of rebels’ choice of tactics. By contrast to the other regional countries it has
seen an upsurge of political violence in the first decade of the 21st century. We must therefore return once again to the Thai developments. Three kinds of tactics have been used in parallel, with shifting kinds of emphasis: armed struggle, unarmed mass protests, and legal mobilization in connection with elections. Since Thailand is a one-person-one-vote electoral democracy, it is possible for Malay Muslims if they act in unison to win elections in the three provinces of southern Thailand where they form a majority (Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat). It has also proved more than possible for opponents of the Bangkok elite to win national elections.

Let us compare the tactical choices of the southern Malay Muslim and the northern Isan rebels in Thailand. Isan are mostly Lao speaking people who have been assimilated into “Thai” culture with a kind of double overlapping identity as Isan and Thai. The Malay Muslim population in Thailand’s deep south have by contrast consistently resisted such assimilation policies, have a clear identity as Malays and are in frequent contact with fellow Malays in the neighboring states of Malaysia. One factor that helps explain their different fates is that the Malay Muslims have stayed in an area where they have lived for centuries whereas the Isan populations went through massive social and economic change from the 1960s onward with migration to new areas, where they were heavily influence by the institutions of the Thai state. The Malay Muslim armed rebels have not been able to control any territory in a military sense, but they are sufficiently entrenched in many villages to avoid being denounced to the police or the Thai Army. The Malay Muslims get little support or attention in the rest of Thailand so they have seen no opportunity to carry out either violent attacks or unarmed protests in the national capital. They have focused their whole energy on carrying out an armed struggle in their own areas, in a subtle combination with local electoral politics. This has led to a situation where the great majority of the victims in the armed struggle are Malay Muslims. Insurgents are killed or arrested by the Thai army and police, and “unreliable” Malay Muslims are killed by other Malay Muslims. Many Thai Buddhists have also been killed, both soldiers and civilians, but they are still in a minority among the victims. In 2004 and 2005 there were also unarmed protests in the south, probably orchestrated by the armed insurgents in order to provoke government repression of a kind that would increase local anger and thus facilitate rebel recruitment. A rather unusual aspect of the Malay Muslim rebel tactics is that no leaders expose themselves. The movement appears amorphous and leaderless, although it carries out small-scale armed attacks almost on a daily basis. By avoiding to expose any leaders the movement radically reduces the risk of being destroyed by killings or arrest. The logic behind the southern uprising is one that tends to perpetuate itself since the aspiration of the Malay Muslims to have their own recognized autonomous or independent state can only be achieved through negotiations while there is no one the government can negotiate with. This is reinforced by the fact that some if not many of the insurgents seem to fund their struggle by engaging in money-making criminal activities. Malay Muslim elected politicians have to find various ways of making sure that they are not singled out as enemies by the insurgents, since this entails a risk of being assassinated. The logic of Thailand’s Deep South is a retrogressive one, a kind of vicious circle, in some ways resembling that of the Palestinians. It remains to be seen if it can be broken. At least there is not much risk that the Malay Muslim kind of insurgency will inspire others. It is not linked to Al Qaida style terrorism. Thailand’s Malay Muslims do not dream about the Caliphate but about the 16-17th century Patani Sultanate.
The Isan are heavily represented in the national capital Bangkok through large scale immigration, and are so numerous that they can strongly influence the outcome of national elections. In addition they have been able to rally behind a leader from their own ranks, a former policeman who managed to assert himself in the 1990s, first as a successful businessman and then as a political leader: Thaksin Shinawatra. For the Isan it is also important that they are no longer pure peasants but have developed into “urbanized villagers” (McCargo 2011) with a vested interest in influencing the national budget so it can give them access to schooling, health services and inexpensive credit. Thus the Isan do not aim for secession or autonomy but for power in the Thai state. The small-scale unsuccessful Maoist guerilla struggle in the 1970s-80s got most of its recruits from poor Isan peasants. In the last two decades they have instead concentrated on a combination of electoral mobilization behind the parties led by Thaksin and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra and unarmed rebel tactics in the streets of Bangkok. The logic leading from the violent repression of the red-shirts in the streets of Bangkok May 2010 to the victory of the Puea Thai Party at the polls just months later is worthy of a study in itself.

Zunes suggests, as mentioned, that “the decline in armed struggle …(worldwide …) is less a matter of a more tolerable status quo than it is the shifting of the struggle to other means, e.g., nonviolent action” (Zunes 1994:406). This interesting proposition is difficult to test on the East Asian evidence since the change in the means of struggle have happened in parallel with improvements in general living conditions. The fact that the change has gone in the opposite direction in Thailand could, however, be taken as a confirmation of what Zunes says. The fact that a radical improvement of economic and social conditions has run in parallel with increasing levels of struggle, both armed and unarmed, could indicate that there is no clear causal relationship between economic growth and shifts to non-violent rebel tactics. There could be just a spurious relationship. In that case there must be something special about Thailand. Is this unique to Thailand or has something happened there that could also happen in other countries, with a potential for breaking the trend towards a more peaceful region? This will not be answered here, but is meant as a question to inspire further research.

East Asia and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring brought many similar developments to those discussed above. The main difference between East Asia and the Middle East was that the unarmed rebellions in East Asia were spread out over a considerable number of years, whereas it all happened in one wave in the Middle East. Many of the same mechanisms we have seen in East Asia can be recognized in the Arab Spring, with a few initiators beginning a movement that catches on and gets more established leaders to join up, and who subsequently are better positioned than the original initiators to reap the harvests afterwards. Much of what happened in the Middle East during 2011 reminds of East Asia and Eastern Europe 1986-89, and also strikingly of Europe 1848.

NAVCO (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011) identifies only four Middle Eastern cases in the time period 1980-2006:
• Egypt, 2000-2005 (the Kifaya movement). A campaign directed against the Mubarak regime, which had some limited success but failed to achieve regime
change.

- Lebanon, 2005 (Cedar revolution). This was a successful case: the aim of the uprising was to get the Syrian troops out of Lebanon, and this was achieved.
- Palestine, 1987-1990 (First Intifada). This contributed to the Oslo Agreement of 1993, and in the NAVCO data it is coded as partially successful.
- Israel, 1981-82 (Druze resistance). A successful campaign to obtain identity cards.

During the Arab Spring the most dramatic changes happened in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, but there were also cases of a lower degree of protests and of reforms inspired by the events elsewhere, such as in Jordan, Morocco, Oman and Algeria.

Morocco is an interesting case because the events in the neighboring countries prompted King Muhammad VI to preventively and quickly unveil a new constitution and allow the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party to win elections and form a new government. No rebellion, either armed or unarmed, was therefore needed in order for a mild form of regime change to occur.

The 2011 Arab Spring differed from its East Asian precursors in that it spread from Tunisia to so many other countries in a short time, after many decades of astonishing authoritarian resilience in most of the region. Yet there are many similarities. Unarmed tactics proved its worth in generating political changes that armed struggles of the kind waged in Algeria in the 1990s, the use of terrorist methods or even long term clandestine organizational work of the kind undertaken by the Muslim Brotherhood had failed to generate. Another similarity is that the outcomes of the unarmed rebellions differed radically from one country to the next. They triumphed in Tunisia and Egypt in ways similar to Manila 1986, Bangkok 1973 and 1992, and Jakarta 1998. The rebels were quashed in Bahrain, in a way reminiscent of Lhasa and Beijing 1989, Yangon 2007 or Lhasa 2008, with the difference that China and Myanmar could rely entirely on their own military strength while the small army of Qatar resorted to external (Saudi) military support. The Libyan, Yemen and Syrian cases differ from the East Asian cases in that they degenerated into civil wars, with different outcomes. In Libya the rebels won because of foreign intervention. This could be a dangerous development because it could encourage rebels to resort to arms in the hope of getting outside support. In East Asia before the 1980s, foreign intervention clearly contributed to fuelling war and keeping them going. Externally supported rebellions of the Libyan kind could also bring a kind of rebels to power who are inclined to continue using violence. The Libyan scenario may have had some influence on rebel behavior in Yemen and Syria, where the initial unarmed rebellions gave way to protracted civil – sectarian – wars. In the Syrian case this probably sealed the fate of the rebellion since no external intervention could be expected, and since the use of arms bolstered the regime’s will to maintain itself through brutal repression. It is noteworthy that the Libyan, Yemen and Syrian scenarios have no parallel in the post Cold War history of East Asia. In the case of Burma, the military takeover in 1988-90 actually led to reduced warfare in the ethnic minority areas, in spite of thousands of students joining the armed ethnic groups. This was because of the military government’s new successful policy of negotiating ceasefire agreements. Not even the Thai case is comparable. The Malay Muslim insurgency in Thailand’s Deep South used armed tactics from the outset, not in replacement for a failed
unarmed uprising. And the red-shirts did not revert to armed tactics after the Bangkok massacre in 2010, but instead triumphed in a perfectly legal electoral campaign. In order to find East Asian cases of the Libyan, Yemen or Syrian kind, with unarmed uprisings either leading to or feeding on ongoing civil wars, we have to revert to Tibet 1959, Manila 1970-72, Yangon 1974 or Bangkok 1976. The “unarmed-rebellion-being-quelled-and-hence-fuelling-civil-war” pattern has simply not been present in East Asia past the 1970s. Its logic has been the other way round.

Another important difference between the regions is the role of religious actors in the mobilization process. In East Asia, religious actors have played a pivotal role in some of the nonviolent uprisings. The Catholic clergy in the Philippines and East Timor, as well as Buddhist monks in the Burmese and Tibetan uprisings (1988-89, 2007-08), were all crucial actors in mobilizing against the regimes. (Montiel 2006)

A shared characteristic between the regions is also the pattern of relatively short uprisings against central government (most of the Arab Spring, and the cases of East Asia discussed above), and long-term intractable unarmed campaigns over territorial issues (in East Asia: Tibet and West Papua, in Middle East: Western Sahara and Palestine).

So while it remains uncertain if changes in Middle Eastern rebels’ choice of tactics form a part of the global peace trend, this has clearly been the case in East Asia. If the main underlying cause behind this shift has been urbanization, enhanced government capacity (Mueller 2004), loss of external support, or new communication technologies remains to be established. All of these factors may have affected both risks and opportunities.

There has been no complete turn away from armed tactics in East Asia. Armed struggle continues in parts of the Philippines, Myanmar and Thailand, and there are a number of ceasefires which may again be broken. Still the overall tendency has been a trend away from armed conflict and towards a combination of electoral politics and unarmed political campaigns. It is significant to notice that since the communist takeovers of Vietnam and Cambodia 1975 and Laos 1976 there has not been one single rebel military victory in East Asia. What we have seen are several successful unarmed rebellions, a gradual opening up of several countries to various forms of legal opposition, and a few negotiated peace agreements, where the rebels have accepted a compromise well short of their ultimate aim. The most important such peace agreement was the Paris agreement on Cambodia in 1991, which led to the establishment of an electoral system with a temporary power sharing arrangement, and paved the way for the final demise of the Khmer Rouge in 1998. The second was the Aceh peace agreement of 2005, which created a possible model for how to resolve secessionist conflicts of the kinds that are still ongoing in many parts of Myanmar, south Thailand, Mindanao, and West Papua. It seems that for most ethnic minority movements, the unarmed rebellion has not appeared as a viable way forward. Their alternative to armed fighting is a negotiated deal offering them a special status with locally elected assemblies enjoying a certain degree of autonomy, and assured representation on the national – or federal – level.

An important distinction that is clear from this analysis is that between territorial/secessionist challenges versus challenges over government. As we shown
above, the dynamics in these types of uprisings, and how the armed and unarmed campaigns are related to each other, are distinctively different between governmental and territorial conflicts. We can see a similar dynamic in the Arab Spring. Moreover, the successful campaigns in the Arab Spring (Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco) were all governmental challenges. The secessionist conflicts have been less successful in using unarmed campaigns, for instance, in Palestine and in Western Sahara.
References


Nepstad, Sharon Erickson. 2011 Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century. Oxford University Press


