The East Asian Peace

How It Came About and What Threats Lie Ahead

It is now 35 years since more than a century of bloody wars came to an end in East Asia. But what are the deep reasons for this remarkable lasting peace, and how fragile is it amid a new set of regional challenges?

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Source: PRIO Data 1946-2008 (best + low estimates); UCDP data 2009-2013 (best estimates).
Addressing Fear and Injustice to Create an East Asian Culture of Peace

By Elin Bjarneård

A closer look at East Asia’s long period without inter-state armed conflict reveals that the peace doesn’t extend to all aspects of life. Violence in many forms, including domestic abuse of women and children, persists in varying degrees from country to country, and hostile perceptions of other countries and religions suggests that a true culture of peace will take more time and effort to create, writes Elin Bjarneård.

THE STARTING POINT of Uppsala University’s East Asian Peace program is the fact that East Asia, once one of the most war-prone regions in the world, has remained peaceful over the past three decades. As Stein Tønnesson wrote in his introduction to this cover package, the definition of peace initially used for the program is a negative one: a significant reduction in the number of battle-related deaths. However, as Johan Gal-tung and many other researchers, peace activists and politicians have pointed out, the mere absence of violent conflict is not sufficient to create a truly peaceful society.

While we are far from a consensus on what a culture of peace should encompass, proponents of the concept of a positive peace agree that there is a need to focus on the human experience of security in a broader sense than security from armed conflicts. Ursula Franklin writes that peace is not just the absence of war, but the absence of fear and the presence of justice. This perspective does not lessen the achievement of ending big wars or the important fact that fewer people are now victims of armed conflicts in East Asia. But answering the question of whether or not there is a culture of peace in East Asia means we also have to assess the absence of fear and presence of justice.

A culture of peace is related to discourses on human security, which emphasize the experience of the individual as opposed to national security. From the individual human being’s starting point, there are many potential causes of insecurity and fear, including violence or threats of violence, natural disasters, diseases and hunger. Economic insecurity and threats to human dignity may also be included under human security. Here, I focus specifically on a culture of peace from an interpersonal perspective: people’s acts of violence against other people as well as people’s attitudes toward other people.

Exploring the culture of peace in East Asia points to some glaring inconsistencies that are obscured by the discourse on the East Asian Peace. First, there are stark and important sub-regional differences in human security. Second, some groups are exposed to more violence and fear than others. Human security in peaceful East Asia today is still contingent on where you are and who you are.

A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE?

Interpersonal violence constitutes one of the greatest sources of fear. Among all violent deaths globally, 74 percent are estimated to be intentional homicides, and just 14 percent direct conflict deaths. However, the very nature of interpersonal violence makes it notoriously difficult to find reliable statistics on such violence. In post-conflict settings, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish continuing conflict-related violence from criminal violence. This poses less of a problem in many societies in East Asia, where most armed conflicts ended long ago. Interpersonal violence also often goes unreported, and evidence of it is not always systematically collected and presented. These problems tend to be accentuated in countries with a lot of violence as well as in countries where the state is a major perpetrator of violent acts and violations of personal integrity. The state itself can be a main contributor to a culture of violence, as the article on repression by Kristine Eck demonstrates. Some trends can be discerned, however. As Tønnesson mentions, lethal violence in general tends to be less widespread in East Asia than in other regions, and is also on the decline, more so than in other parts of the world.

Who are the victims of homicide in East Asia? The clearest pattern involves gender, although far from all countries gender-disaggregate homicide data. It is estimated that globally, 84 percent of all victims of intentional homicide are men, and the same pattern is visible in the few countries that present gender-disaggregated data in East Asia. Intentional homicide is therefore similar to armed conflict in that its victims are predominantly young men. There is an important exception to this pattern, however. When it comes to homicide against children under 14, the gender pattern among adults is reversed, particularly for newborn babies.

According to the World Health Organization, East Asia has the highest reported homicide rate in the world for newborn girls, 46 per 100,000, while the corresponding rate for newborn boys is 18 per 100,000. This, along with sex-specific abortions, has severe implications for the sex ratios of entire countries. In Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea Den Boer’s global comparison of sex ratios for children aged 0-4, China stands out with a ratio of 120 boys per 100 girls. While China’s large population, this development over time has led to estimates of 40 million “missing” women in China. There are similar tendencies in South Korea, with 111 boys per 100 girls. These patterns are much less pronounced and closer to the global average in Southeast Asia.

In a sense this means that the young men who used to be exposed to the risk of dying in armed battles now seem to enjoy the benefits of a wider culture of peace across East Asia, running a relatively low risk of being victims of homicide. The most vulnerable individuals, however, are the most likely victims of a persistent culture of violence. The surplus of men that this pattern creates can also have more long-reaching consequences for peace and security.

Some non-lethal violence is even more difficult...
While largely invisible in statistics, intimate partner violence affects many more individuals than homicides or armed conflicts.

previously expected across the region, but also that there are important differences among countries. When asking about the lifetime experiences of men, most countries surveyed had between 30 percent and 57 percent reporting that they had at some time perpetrated physical or sexual violence against an intimate partner. In Cambodia, 30 percent of men reported that they had done so, in China 51.5 percent, and in parts of Indonesia as many as 60 percent. Given the large populations in China and Indonesia, this implies a massive culture of violence affecting millions of women. Data from the World Values Survey on the attitudes toward violence against women point in the same direction of mass-scale, gender-based violence in the most populous nation in the world: only 45 percent of polled Chinese agree with the statement that it is never justifiable for a man to beat his wife.

Children are also victims of domestic violence. This is possibly even more difficult to measure than intimate partner violence because of huge differences over what constitutes acceptable behavior. Corporal punishment is accepted in some countries, encouraged in others and prohibited in a few. In Japan and South Korea, over 80 percent agree that it is never justifiable to beat a child. In the Philippines, only 46 percent agree, and, again, in populous China, just 22 percent think it is never justifiable to beat a child. This type of violence is both problematic and difficult to detect, because it affects the most vulnerable group in society, children who have little or no possibility of reporting it, and these childhood experiences may serve as measures of right and wrong that affect their entire lives. A survey conducted in Thailand as part of the East Asian Peace program links childhood experiences of violence to violent adult behavior. Individuals who have been beaten as children or who have seen their mother being beaten are far more likely to use violence as a means to solve conflicts than individuals who have been raised in a culture of family peace.

A CULTURE OF DISTRUST?

Let us move from experiences to attitudes and ask if a culture of peace is ingrained in people’s minds to the extent that it has become unthinkable to devalue or hurt other human beings. Is peace included in the primary mindset and logic of people, or do war-like attitudes prevail despite the absence of armed conflict? Are groups of people mistrusted and mistreated because they are perceived as different? Attitude surveys help us link macro conflict patterns to micro mechanisms at the individual level.

It is potentially important to understand to what extent people regard other people as enemies and to what extent there is widespread tolerance of people who are perceived to be different from you. The process of “othering” means distancing yourself from other groups of people. Speaking in “we” and “them” terms, and devaluing “them,” has been demonstrated by socio-psychological studies to be a prerequisite for being able to commit violent acts. To investigate the attitudes that people have with regard to other groups therefore gives important information about the extent to which peace is ingrained in people’s minds. A large degree of “othering” creates fertile soil for conflicts to turn violent, and for individuals to tolerate violent acts toward other nations or individuals.

The Pew Global Attitudes Project has conducted attitude surveys in China, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan. It presents data on the attitudes people have toward other nations, which may be prerequisites for international conflict, as well as attitudes toward individuals of other religions, another possible source of conflict (see Isak Svensson’s article).

When it comes to conflict between nations, Pew data show that there are clear differences in the ways that Indonesians, South Koreans and Japanese regard the biggest power in the region, China. The closer a country is geographically to China, the more likely people are to regard China with hostility. When asked the question, “Overall, do you think of China as more of a partner of [the survey country], more of an enemy, or neither?” 20 percent of Japanese and a full 35 percent of South Koreans say they primarily think of China as an enemy. However, only 10 percent of Indonesians think of China as an enemy. The same question is not asked of the Chinese, so we cannot measure to what extent feelings of enmity are mutual.
Turning to religious groups, the Pew project also asked the question, “Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of Jews/Christians/Muslims?” Here, the tables are turned. Indonesians, who were most likely to have a favorable view of China as a nation, are the least tolerant of other religions. Almost half the population of Indonesia has a very unfavorable view of at least one religious group. South Koreans, who were most likely to view China as an enemy, show more tolerance toward religious groups than other countries in the region. Eighteen percent of South Koreans claim to have a very unfavorable view of another group. For China and Japan, the percentages are 34 and 22 percent, respectively. There are very small gender differences in these surveys, with the big differences being between countries. These fairly high levels of religious intolerance in large parts of East Asia caution us to be concerned about the possible mobilization of religious cleavages that could cause violent conflict.

Attitude data are thus able to show us that even in a country such as Japan, which has reached low levels of interpersonal violence, about a fifth of the population still holds unfavorable views about an entire nation or groups of people.

A CULTURE OF PEACE IS A RESILIENT PEACE

Even if we accept that the East Asian Peace exists largely as an absence of war and violent conflict, we cannot draw the conclusion that East Asians now generally lead a secure life. Instead, many of the patterns presented here demonstrate highly uneven performances with regard to human security. To be sure, when it comes to interpersonal violence, East Asia as a whole seems to be safer than other regions (except Europe), although under-reporting may be higher there than in other regions. There are also huge differences within the region: Being a girl child is far more dangerous in China and South Korea than in Southeast Asia. Members of some minority religious groups are more likely to be tolerated in South Korea and China than in Indonesia or Myanmar.

In fact, we do not yet know if the long-term absence of armed conflict leads to a deepening culture of peace. But we have reason to believe that if fear, distrust and human insecurity persist among much of the population, the risk of new outbreaks of organized violence or war will increase. Distrust and enmity between countries and ethnic and religious groups can be direct causes of armed conflict. The relationship between violence against women and children and the absence of armed conflict is perhaps not as direct, but empirically well documented. Many studies have shown that when women are maltreated in a society, the risk of organized violence and war increases. When views of “others” as inferior human beings against whom physical, psychological or sexual violence is justifiable persist, it also allows for a culture of violence to continue. As Erik Melander’s article in this cover package shows, cultures of violence are underpinned by the glorification of militarized versions of masculinity and honor ideologies that can explain why conflicts are allowed to escalate and why compromise is avoided.

This article notes the complexity of the East Asian Peace from a human security perspective. A thorough investigation of possible links between a decline in battle deaths and human security is sorely needed in order to gauge the depth of peace in East Asia, but is difficult to carry out due to the scarcity of reliable data. But we do know that despite the long-lasting “negative” peace in East Asia, there are still important human security problems that need to be tackled in order to strengthen the resilience of the East Asian Peace and to protect individual integrity everywhere. At the very least, it is safe to say that huge human security challenges persist in East Asia and there are good reasons to continue to work toward a deeper culture of peace.

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