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)
Outsiders Matter: External Actors and the Decline of Armed Conflict in Southeast Asia

By Joakim Kreutz

The search for the reasons behind the rise and fall of armed conflict in Southeast Asia may well point to circumstances specific to each of the countries involved, but a closer look at the role of external actors, particularly the major players in the Cold War, suggests that outsiders had a major role in fomenting both conflict and the subsequent peace that now largely prevails, writes Joakim Kreutz.

The CURRENT East Asian Peace was created through sequential processes; first, there was a reduction of large-scale inter-state wars, and eventually also a decline in intra-state conflicts in the region. The latter was primarily a Southeast Asian phenomenon, but the decline in intra-state conflicts in the region. The latter was primarily a Southeast Asian phenomenon, but it constitutes an important part of understanding the East Asian Peace. In this essay, I argue that the changes that brought about this decline in internal armed conflict had less to do with deliberate policy shifts by Southeast Asian governments than changes in the international system and a reversal of great power strategy by the US and China. As Washington and Beijing scaled back support for government repression or rebel movements, both countries instead encouraged negotiated settlements. What makes the phenomenon of the East Asian Peace remarkable is not just the rarity of armed conflict in recent decades, both in Northeast and Southeast Asia, but how this differs from the extreme severity of the wars in the region in the preceding period. While the fighting in Northeast Asia involving Japan, Korea, China and Taiwan was receding already in the 1950s, excessive political violence continued in Southeast Asia throughout the 1970s. In cases such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, the violence lasted into the 1980s. Indeed, there are still internal armed conflicts under way in the Philippines, Myanmar and Thailand, although mostly with lowered intensity. In order to understand the process of declining warfare in Southeast Asia, we must revisit the political dynamics both during the years of war and as the violence was reduced.

It is also necessary to remember that the empirical phenomenon of a regional transition from widespread warfare to relative peace consists of two processes. First, fewer new wars begin or escalate, and second, conflicts already under way end or become less violent. These two aspects of declining warfare may be interlinked, but not necessarily. I contend that in Southeast Asia, both the high-intensity violence prior to 1979 and the subsequent reduction of warfare largely resulted from the policies of powers external to this region.

Great Power Interests

To begin, it is necessary to go back to the ambivalent policies of the leading international powers after the Second World War. On the one hand, they tried to enhance stability through greater regional economic and political co-operation. On the other hand, they opposed what they perceived as any threat from adversaries in the postwar international system. The United States supported the reconstruction of Japan and the export-driven economic rise of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea, while at the same time militarizing almost all unresolved conflict issues in the region. The Truman doctrine in the US and the subsequent domino theory motivated large-scale support for government repression as well as ground involvement in the wars in Korea and Indochina.

The Soviet Union and China pursued similar policies of supporting communist regimes and rebels, thereby contributing to the amount and severity of armed conflict. In addition, the willingness of great powers to offer military aid shaped the policies of local political leaders, who were rewarded rather than punished when they used force against political opponents, regardless of whether they were communists, proponents of ethnic minority rights or peaceful democracy advocates. While leaders such as Park Chung-hee in South Korea, Ngo Dien Diem in Vietnam, Mao Zedong in China, Suharto in Indonesia, Pol Pot in Cambodia and Ne Win in Myanmar may at any rate have been inclined to suppress the political opposition, the scope of their terror was certainly mirrored a global trend where inter-state wars are decreasingly rare, although many disputes remain. However, this cannot explain either the earlier prevalence or the subsequent reduction of internal conflict in Southeast Asia. To explore this puzzling feature of the East Asian Peace, it is necessary to consider the driving forces behind previous regional conflicts — and their high amount of fatalities. For this, looking beyond the goals and capabilities of the conflict parties is instructive.

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Understanding the Players
A substantial body of research has found that the most intensive internal wars are those where the parties can count on support from external actors. There are three main reasons. First, the belligerents have more and better weapons and can recruit and provide better training for troops through economic backing and sanctuaries abroad. This reduces the need to rely on support from the local population, which means fewer constraints with regard to the use of violence. Second, conflict resolution is more difficult in situations with many parties, because there are more interests that need to be appeased and more actors who can “veto” an agreement and resume the use of armed force. Third, when belligerents depend on external actors for resources, leaders have incentives to make more extreme demands to maintain support from the outside.

This quest for continued or increased support means that belligerents also have incentives to influence the military of their movement by overemphasizing the likelihood of victory and discouraging any compromise. For example, the Chinese-backed leaders of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) rejoiced and proclaimed support for the “Gang of Four” after the brief ouster of “rightist” Deng Xiaoping in 1976. Needless to say, they were not amused by subsequent developments in Beijing. The Deng era led to a stepwise reduction of support from China to the CPB, which instead started to pressure the group to enter into talks with the regime in Myanmar (Lintner 1990).

For the 1960s and 1970s, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) registered internal conflicts in Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. In these nine countries, Myanmar was the only state that did not receive substantial military backing from the outside. Further, most rebel actors in these conflicts were also backed externally. The picture regarding rebel support is, however, more varied. While the communists and their allies in northern Myanmar were supported by China, non-communist ethnic insurgents in other parts of the country tried, but failed, to receive large-scale support from Thailand and the West. Similarly, the Moro insurgents in the southern Philippines were also largely left to fight for themselves; the same was the case for rebels fighting Indonesian state forces in Irian Jaya, Timor-Leste and Aceh.

The substantial inflow of support for conflicts in the region in these decades was in sharp contrast to the lack of international efforts to mediate or resolve the conflicts. Indeed, the only attempts at peacemaking were in Indochina (where the supernetwork and regional powers were actively involved) and negotiations to end the Mindanao conflict mediated by the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

The balance between support for waging war and efforts to make peace changed in the 1970s. Domestic political shifts caused by the high costs of on-the-ground US involvement in Indochina and the need for economic development in China led to very visible changes in strategy. These developments contributed to great power realignment, where China changed from being an ally of the Soviet Union to a friend of the US. However, this was not just a consequence of events in Vietnam. For example, the American focus on human rights also stemmed from domestic politics in the US, where Congress already in the early 1970s became critical of the disbursement of aid to countries with poor human-rights records.

It is also worth noting that this process by external actors of withdrawing support for warfare and backing negotiations was slow and uneven. The turning point came in the late 1980s, when both the US and China ended their support to the coalition fighting against the Vietnam-backed government in Cambodia, and instead helped mediate the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement. By 1989, there was also the tripartite peace agreement between Thailand, Malaysia and the remnants of the Communist Party of Malaya. Furthermore, international support was instrumental in eventually ending the conflicts in East Timor in 1999-2000 and Aceh in 2005.

While external support for peace processes is recognized as a potent means of ending long-running civil wars (Walter 2002; Svensson 2007; Fortna 2008), the record of East Asia (both Northeast and Southeast) of avoiding the recurrence of civil war is impressive.

This is probably another consequence of the external dependencies established by support in earlier periods. When the US and China shifted their support from providing weaponry to promoting talks, many local actors lost their capability to sustain the conflict for an extended period. Curiously, this may also help explain why some countries in East Asia have been unable to make the transition to peace. Because the many non-communist ethnic minority rebels in Burma were unable to secure external support, they were instead forced to finance their operations themselves and these conflicts are still active. Similarly, neither the Moro nor the communist rebellions in the Philippines have received substantial outside support for their armed struggles, and they instead secured resources through local criminal activity, which has made these conflicts exceedingly challenging to end.

The importance of external actors for, first, the initiation and escalation of conflicts and, later, the reduction of violence in Southeast Asia may be instructive also in terms of helping us judge the main threats to the East Asian Peace. If the great powers become more willing to support political rivals in countries where they are vying for influence, then we may see an increase in armed conflict and political violence again in the region. Some signs are discouraging. Since the US declared a “war on terror” in 2001, several regimes in the region seem more intent on the use of repression than compromise when faced with domestic opposition. While actions of external states have directly contributed to making Southeast Asia less violent than it was in the 1970s, making this peace sustainable depends on domestic political processes rather than relying on the preferences of the great powers.

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