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)
Explaining East Asia’s Developmental Peace: The Dividends of Economic Growth

By Stein Tønnesson

After almost 150 years of murderous wars, East Asia since 1979 has experienced an extraordinary period of peace. The decades after the Second World War in the region have also been marked by unrivaled economic growth. Oslo-based peace researcher Stein Tønnesson argues that the priority placed on economic development by East Asian leaders holds the clue to the region’s long peace.

THE THREE LEADERS with the greatest influence on East Asia’s security all say they are dedicated to preserving the peace that has prevailed since the 1980s, as these quotations attest:

We stand for an international order … where emerging powers contribute to regional security, and where disagreements are resolved peacefully — US President Barack Obama, “Pivot to Asia” speech to Australian parliament, Nov. 17, 2011.1

While taking silent pride in the path we have walked as a peace-loving nation for as long as seventy years, we remain determined never to deviate from this steadfast course — Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, 70th anniversary of the Emperor’s decision to surrender and end the Second World War, Aug. 14, 2015.2

War is the sword of Damocles that still hangs over mankind. We must learn the lessons of history and dedicate ourselves to peace … We Chinese love peace — Chinese President Xi Jinping, 70th anniversary of the victory over Japan, Sept. 3, 2015.3

At the time when these peaceful intentions were expressed, East Asia had avoided international war for well over three decades, and seen astounding economic growth. Yet the three speeches were all made in conjunction with new military initiatives. Obama promised that cuts in the US defense budget would not come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific. His speech was interpreted in China as an intention to contain its rise. Abe’s pledge was made at a time when his government had submitted a proposal to the Japanese Diet for reinterpreting article 9 in the 1947 constitution to allow Japan to be able to fight alongside its US ally in “collective defense.” Xi Jinping’s speech was made at a massive military parade displaying some of China’s most sophisticated missiles and other weapons.

There is little reason to doubt the sincerity of the three leaders in their hopes for peace. Yet they do not trust each other, fear each other’s capabilities and are preparing for the worst.

EXPLAINING REGIONAL PEACE
If we are to gauge the prospects for regional peace, we first need to explain how it began in the 1980s after more than a hundred years of frequent and devastating warfare. Possible explanations include factors such as US hegemonic leadership, nuclear deterrence, the Sino-American power balance, China’s “peaceful rise” strategy, economic inter-dependence and ASEAN’s consensus-oriented culture. None of these is fully satisfying, however.

For much of the 20th century, the US was an active belligerent, repressing rebellion in the Philippines and using force to prevent Japanese and communist expansion. Only in the 1970s-80s did the US become a force for the status quo, after it had formed a quasi-alliance with China against the Soviet Union. China’s rise is part and parcel of the East Asian Peace and has as its background the 1978 decision to open up the country to market-oriented economic reforms. The economic inter-dependence that followed from East Asia’s overall economic rise made the potential cost of war much higher. Yet we know from history that inter-dependence does not always prevent war. If nations fear being bypassed by their rivals, or if leaders are motivated primarily by non-economic concerns such as nationalist ire dentism, an urge to make up for past humiliation,

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References:
Was 1979 really the turning point? Only partly. It was the year of the region’s last international war — between China and Vietnam. Deng Xiaoping used the Chinese army’s poor performance in the conflict as an excuse for downsizing it so that he could channel more resources into the economy. But China was not the first country in the region to change national priorities.

THE YOSHIDA MODEL

The history of regional peace began in 1945–46, in the wake of Japan’s defeat in the Second World War. A pro-Western diplomat, Shigeru Yoshida, took over as prime minister under US tutelage in 1946 and remained in power for most of the period until 1954. Japan was in a profound crisis, with its cities in ruins, but its leaders decided, in the words of John Dower, to “embrace defeat.”

Not a single US soldier was killed in anger after the war, and Japan adopted a constitution that forbade it from ever again waging war or having an army. Radical reforms were carried out, including land reform and the creation of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) to co-ordinate economic reconstruction.

At the cost of allowing the US to keep bases on its territory, Japan negotiated an end to US occupation in 1952 after signing a peace treaty in San Francisco. Meanwhile, the US had intervened in Korea to save South Korea from communist invasion. Japan declined a US invitation to take part in the Korean War and instead made money from it. Internally, Yoshida maintained a system of close surveillance and police control to prevent leftist rebellion.

Yoshida’s economically-oriented foreign policy and his emphasis on economic growth are known as “the Yoshida doctrine.” It was controversial both among conservatives and leftists, but allowed Japan to become rich. Only after the country had reached genuine prosperity did its economy begin to stagnate in the 1990s. And despite being a staunch US ally, Japan has so far been constitutionally prohibited from fighting in any of the many US wars.

The Yoshida model was a chain with the following main links: National crisis > new leaders > shift to a policy prioritizing state-driven economic growth > need for external and internal stability > accommodating the US in order to benefit from aid, investment and market access > pragmatic policies towards neighbors > repressive measures internally > rapid economic growth.

When other nations emulated the Yoshida model, an additional link was added: Learning from Japan. There was nothing deterministic about the chain. Each link did not by necessity lead to the next. Each was contested. Yet all of them were connected to the overriding goal of economic development.

THE COPYCAT TIGERS

Other East Asian countries emulated Japan, one after the other:

• South Korea’s dictator Park Chung-hee (1961–79) was deeply inspired by Japan. He normalized relations with Tokyo in 1965 so he could get aid and investment. He avoided war with North Korea (but contributed troops to Vietnam in exchange for US aid) and set South Korea on a course to prosperity by governing the market and promoting massive industrialization.
• When Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore was thrown out of the new Malaysian Federation in 1965, it applied a developmental policy, emphasizing political stability both internally and externally, with astounding success.
• Indonesia made a similar change under General Suharto’s New Order after 1965. It abandoned the confrontational policy of President Sukarno towards Malaysia; it sought rapprochement with Japan and the US, forming the ASEAN grouping in 1967 with Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore; and it applied a successful economy-first policy combined with harsh repression internally.
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* Chiang Ching-kuo — Taiwan's prime minister from 1972-78 and president from 1978-88 — abandoned any idea of reconquering mainland China, carried out a successful developmental policy, boosted trade with Japan and the US, obtained implicit US protection under the Taiwan Relations Act (1979) and began a process of enhancing regime legitimacy through liberal reforms.

* After a national crisis caused by ethnic riots in 1969, Malaysia adopted the new economic policy (NEP) in 1971, giving ethnic Malays a preferential stake in commerce and industry in order to enhance ethno-political stability. In 1981, when Mahathir Mohamad took charge as prime minister, he modified the NEP by adopting a growth-promoting “Look East” policy.

* Most important of all: When Mao died in 1976, its Cultural Revolution ended and a sense of acute crisis spread among the communist elite. Deng took charge in 1978 after a power struggle ended in the defeat of the Maoist “Gang of Four.” He gave up the idea that there had to be a Third World War, undertook study tours to Japan and the US and set China on its way to peaceful development. Since 1979, China has not engaged in any armed conflict, except for some incidents with Vietnam. China’s huge internal security forces have long prevented any armed rebellion on its territory.

* Just as China was making its transition, Vietnam was bogged down in a drawn-out occupation of Cambodia and a fateful alliance with the Soviet Union. When Mikhail Gorbachev announced his perestroika reform movement, and made it clear that Vietnam could not continue to count on Soviet aid, Vietnamese leaders understood that they had to emulate Japan, South Korea and China. When party chief Le Duan died in 1986, the stage was set for Doi Moi, Vietnam’s opening to foreign investment. The country encouraged export-oriented industry and withdrew its troops from Cambodia, allowing Vietnam to normalize relations with China and the US, join ASEAN in 1995 and initiate rapid economic growth.

Once all these countries had opted to avoid external and internal war in favor of developmental policies, the region entered its era of peace. The East Asian Peace was thus the cumulative effect of a series of national priority shifts. This is a historical theory, meant to explain the emergence of the East Asian Peace as such. It does not predict that similarly cumulative priority changes are likely to happen in other regions.

THE OUTLIERS

There are some East Asian exceptions. Laos, Cambodia and Brunei have implemented only parts of the model. Myanmar is only really trying now. Former military dictator Than Shwe began to open up the national economy in the 1990s, but his brutal repression of the democratic opposition led to international sanctions. He retired in 2011, leaving the new President Thein Sein with a mandate to get rid of sanctions and catch up economically. Myanmar has long enjoyed international peace, but has been ravaged by internal warfare. A key condition for success in Myanmar will be a successful national political dialogue between Aung San Suu Kyi’s new government, the military, the elected national, state and regional assemblies, and the many ethnic parties and armed groups. The big question is if they can reach a federal compromise. We cannot yet say if Myanmar’s bid for developmental peace will succeed.

Thailand has had substantial growth but never established a sustained developmental policy. Its monarch hews to a retrogressive economic self-subsistence philosophy, and its military has eluded civilian control, seizing power on numerous occasion and withdrawing to the barracks only when its economic failures became evident. In the 2000s, Thailand became a regional outlier when its government was unable to prevent a drawn-out insurgency in its Malay-Muslim south, while the army engaged in a border conflict with Cambodia, and a polarized power struggle took place in Bangkok between two national factions or “networks.”

The policy-making elite in the Philippines has never reached consensus on a developmental policy or been able to implement one. Some presidents have tried (Ramon Magsaysay, 1953-57; Fidel Ramos, 1992-98). Their failures were largely due to weak state capacity, while rich landowners were powerful enough to ignore or obstruct government policies. In contrast to the main growth countries, the Philippines has not carried out genuine land reform and never managed to subdue its communist or Muslim separatist rebels. Under the presidency of Benigno Aquino III, which is to end in 2016 after five years, Manila has reached a peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). However, at the time of writing, its full implementation remains in doubt.

The greatest aberration is North Korea. The Kim dynasty has never felt secure enough to open up to international trade and investment. Instead, it has sought security through a military-first policy, emphasizing nuclear weapons, thus provoking sanctions and resentment from abroad, and further boosting Pyongyang’s sense of insecurity while condemning most of its people to poverty.

INTO THE FUTURE

Can the regional peace hold? If the theory above is correct, then we cannot be sure. As long as the leaders of the major powers see stable economic development as their primary goal, we are unlikely to see an outbreak of major war. Awareness of the pervasive inter-dependence that characterizes the global economy, as well as fear of nuclear war, will restrain them. There are, however, competing priorities linked to strong nationalist sentiments. If there is a severe economic recession — of the kind that Russia is experiencing today — it will be hard for national leaders to keep economic development as their overall national priority. They may be tempted to seek shortcuts to popularity. Calls are often heard in many countries for more protectionist policies, which could be precursors for war.

Also, the original Yoshida model is no longer valid in Japan. The governments of Juchiro Koizumi (2000-06) and Shinzo Abe (2006-07 and 2012-present) have sought to make Japan a “normal nation” with the right to “collective defense.” Meanwhile, the US, instead of giving top priority to rebalancing its all-important economic relationship with China, has reached a comprehensive free trade agreement (the Trans-Pacific Partnership) with China’s neighbors. And Xi Jinping’s China, while launching its ambitious “One Belt, One Road initiative,” is at the same time provoking fear among its neighbors by pushing its claims to small islands and vast maritime zones.

A key factor in securing regional peace is the ability of national decision-makers to keep or set environmentally sustainable economic development as their paramount goal. If rival goals take precedence, then East Asia could revert to its murderous past.

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