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?

ESSAYS BY
- Stein Tønnesson 8 & 10
- Joakim Kreutz 16
- Elin Bjarnegård 20
- Isak Svensson 26
- Holly L. Guthrey 32
- Erik Melander 40
- Kristine Eck 46
- Börje Ljunggren 52

Source: PRIO Data 1946-2008 (best + low estimates); UCDP data 2009-2013 (best estimates).
The East Asian Peace
How Did It Happen? How Deep Is It?

Introduction by Stein Tønnesson

HOW CAN WE EXPLAIN that East Asia, which suffered some of the world’s most devastating wars in the long period from 1839 to 1979, became one of the world’s most peaceful regions? How deep is the East Asian Peace? Can it hold?

A research program based at Uppsala University in Sweden and funded by the Swedish Riksbankens Jubileumsfond has for the last five years tried to answer these questions. It includes a core group of seven researchers based in Uppsala and more than 20 research associates in 12 countries. The researchers disagree among themselves, but that is fine. Rather than aspiring to forge a consensus, they have been encouraged from the beginning to pursue independent approaches and sharpen their arguments in competition with each other. Some of their debates are reflected in this issue of Global Asia.

From the 1840s to the 1970s, East Asia — China, Taiwan, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, and the 10 current member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations — suffered from colonial wars, civil wars and the wars of the Cold War. The worst of all 19th-century wars was the Taiping Civil War in China (1850-64). A number of their debates are reflected in global asia.

The graph on the previous page illustrates, since 1979, when China invaded Vietnam to punish it for having occupied Cambodia, there has not been a single major war in East Asia, a region home to more than 30 percent of the world’s people. In the 1980s, the East Asian share of global battle deaths fell to 8.5 percent. After the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 and the Cambodian peace agreement of 1991, the East Asian share of global battle deaths sank to 3.6 percent, which makes it comparable to the much less populated West/Central Europe and the Americas in terms of war avoidance. Since 1988, East Asia has not had a single inter-state armed conflict, and internal armed conflicts have become fewer and less intense. Only three East Asian countries still suffer from internal armed conflict: Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand (see Figure 1). Interestingly, as Holly Guthrey shows in her article in this issue of Global Asia, these are also the countries with the highest propensity for issuing amnesties for human rights abuses instead of seeking justice.

One might think that the decline of armed conflict would lead to an increase in criminal violence and/or the use of capital punishment, as has been the case in some other parts of the world. China is key in this context. Its official statistics show an increase in recorded murders from about 10,000 in 1981 to over 28,000 in 2000, but then a steady drop to about 12,000 in 2011.1 The 2015 Global Burden of Armed Violence shows a striking difference between East Asia and the Americas. Both have few people killed in armed conflict, but the Americas have many more homicides. All East Asian nations are at the lower end of the scale. In the 2007-2012 period, East Asia was the only region outside Europe where every single country had less than 10 reported violent deaths annually per 100,000 inhabitants. From 2004-2012, East Asia saw a further significant decline in the average number of annual violent deaths. Although the figures from countries such as North Korea and Myanmar are likely to be underreported, the Global Burden of Armed Violence confirms that the East Asian Peace is not just due to war avoidance but to a general decrease in direct violence.

On the other hand, although the number of East Asian countries practicing capital punishment has gone down, China executes more people than the rest of the world taken together. The exact number is a state secret, but Amnesty International says there are thousands each year. Timo Kivimäki, a UK-based leading researcher on the East Asian Peace, characterizes the peace as slightly Orwellian, since it is backed up in many instances by authoritarian regimes with a high capacity for repression.2 This points to one of the main disagreements within the East Asian Peace program: Is the East Asian Peace just a negative low-quality peace based internally on repression, and externally on a balance of power? Is it a fragile, unsustainable peace, depending on US security guarantees? Or is it a developmental peace that could be the first stage of a genuinely peaceful regional order characterized by economic interdependence, regional and global co-operation and respect for international law?

The following articles in this cover package represent different, sometimes conflicting and sometimes complementary approaches to exploring and answering these questions.

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1 These figures may not be fully reliable but the trend is unlikely to be the opposite: “Murder mysteries,” The Economist, Apr. 6, 2013.