

Conflicts in East Asia: How Are They Different from Europe's?

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Abstract

While the threats that turned Europe into the most explosive part of the world in the last century appear to be quite relevant for Asia, the European-style security institutions do not seem to work for Asia. The key reasons are the historically embedded roots of the insecurity, more acute territorial divisions, specific (non-Western) understanding of security, and ethnically-driven separatist and irredentist movements. Also, as deglobalization increases and the international system becomes less and less manageable, East Asian countries tend to push harder for pursuing an autonomous security policy.

Keywords: international security, cultural differences, historical conflicts, colonial era legacy, national sovereignty, deglobalization.

Both in Europe and in East Asia, international crises flare up periodically, fraught with the threat of growing from the regional to the global level. Conflicts in international relations in East Asia manifest themselves no less, if not more, than in Europe. However, they are based on slightly different reasons than in the Occidental world. The conditional East (and East Asia, in particular) is distinguished by a much higher degree of civilizational-historical, ethno-confessional and national-psychological heterogeneity. Unlike the conditional West, which developed under the auspices of a single Christian civilization, in East Asia, different confessional and cultural groupings, such as Confucian-Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian, coexist with each other. The forms of the socio-political system are also more diverse in East Asia: authoritarian regimes coexist there with democracies, and the scale of “authoritarianism” and “democracy” there is much wider than in the Euro-Atlantic space. Under these conditions, it seems practically impossible to ensure any consensus on common “norms and rules” that should underlie the general order.

The rejection of Western values and political culture is associated in many countries of the East with the bitter historical experience of the colonial era. The invasion by European powers undermined the order that had existed for centuries and caused the collapse of the Chinese-centric vassal-tributary system. There are long-standing grievances against and biases towards Europeans, as well as the rejection of their globalist view of security, not only in China, but also in other countries in the region. This fuels East Asian nationalism and the belief that regional integration institutions should be built without the West, and the institutions themselves should be resistant to external pressure (suffice it to recall Mahathir Mohamad's slogan “Asia for Asians”).¹

¹ Prime Minister of Malaysia, who in the early 1990s proposed to create the East Asian Economic Group without the participation of Western countries.

Behind this is not only the memory of the colonial era, but also the evaluation of more recent events, when the “help” from Western countries and their global governance structures turned out to be of little effect or even counterproductive (for example, in overcoming the consequences of the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis).

If we talk about “common values” that could become the basis of international cooperation in East Asia, they are much less obvious than in the West. For example, Asian cultures are said to prioritize group interests over the individual ones, order over freedom, and obligations over rights. However, in reality, ethical norms in various countries of the East can either be based on the priority of traditional social hierarchy or be closer to Western standards, with their emphasis on egalitarianism and equality of opportunity.

For this reason, building “collective” or “multilateral” security systems based on a common understanding of their underlying principles is a much more difficult task in the East than in Europe.

NOT ONLY THE COLD WAR

Unlike in Europe, where crises like the Ukrainian one are associated with the problematic and ambiguous legacy of the Cold War and the post-bipolar world order, a significant proportion of the conflicts in East Asia are rooted in more distant historical eras—colonial and even pre-colonial. These include territorial disputes in the East China and South China Seas, as well as the problems of separatism, religious and ethnic extremism, especially in connection with the rise of nationalism among “non-titular nations” and the aggravation of interfaith contradictions, as well as conflicts related to so-called historical grievances that can be observed in the relationship between Japan, China and the states of the Korean Peninsula. Usually smoldering, such conflicts tend to periodically flare up due to increased sensitivity of the public.

The change of generations has significantly shifted the electorate further right, exacerbated nationalism, and increased demand for a proactive foreign policy to protect national interests not only by economic, but also by military means. Since the late 2010s, the leaders of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea have been increasingly

turning to the past in a bid to find ideological justification for such a policy. They advocate a revision of the previous historical narratives and push official discourse towards a more “patriotic” vision of history that would allow them to increase their legitimacy and boost confidence ratings among the population. The “patriotic” vision of history implies an uncompromising approach to the complex and painful problems of the past, as well as its extrapolation to the modern agenda.

Quite often, “historical conflicts” are invoked for domestic political reasons. Using the traumatic memory of the past events associated with the injustices committed against their own countries, including those that took place decades and even centuries ago, the leaders of East Asian countries win people’s loyalty and consolidate society. While forming a new identity based, among other things, on the narratives of “historical grievances,” similar steps by partners are perceived as a challenge. Such narratives become a significant factor driving confrontation in relations between these countries and the states that are the sources of their grievances, which leads to serious diplomatic conflicts.

To introduce historical narratives into the public consciousness, the states use a wide range of educational, media and political-ideological methods and means. This goal is achieved through educational practices within the system of school and university education, particularly through university programs and school textbooks. They are reproduced in the media, the speeches of public figures and public opinion leaders, and the publications and comments by experts and members of academia. They become a powerful means for the patriotic education of the masses. Mnemonic memorials and history museums also play an important role, designed to provide the “correct” historical education for their visitors.

For example, in China, the discourse around “historical grievances” is closely connected with the “century of humiliation” (1840-1949). The idea of overcoming “historical injustice” in relation to China, for which the “great powers”—the West and its neighbors (above all Japan)—are responsible, is expressed in the “Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”

The “theory of colonial exploitation” (an unambiguously negative assessment of the 1910-1945 period of Japanese colonial rule) that dominates the socio-political discourse in the Republic of Korea does not allow for full normalization of relations with Japan even though both countries are America’s military and political allies and have common security threats.

Similarly, Southeast Asian countries cannot agree with China on a “code of conduct” in the South China Sea, largely because of their centuries-old distrust of the Asian giant. There are also “historical grievances” in relations between China and the Republic of Korea, which are based on differences in the assessment of South Korea’s agency as an independent state during the Sino-centric period.

TERRITORIES OF DISCORD

Territorial divisions in the East are much more acute than in the West. The territorial problems of the South China and East China Seas have become a constant source of never-ending conflicts in relations between China and Japan, China and Vietnam, China and the Philippines, etc. These conflicts are connected with the legacy of the colonial system: the colonial powers set the borders between their overseas territories quite arbitrarily, without taking into account historical, geographical, demographic, economic, and other factors—their agreement among themselves was the main criterion. After the start of decolonization, respect for territorial integrity on the part of Western countries became a way of ensuring the independence of their former colonies (Jantis and Zacher, 2010, p. 306). European capitals understood that if even one border recorded on the colonial-era maps were questioned, mutual claims would snowball and engulf the entire Third World. Wars between former colonies would not help create a reliable and stable world order.

In the post-war period, marked by military-political rivalry between the West and the East, the inviolability of borders was sacred. It was based on the realization that violation of the ban on war between states (territorial conflicts are their most common type) could lead to a world nuclear clash. However the huge number

of inherited disputes has become an unpleasant “makeweight” to independence for many countries of the East. Most of these disputes are rooted in the lack of a legal framework that would fix the internationally recognized system of interstate borders. Such a system was not created during the colonial period because of contradictions between the parent states. In addition, the concept of state borders fixed by the Westphalian system did not exist in East Asia as it was simply not required within the framework of the Sino-centric vassal-tributary system (Koldunova, 2010, p. 83).

The Treaty of San Francisco signed in 1951, in fact, recorded the unsettled borders between Japan and its neighbors (China, the Republic of Korea, and the USSR) and planted a time bomb under the entire regional system of international relations. It failed to specify the clear geographical coordinates of the territories that Japan had abandoned at the end of World War II, and likewise failed to designate the beneficiary countries. This situation is fundamentally different from that in Europe, where, as a result of the post-war settlement and the Helsinki Final Act, which proclaimed the inviolability of borders in the continent, there are no territorial conflicts related to the results of the Second World War.

Unlike Western countries willing to regulate territorial conflicts by political and judicial methods, East Asian countries (and African-Asian countries in general) are not inclined to go to court, including the International Court of Justice, in order to resolve territorial disputes. This is due to the fact that this body gives priority to the existing system of agreements, which is extremely weak outside Europe. Most countries involved in conflicts are not ready to trust a third-party court.

American expert Barbara Walter shows the important role reputational considerations play in motivating countries involved in territorial conflicts (Walter, 2003, p. 138). Governments facing territorial claims take a tough stance and refuse to negotiate mainly because of the fear that any concessions will be perceived as a weakness and provoke more claims. But there is also a risk of losing face in the eyes of other states involved in a conflict, or third parties, for countries that initiate territorial claims, if they have to abandon or reduce them.

This provokes a tough attitude, even when flexibility would be desirable for the strategic interests of good neighborliness, and negotiations become stalled.

Border tensions continuing for decades and remaining acute in the post-bipolar period do not allow relations to be normalized, and the absence of a calm and benevolent atmosphere makes the resolution of border problems impossible. This vicious cycle creates a permanent crisis. In addition, the factor of deterrence previously ensured by the involvement of most post-colonial countries in the orbit of nuclear bipolarity receded into the background after the end of the Cold War. With the bonds to one of the two opposing camps gone, Afro-Asian countries started to pay less attention to the world political context and focused more on their own interests, in particular internal political ones, which are often interpreted from a selfish position and ignore international security requirements.

In the absence of common approaches to borders, the idea of launching some kind of a regional Helsinki process in East Asia, which would consolidate the principle of the inviolability of borders and the inadmissibility of territorial wars, becomes practically unrealizable (Sahni, 2004, p. 126). Countries of the region are, therefore, forced to reckon with the real possibility of changing the status quo by force.

HOW SECURITY IS UNDERSTOOD

The way the elites of many non-Western countries (including East Asia) perceive modern conflicts and respond to them, as evidenced by their state security policy, differs significantly from Western models. In the conditional West, the security agenda has gradually evolved from military and disarmament issues to integrated security, including environmental protection, climate change, development sustainability, food and energy. Featuring prominently on the agenda are new threats, which, unlike traditional problems related primarily to the security of the nation-state, are universal and transnational in nature and require coordinated efforts of all countries. Vivid examples are the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and other infections, global warming, international terrorism, and cybercrime.

In the East, the security agenda for the most part remains focused on the interests of the state (Beeson, 2014, p. 17). Behind them are the tasks mapped out by of the highest political elite, which, as a rule, have priority over transnational projects. When drafting national security projects (defense construction, strengthening of security services and others), the interests of the military and security forces, as well as business people close to the highest quarters are often one of the defining criteria. Challenges are formulated based on the nationalist perception of the surrounding world. These, to put it mildly, are not the most favorable prerequisites for building sustainable regional security systems. Self-isolation, inability to compromise and see problems in a broader context, and national egoism clash with common interests and become a source of conflict, including armed ones.

Personalist principles, autocratic traditions, and rigid forms of government prevail in the political regimes of many Asian countries (Howe, 2018, pp. 2-3). At the national level, this shifts the focus towards the need to provide personal security guarantees for the ruler and his inner circle, which are understood as key aspects of national security. Internationally, these issues could be a subject of bargaining and even behind-the-scenes deals between global-level powers. For example, the security of the DPRK is discussed largely as the personal security of the state leadership, not only the top leader, but also his entourage.

East Asian states, being the product of national liberation from colonial or semi-colonial dependence on the West, value their independence and national sovereignty to a much greater extent than European countries, which often quietly delegate part of their prerogatives, including foreign policy and security ones, to supranational institutions, as in the case of the EU or NATO.

In East Asian countries, the transfer of some sovereign rights to external entities is viewed as a partial loss of sovereignty, and therefore as transition to a dependent state. With a lack of value and especially moral and ethical justification for such a step, their own national interests have a clear priority over regional and interstate ones.

ETHNIC CONFLICTS

Another example exposing the specifics of conflicts outside Europe is the ethno-confessional sphere. Many Third World countries face ethnic and ethno-confessional conflicts when addressing the task of nation-building. With both internal and international political dimensions, such conflicts are much more volatile and aggressive than in the West, destabilizing the international political situation and creating sources of tension.

There is a view that inter-ethnic conflicts are most often provoked not by ethnic differences, but by political, economic, social, cultural or territorial problems (Reuter, n.d.). However ethnic and confessional conflicts in the East are caused by other structural, political, economic, socio-cultural, and perceptual reasons, and their dynamics is determined by factors that are different from those observed in the West.

Structural factors making up Afro-Asian specifics include weaker statehood than in the West. This, of course, does not apply to everyone. In fact, there are many quite stable and dynamic states in Asia. But there are also those who do not control their entire territory and face separatism incited by neighbors. There is also an ethno-geographic factor (which concerns almost everyone), namely the transnational nature of the resettlement of ethnic groups, which often have no proper representation in the central government bodies and fight for the right of self-determination.

Ethnic conflicts often occur where attempts are made to create united “nations” within the borders of centralized states for the sake of modernization. The acquisition of state sovereignty and territorial integrity after the declaration of independence in some cases was accompanied by steps towards forced assimilation of certain ethnic groups in the name of “nation-building.” Under the slogans of strengthening unity, some of the Third World states often suppressed the identity of small ethnic groups or national minorities and ignored their specific interests. Discriminatory practices were used where the borders drawn in the process of colonization and decolonization covered areas populated by various ethnic groups that had to get along with each other within one territorial-state unit that was unnatural or contrary to their political and economic interests.

Political factors in the region work differently than in the West. One of the main causes of ethno-confessional conflicts is a policy that belittles certain ethnic groups. This can include, for example, the denial of citizenship or political and economic rights, the use by the party of power of discriminatory socio-cultural practices against ethnic minorities, including their forced cultural and linguistic assimilation. Economic and social factors play an equally important role in creating conditions for potentially violent ethnic conflicts: employment discrimination against ethnic minorities, unfair distribution of national income from the point of view of non-titular populations, or a regional development policy for places populated predominantly by non-titular groups. All this contributes to the mobilization of minorities and predetermines an extremely acute and even irreconcilable nature of ethnic conflicts.

In the post-bipolar period, the trend towards democratization in previously authoritarian countries, which is going ahead as globalization progresses, has given ethnic minorities more opportunities. Broad international media coverage of discrimination against ethnic minorities has attracted world attention, which, in turn, has stimulated protests by ethnic groups for their self-determination (including Kurds' protests in Turkey and Syria, the Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan, riots in Tibet and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China).

Ethnically-driven separatist and irredentist movements creating the risk of disintegration and fragmentation of the state have become a big problem for many countries in Asia and Africa. But they have failed to achieve national self-determination, with the exception of some cases (Bangladesh, Eritrea, East Timor), remaining a serious source of not only internal, but also international conflicts (Singh, 2002).

EUROPE IS NOT AN EXAMPLE, BUT A RISK

The international security situation in East Asia has not changed significantly since the Cold War and is fundamentally different from that in Europe. This is the notorious hub-and-spoke system, which is characterized by the presence of the hegemon and its younger partners. The weakening of the United States and its dwindling military

presence (a process observed over several decades) has not led to the emergence of effective regional security mechanisms. Existing formats are purely dialogue in nature and do not imply binding decisions. Being committed to the inviolability of sovereignty, East Asian states do not want to constrain themselves with restrictions and lose their wiggle room. In addition, the effectiveness of multilateral measures is unpredictable due to uncertain prospects for the development of the international situation, fear of “black swans” and other reasons.

East Asian countries tend to push harder for pursuing an autonomous security policy as deglobalization increases and the international system becomes less and less manageable. The latest coronavirus pandemic has become one of the catalysts. States have reaffirmed their leading role in responding to crises and protecting sovereignty, using emergency economic management methods during abnormal periods and giving up international cooperation (Qingming, 2021, pp.11-12). “Pandemic nationalism” has undermined the authority of globalization institutions and the international order guided by the principles of multilateralism in addressing security problems.

But, of course, there are sources of conflict in Asia that are similar to those in Europe. For example, one of them is a decades-old conflict between China and its neighbors who are worried about Beijing’s growing assertiveness in the region. These are primarily the East Asian allies of the United States, which are trying to coordinate their efforts to “contain China.” This is consonant with the current conflict in Europe between Russia and the collective West.

China and Russia—two countries opposed to the “democratic camp”—call for a revision of the “norms and rules” established by the West as unfair. Both are experiencing a similar set of grievances against the collective West: China, for “a hundred years of humiliation” and the West’s dominance in the global governance institutions; Russia, for the West’s refusal to respect its interests after the collapse of the USSR and for NATO’s eastward expansion. The proximity of interests pursued by Russia and China concerns not the regional, but the global order, which is why these conflicts and the international crises they

cause can be regarded jointly as a manifestation of the global-level “anti-revisionist” strife.

So it seems that the experience of security institutions built in Europe in the second half of the 20th century does not work in Asia. But the threats that turned Europe into the most explosive part of the world in the last century appear to be quite relevant for Asia as well. They grow as the rivalry between the United States and China becomes the main element of international politics, provoking the militarization of the Asia-Pacific region and the general escalation of global tension.

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