

BOOK REVIEW

A Fragile Regional Peace

Explaining the East Asian Peace: A Research Story. Stein Tønnesson. Copenhagen, Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2017, 263 pp. US \$ 25.00 (Paperback), ISBN: 978-87-7694-223-6

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Recent events in East Asia—including North Korea’s unrelenting missile and nuclear testing, great power rivalries, interstate militarized disputes, maritime and island disputes, accelerated arms build-up, rising nationalism, and the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump and his “America First” foreign policy—seem to bode a grim future for the region. The two-decades long realist prediction of East Asia that is “ripe for rivalry” may have finally been realized (Friedberg, 1993). Stein Tønnesson, however, offered some hope in that despite all these unresolved disputes, the “developmental peace” may predominate through a “combination of security and economic risk... enough to keep governments away from the brink” (p. 154).

As head of the East Asia Peace program (2011–2016) in Uppsala University, Sweden, Tønnesson told his side of the story of this 6-year research program’s comprehensive analysis of East Asia’s transition from numerous and intensive warfare to relative peace. Tønnesson narrowly defined in his work the “absence of armed conflict” (p. 7) based on a “dramatic reduction in battle deaths” (p. 4); the program also raises debates on the quality and viability of the East Asian Peace. His work is one of the outcomes of the research program, and he presented his views and that of the

views, conclusions, and predictions of his colleagues in explaining the East Asian Peace. He methodologically traced the history of East Asia in the post-World War II period. Tønnesson argued that national priority shifts of political leaders, from internal and external conflict to the pursuit of economic growth as the national priority, resulted into the East Asian Peace. National leaders safeguarded both internal and external stability as a precondition for the developmental peace.

Tønnesson’s work originally drew insights from an academic article written by one of his colleagues in the research program, Timo Kivimäki. [Kivimäki, T. (2001). The long peace of ASEAN. *Journal of Peace Research*, 38(1), 5–25]. He linked the East Asian Peace to the rise of Chalmers Johnson’s (1999) “developmental state” model and Robert Wade’s (1990) “governed the market.” The East Asian Peace had a domino effect among East Asian political leaders through the process of learning, an element Tønnesson found crucial. He traced the roots of the developmental peace to Japan when their political elites shifted priority to economic development and the country embraced pacifism under the Yoshida Doctrine. After Japan pursued the route to pacifism, other states in the region began to perceive it as less threatening. This pacifist path was then gradually followed by the

national leaders of South Korea (Park Chung-hee), Indonesia (General Suharto), Singapore (Lee Kuan Yew), Malaysia (Mahathir Mohamad), and China (Deng Xiaoping); and much later, Vietnam and to a certain extent, Cambodia (Hun Sen). These countries prioritized internal and external stability to achieve economic growth, producing the developmental peace or relative peace that the region has experienced from the 1980s up to the present period.

As a peace researcher, while Tønnesson provides an optimistic rationalization of how the East Asian Peace came about, his conclusion of the viability of the peace is less sanguine. He argued that with the region's structural weaknesses, which "lacks solid cultural, normative, institutional and legal foundations" (p. 198), a viable regional peace is less likely. He also identified new factors based on recent events that "could disrupt the peace" (p. 198), but still found promise in the continuation of the developmental peace so long as economic integration continues in the region.

Tønnesson's *Explaining the East Asian Peace: A Research Story* is a delightful, easy-to-read for any audience, with a remarkable historical review of the Cold War East Asia, logical theoretical explanation, and up-to-date discussions of the region's most pressing events, with maps, tables, and figures that fit neatly in the text. Unlike dominant theoretical debates that seek to explain outcomes based on patterns of state interactions, his theoretical framework, East Asian Peace, focuses on individual state behavior and gives importance to the role of individual state leaders and foreign policy decision-making considerations.

It is an inspiring undertaking. Towards the middle and end of the book, however, the reader might start to wonder if there was an adequate discussion of the East Asian Peace in his four chapters. Studying the causes of peace, instead of war, is a tricky task, admitted Tønnesson (p. 31). Part I, which discussed his theoretical framework through a historical theoretical lens, explains a great deal about how the region transitioned from warfare to relative peace using two independent variables: how disputes did not turn violent, and how armed conflicts came to an end, to explain the dependent variable: conflict-related death (pp. 12–13). Part II focused on the rise of China, and he argued that China is "the key to the

future of the East Asian Peace" (p. 81). To come up with predictions of the Chinese future, however, he undertook a comprehensive review of well-known China watchers that use Western-language literature, which he magnificently compiled, but I felt was inconsistent with his historical analysis. His work also suffered from a hasty and abrupt end: after a lengthy literature compilation on China, Tønnesson then jumped to answer the debates on the quality of and the viability of the East Asian Peace in Part III, followed by his conclusion and recommendations. Perhaps since he gave due credence to Japan for the expansion of the developmental peace, a separate chapter analyzing Japan's role in the region might be an appropriate addition.

For developmental peace to hold, he concluded that powerful state leaders should continue concentrating their energies on the goal of economic development. Positive trends will prevail despite the troubling signs, and he placed the fate of the viability of the East Asian Peace through a combined nuclear deterrence and continued economic interdependence, which can constrain the actions of major powers crucial for the region's stability—USA-Japan-China. By combining economic interdependence and nuclear deterrence as key factors to maintain the peace, however, the former loses its explanatory power as the latter can stand on its own to explain why the region has not had an outbreak of a major war. In fact, the security risk of nuclear warfare was enough deterrence during the Cold War, and this risk still persists today. Why, for instance, does the U.S.A. hesitates to launch a pre-emptive strike on "rogue states" like North Korea when it can and has unilaterally demonstrated in the post-9/11. Fear of possible nuclear retaliation is more than enough restraint even for a country with superior military power.

Great powers will always play the great power game, which includes a combination of peaceful and unpeaceful means to peace in their relations. What has certainly mattered is national leaders' perceptions of the economic and security risks, and even Donald Trump admitted that certain issues looked different once he is in the oval office than when he was on the campaign trail. The biggest threat to the peace, however, may not always lie in the hands of bigger powers, but rather in

the hands of ambitious and unstable nuclear-power hopefuls like North Korea.

Power dynamics in the East Asian region is, indeed, becoming more complex. Many international relations experts concentrate their efforts on studying conflicts and the potential outbreak of warfare in the region, but Tønnesson's motivation comes from his desire to explain the region's relative peace, and whether that regional peace can be extended globally. His work, despite some of its limitations, provides a fresh perspective, valuable insights, and lessons. It is definitely a must-read to gain a broader understanding of the events happening in one of the world's most significant region to date.

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