The Centre for Democratic Institutions

DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY – WHAT RELEVANCE TO EAST ASIA?

According to Samuel Huntington, “the democratic peace thesis is one of the most significant propositions to come out of social science in recent decades. If true, it has crucially important implications for both theory and policy.” My purpose today is to take a glimpse at the theory and, because the democratisation literature is generally weak on Asia, ask whether democratic peace theory has any application to East Asia.

The basic thesis draws on concepts first advanced in the eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant on perpetual peace and on recent empirical work analysing international wars since 1817 (Michael Doyle, Bruce Russett, R J Rummel). The conclusion from the study of wars over the past two centuries is that while liberal states often go to war against non-liberal states, they tend to remain at peace with each other: between 1816 and 1991, of the 353 pairings of nations fighting in major international wars, none occurred between two democracies. President Clinton’s 1994 State of the Union address based a key plank of his foreign policy on this theory when he said: “Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don’t attack each other, they make better trading partners and partners in diplomacy.” The Community of Democracies, a grouping of 115 nations established under a Clinton initiative, had as one of its underlying premises “the interdependence between peace, development, human rights and democracy.” One of its goals was to create a multilateral democracy caucus but in the wake of 9/11, anti-terrorist alliances have carried more weight than democracy alliances. Nevertheless, democratic peace theory is an example of a social science theory having a clear and speedy impact on government policy.

The theory is not without its critics. Any statistically based theory is inevitably subject to scrutiny over the definitions it uses and the premises on which it is based and this certainly applies to the use of terms such as ‘liberal’ and ‘democracy’. More disturbing is the argument that while there may be truth in the proposition insofar as consolidated democracies are concerned, transitional democracies have shown themselves to be particularly war-like (Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder Foreign Affairs May 1995). The Mansfield/Snyder study focuses mainly on Europe, with much evidence coming from former parts of Soviet bloc. Their reasoning can be summarised in a few propositions: all change in governance systems brings volatility to interstate relations; mass participation systems need means of directing masses and in post-authoritarian period, aggressive nationalism becomes an effective means; new political elites, having defeated the previous autocracy, have difficulty in finding other organising political
ideas; some old elites, especially the military, benefit from conflict situations; and, with a weakening of state authority, there can be a search for popular victories abroad to demonstrate political strength at home.

Mansfield and Snyder argue that the solution is not to return to autocracy but to consolidate democracy through rule of law, civil society involvement, allowing a free press and ensuring competent representative governance. Some examples of successful transitions exist in central Europe and Latin America (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Chile, Costa Rica). Another factor of influence is the regional environment - whether there exists an interstate web of commitments, perhaps as well as a formal or informal guarantor of peace. Finally, they argue, a key tactic in the consolidation process is to offer golden parachutes to former elites in politics and in the military including through privatisation processes as a means of ending winner-take-all philosophies.

Before proceeding to apply the above analysis to East Asia, it is important to note that the theory does not have direct application to internal conflicts. Yet many of the most pressing security problems in East Asia concern internal conflicts. Looking at some of these, it is difficult to assert that democratisation has had any immediate peace dividend. Habibie’s agreement to East Timor’s act of self-determination flowed not from the democratisation process but more from executive weakness in the post-Suharto period. In this and other cases, there is also the problem of structure/agent analytical dilemma – whether the political structure or the political actor had the key determining influence. The Mindanao dispute festered under Marcos and Aquino, showed signs of resolution under Ramos, and then began to fray at the edges under Estrada – competence appears to be a more important distinction than democracy. The Papua issue was frozen under Suharto, defrosted under Gus Dur, and has reverted to the previous processes of persuasion and manipulation under Megawati – again it is difficult to see the impact of democratisation. The search for a resolution of the Aceh conflict should perhaps have been more susceptible to the greater influence of Islamic politics in current Indonesian democratic discourse but this has been counterbalanced by resort to force justified by nationalism under Megawati. So it difficult to draw any positive conclusion that the transition to democracy has contributed to the settlement of internal armed disputes in Southeast Asia.

Reverting to what might better be viewed as interstate conflicts in the region, there are several hotspots that draw our attention. There is a curious irony in Taiwan in that its democratisation process has emphasised nativist political views that lean towards Taiwanese sovereignty. Beijing has warned that a Taiwanese declaration of independence would be a *casus belli*. But this is a problem of Beijing’s reaction, not a case of transitions to democracy bringing about more conflict. Developments on the Korean peninsula also defy any assertion that the ROK’s democratisation has enhanced regional peace. Once again, democratisation in South Korea has little influence on DPRK’s irrationality and bellicosity. Turning to more classical interstate conflicts, the South China Sea remains an area of dispute and only two decades ago China and Vietnam skirmished. *Konfrontasi* on the other hand seems well behind us, and the hottest border among the ASEAN ten is probably the Thai-Burmese frontier.
Applying to East Asia Mansfield and Snyder’s three propositions militating for peace, democratic consolidation, regional structures and golden parachutes, leaves us with a mixed result. Can any state in East Asia be regarded as a consolidated democracy? The candidates are Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. The general tests are the holding of free and fair elections with genuine electoral contestation, Huntington’s test of at least two alternations of power through peaceful electoral means, and Przeworski’s work demonstrating statistically that democracy becomes impregnable at a certain income level (USD 6,000 per capita PPP in 1985 dollars). There may also be an emerging new test of whether political corruption is within tolerable limits or whether it has vitiates the legitimacy of electoral victory.

Looking at the Freedom House list of electoral democracies, Malaysia and Singapore are omitted because of the incumbent bias in the electoral and political process. The others are all included. Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines do not meet the economic target but this is not a disabling feature. Perhaps more important has been the irregular nature of power transfer in the Philippines following Edsa II and the need for more evidence of electoral transitions in Indonesia and Thailand. All three also have significant problems of political corruption. Political corruption is again a problem in the remaining three candidates. The KMT in Taiwan was prepared to hand over power after an election loss. This pattern needs to be repeated. There may be doubts about the extent of political contestation in Japan but we might conclude that Japan, Korea and perhaps even Taiwan might now qualify as consolidated democracies.

With regard to the pacific influence of regional architecture, the key institution is ASEAN. Its great success has been to make war between the original members of ASEAN virtually unthinkable. Government to government relations among ASEAN countries are strong while people-to-people relations are less so. But the real problem within ASEAN is with the new members and in particular Burma. A poverty stricken country with a shrinking economy run by an incompetent military is a recipe for conflict, not peace. And transitions from communism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam could yet cause interstate friction. While China and the United States are powerful actors in the region, neither could be described as a peace-imposing hegemon.

The final factor listed by Mansfield and Snyder, golden parachutes, is a two-edged sword. Banishing winner-take-all politics is an important ingredient in democratic consolidation but the effect of placating the old authoritarian elites in Southeast Asia has been to maintain the influence of the military in national politics. That influence seems clear in Indonesia where the formal elimination of reserved seats for the military in parliament has been countered by its continuing territorial role and its remaining strong informal influence in national and provincial politics. In the Philippines, the ultimate reason why Estrada was forced from power and why the ‘idealist’ young military officers’ coup was defeated was the decision of the military brass to back Gloria in both contestations. And in Thailand, the military may well have been forced from political power but it is still a significant player in the economy, retaining influence in the transportation, communications and private security sectors as well as less open money generating
activities. As one of the facets of democratic consolidation is civilian control over the military, the golden parachutes regime practiced in Southeast Asia may not be as beneficial as it might seem at first blush.

So where does this analytical gallop through the region leave us? East Asia is clearly embarked on a process of democratisation. That process is in its early transition stage and very few if any nations in the region can confidently be classed as consolidated democracies. The bottom line proposition derived from democratic peace theory is that consolidated democracies do not make war on each other. So that simply tells us something not particularly startling: that Japan, Korea and Taiwan will not go to war with each other. The caveat on democratic peace theory in relation to transition democracies is more worrying. Transition democracies tend to be more war-like in their international relations according to the statistical and analytical studies. This places considerable attention on countries in Southeast Asia. There is also a continuing problem of internal conflict that seems to be impervious to the influence of democratisation in its transition stage. The underlying conclusion to be drawn is to place even more emphasis on the importance of working for the consolidation of democracy in our region. Whereas there is broadly seen to be governance and development dividends from democratic consolidation, democratic peace theory tells us that there is also likely to be an eventual peace dividend.

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