

Elusive East Asia: *Methodological* Suggestions for the Study of East Asian Security

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Abstract

This article attempts to fill a gap in International Relations (IR) literature on East Asian security. ‘East Asia’ appears to be mostly an indeterminate conceptual construct, allowing scholars to look selectively at those aspects and areas that could justify their security thesis, *albeit* security dynamics in the region are all too difficult to comprehend and predict. This problem has been frequently pointed out in IR literature, but its *methodological* implications and suggestions have neither been appropriately illuminated nor been systematically offered, and the main solution commonly found in the literature was the tautological one of ‘better defining’ the region. As an alternative, this article suggests that one needs to tighten geographical focus and differentiate the subjects of analysis. When it comes to the study of East Asian security, one needs to aim to develop specific and differentiated generalizations *as opposed to* generalizations of a broad character. To showcase the fact that research outcomes can be more determinate when the target of analysis is more focused and specified, this article takes Northeast Asian security as an example and challenges the so-called ‘peaceful East Asia’ thesis, one of the mainstream perspectives on East Asian security. This article ultimately argues that while apprehending East Asian security dynamics *through* delimiting the scope of analysis and circumscribing the subjects of investigation is often deemed to be a modest enterprise—in particular, in terms of generalizability—the merits are substantial: research outcomes will be able not only to give us a truer mapping of the real world, but also bring us closer to building knowledge which satisfies the scientific criterion of ‘falsifiability.’

* I am very grateful to three anonymous reviewers and Takashi Inoguchi, the editor of JJPS, for their thoughtful suggestions and valuable feedback on earlier versions of this article. Also, I would like to thank Shaun Breslin for his continued support of my work. I gratefully acknowledge the following institution for providing financial support: Hanyang University (20160000000558).

1. Introduction: problematizing existing approaches to the study of East Asian security

Security dynamics in East Asia appear to be all too difficult to observe and predict. As compared with Europe, for example, East Asia faces more challenges and difficulties that clog observers' attempts at pinning down the present and/or the future regional security orders and configurations – be it the increasing power competition *and* growing economic interdependence between the existing hegemonic state and rising powers from the realist and liberalist perspectives or the perceptual change in the identities of emerging Asian countries and multiculturalism in wider Asia-Pacific from a constructivist (or linguistic) perspective.¹ What makes the task of apprehending East Asian security more complicated is the need to define the region. Asia-Pacific, Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia are all deemed to be valid regional categorizations.² Among many, East Asia is a regional 'vision' that has captured the imagination of a high proportion of IR scholars, as demonstrated by the number of works in the first footnote; it has been so for good reasons. East Asia offers a middle ground between a vast Asia-Pacific on the one hand, and more limited, somewhat partial regions on the other.

However, East Asia as such is also stretched and bent in so many ways that it has become almost 'a conceptual construct', rather than a specific geopolitical (i.e. empirical) entity (see, for a similar observation, Breslin, 2007). Do I want to stress the role of the United States? Then let me talk about an East Asia that in reality should be called Asia-Pacific. Do I want to show that East Asia has been a site of power struggles? Then let me still speak of East Asia, but I will anyway concentrate on the putative rivalry of Japan–China.

With these two problems of the complex political reality underlying East Asia and lax understandings or, more to the point, arbitrary treatments of the region and the security dynamics in it, scholars often look selectively at those aspects/areas that could justify their thesis while overly *generalizing* their findings. For example, consider briefly for the moment the so-called 'peaceful East Asia' thesis, one of the mainstream perspectives on East Asian security. Based on an implicit premise that the concept of peace can be interchangeable with the absence of war, the thesis focuses its analytical attention on the simple fact that there have been almost no major armed conflicts between states in the region since the end of the Cold War and then delivers its verdict of a 'peaceful East Asia'. This line of reasoning, however, encourages ignorance of the

¹ There is a voluminous literature that demonstrates this point. See, for example, Buzan and Segal (1994); Roy (1994); Betts (1993/94); Segal (1996); Cossa *et al.* (1997); Alagappa (1998); Christensen (1999); Dupont, (1999); Bessho (1999); Ross (1999); Kang (2003/04); Suh *et al.* (2004); Pempel (2005); Beeson (2007); Goh (2008); Katsumata (2009); Hagstrom (2012); Kang, (2013); Shimizu and Bradley (2014).

² See, for a representative case, Ikenberry and Mastanduno's 2003 edited volume. More specifically, this edited book in which 14 leading analysts, including G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, are involved intends to understand the political and economic future of the broad Asia-Pacific region based on the working premise that stability in the region is in large part a function of the behavior of, and relationships among three powers, namely China, Japan, and the United States.

lingering security tensions in the region, which in turn discourages important linkage studies between the emerging conditional peace and dormant, yet not inconsequential, regional suspicions and confrontations.³ Of course, much the same can be said about the reverse line of ‘peaceful East Asia’ reasoning: those arguing East Asia is ‘ripe for rivalry and war’ also give exclusive or discrete explanatory priority to the conflictual side of East Asian security dynamics. Yet the effect of doing this – regardless of what lines of arguments one might take – is to flatten out the rich and diverse textures of the reality. Although the thesis attempts to become ‘all encompassing’ (Iida, 2015: 431), East Asia, in effect, appears as far less interesting, more one-dimensional, than it should do. Additionally, such an underdeveloped and one-sided evaluation of regional security dynamics often adds up to entailing a pick-and-mix type of study, allowing scholars to readily manipulate their findings in order to suit their pre-set research objectives. The result is that various parts of the broad region *do not fit* when disassembled and assembled again. The question is, can the same East Asia be at the same time ‘ripe for rivalry’ and ‘set for stability’?

The foregoing discussion, then, invites us to pause for a moment and ask an often-unrecognized yet crucial question about the *methodology* for the study of East Asian security, namely ‘how to assess the regional security and the evolution of regional security orders more effectively’. Here I argue for a more specified and non-linear analytical approach in which intentions and outcomes, and wider regions and sub-regions are juxtaposed, respectively. This suggestion is premised upon an epistemological injunction that the aim of East Asian security study should lie in developing ‘conditional’ (or contingent) generalizations so as to understand and capture the co-existence of lingering tensions with ‘minimalist’ peace.

I illustrate this point with the example of Northeast Asia, a sub-region of the greater East Asian area. More specifically, I first survey in more detail problems associated with definitions of East Asia and the research conclusions following on from them. In the second section, I bring the lax logic of the ‘peaceful East Asia’ thesis into sharp relief by zooming in on Northeast Asia from which almost all security tension in East Asia gravitates. Empirical findings show that while it is a part of East Asia, the sub-regional security dynamics do not support the ‘peaceful’ thesis. By way of conclusion, I will then end by elaborating on methodological and epistemological positions well-suited to becoming sensitive and attentive to the complex and dynamic reality underlying East Asian security. Here I suggest that rather than prioritizing the task of generalizing from the cases studied to the wider population, which runs the risk of ‘conceptual stretching’ (Sartori, 1970: 1033) we ought to focus on the development of limited-range analysis and theory. That is, one should delimit geographically the scope of analysis and differentiate analytically the objects of investigation and then focus on making

³ I will discuss this point in greater detail in later sections. Here suffice it for the moment to problematize the line of reasoning invoked by the thesis.

specific and differentiated generalizations – as opposed to probabilistic generalizations of a broad character.

2. Elusive East Asia

The problem with defining ‘East Asia’ has often been acknowledged in the IR literature. Jong-Kun Choi and Chung-in Moon, for example, have drawn our attention to the ‘blurred geographic focus’ that haunts studies of the Eastern hemisphere (Choi and Moon, 2010: 349). Similarly David Kang (2003: 60) writes that ‘the concept of “Asia” lends itself to highly problematic and often sweeping generalizations’. Going a step further, James Stockwin (1995) states that “‘Asia’ is a more elusive concept than is often realized”; this is especially so given that the term ‘Asia’ often refers to a geographic area that ‘takes in Russia and Japan, encompasses the entire Pacific Ocean including Australia, and ranges as far west as India and Pakistan’. Asia is sometimes defined so that it comprises ‘perhaps half the world’s population’ (Kang, 2003: 58–60). If we look at a map, however, we perceive that this would be a narrow definition of Asia, for we would leave out stretches of central and southwest Asia: countries such as Kazakhstan, Iran, and Afghanistan. In this regard, David Kang, calling for paying greater attention to ‘definitions of the Asian region and its subsystems’ (Kang, 2003/4: 180), offers his solution to this elusive (East) Asia and the poor definition, which is to refer to specific ‘countries’. Amitav Acharya, however, takes issue with Kang’s suggestion, criticizing country-specific work for its tendency to focus on great powers (Acharya, 2004: 163).

Against this background, East Asia has seemed to become a moveable feast: it is a concept so loosely defined that it travels across the Eastern hemisphere, staying once here and once there. In the classic definition of John Fairbank, Edwin Reischauer, and Albert Craig (1978), ‘East Asia consists of Japan, China, and Korea, and to a lesser extent Vietnam’ (Fairbank *et al.*, 1978; Calder and Ye 2010: 106). However, Acharya – following Hellmann (1969) – asserts that there is a ‘surprising degree of consensus’ that East Asia includes ASEAN, China (with Taiwan), Japan, and Korea (Acharya, 2008: 303). On the other hand, Robert Kaplan (2011: 17) maintains that ‘East Asia is a vast, yawning expanse stretching nearly from the Arctic to Antarctic – from the Kuril Islands southward to New Zealand – and characterized by a scattered array of isolated coastlines and far-flung archipelagos’, whereas Suh *et al.* (2004) focus on Japan, China, and Korea in their book, *Rethinking Security in East Asia*.

In other instances, East Asia has been created from a national seed. Cornell University used to have a China Program, which alongside the importance of Japan grew to become a ‘China–Japan Program’ in 1972. It expanded further in 1988 to incorporate Korea – to become the ‘East Asia Program’ (see, for example, Pemple, 1997; Katzenstein and Shiraishi, 1997). Interestingly, there is a difference in how British and American dictionaries define ‘the East’. According to the *Longman Advanced American Dictionary*, the East means ‘the countries in Asia, especially China, Japan, and Korea’, and according to the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, the East means ‘Asia, especially its eastern and southern parts’. Definitions of East Asia are also subject to

parochial interests. As noted, Acharya accuses Kang's work – published in the journal *International Security* – of essentially focusing solely on Northeast Asia, neglecting the Southeast. 'An Asian security studies field can and should draw more from Southeast Asia's pathways to regional order', he writes (Acharya, 2004: 163). But, in an article published in the same journal, Richard Betts treats East Asia differently: he defines the region as 'the area from Japan to Burma [Myanmar]' while excluding India for 'analytical convenience'. India emerges, in this respect, as a big question in the debate on East Asia. This goes from excluding India – as does Betts (1993/94) or Kang (2003) – to 'perhaps' India (in Friedberg 1993) as far as advocating for India, or South Asia, to be included (Friedberg, 1993, 2005; see also Betts, 1993/94; Kang, 2003).

'Competing definitions are often inclusive or exclusive exercises in the politics of representation' (Higgott, 1994: 68). The opt-in logic underlies how the Asia-Pacific region was created. This is well presented in the statement of James Baker who served as Secretary of State in George H.W. Bush's cabinet. 'Pacific century was rapidly becoming fact . . . My job was to make sure that the United States would be a major part of it' (quoted in Ba 2009: 147). The appending of 'Pacific' to Asia is, in some quarters, seen as an 'exercise to incorporate Asia into a larger unit in which the US maintains the principal role' (Higgott, 1994: 91). Meanwhile, Aaron Friedberg takes a different view that does not include the United States in his definition of Asia (Friedberg, 1993 : 31), while still regarding the United States as 'the single most important player in the present drama' of *the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (Friedberg, 2011). In his recent book, he adds as following: 'When the Cold War ended, the Pacific Ocean became, in effect, an American lake' (Friedberg, 2011: 26). The use of a hyphen in the term 'Asia-Pacific' has been a code for defining the region on the basis of East Asia, but including participants from other places (Evans, 2005: 205). This is in line with Peter Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara (2001/02: 155). Consider, for example, the introduction of their article: '[we] have chosen Asia-Pacific as the most general concept that encompasses US relations with Asia'. But scholars such as Muthiah Alagappa or Amitav Acharya oppose this practice by taking 'Asia' as a sole unit of analysis. In their words: 'Though it has been fashionable to use the term Asia Pacific and to delimit Asia to East Asia, it is becoming increasingly clear from conceptual and policy perspectives that Asia (not Asia Pacific) is the security region' (Alagappa, 2003; Acharya, 2008: 327–8).

Viewed in this light, prospects for a regionally specific and coherent security arrangement/order in the Asia-Pacific seems to be poor. *But* it is right here that we ought to ask ourselves the following question: Did somebody tell us that we need to speak of 'Asia-Pacific'? In a way, we have created this region, and we now have a self-fulfilling prophecy where chances for a security arrangement are low. If this is so, why not create in our heads a more condensed and coherent region? East Asia has always been 'the unspoken centre of Asia-Pacific' (Evans, 2005: 205). Yet, neither the area defined around the Pacific, nor any selective choice (parochial interests or the East Asia of the great powers) manage to capture the essence of East Asia. It is not sound scholarly practice that we give ourselves the option to include/exclude countries

as vast as Australia or India in our working definition of East Asia, and especially in such an important area as security. When we assemble these various analyses and start comparing them, we find ourselves comparing research outcomes under seemingly the *same* headline of ‘East Asian security’ that de facto analyze *diverging* regions: East Asia with or without Australia, with or without India, to give only a few examples. The key question is, then, ‘What is a more fruitful way of studying such an elusive region as East Asia?’ Before offering methodological suggestions as to how to study the region more effectively, I will further discuss problems associated with the pick-and-mix approach to the study of the elusive East Asia with a focus on the issue of security and peace.

3. Elusive peace

As the research agendas become more consolidated, the terms start to acquire an individual meaning that becomes a shortcut to some understandings. In this sense, I believe that ‘East Asia’ ceased to be a (regional) unit of academic inquiry, becoming an argument *in itself*. This problem, namely arbitrary treatments or conceptualizations of East Asia, is exacerbated when it meets the *security* issue of the region. Let us take an example from the so-called ‘peaceful East Asia’ thesis, one of the mainstream perspectives on East Asian security (see, e.g., Kivimaki, 2008; Tønnesson, 2009; Choi, 2006; Alagappa, 2003: 11; Kivimaki, 2014). While highlighting that there have been almost no major wars between states in the region since the end of the Cold War, the thesis draws a determinate conclusion of a ‘peaceful East Asia.’ To be sure, East Asia has been peaceful: since the end of the Cambodian War in 1990, there has been no war between nations in Asia. This is the reality that we can observe with the naked eye. However, this observation ought to be understood in *relative* terms. Put otherwise, it has been peaceful *not* on an absolute scale but relative to other regions, namely the Middle East or Europe, and to other types of security, such as organized armed violence or military friction.

Moreover, one cannot define ‘peace’ as the absence of war. An absence is not an outcome. There is a difference between peace and peaceful intentions, just as there is a difference between hostile intentions and outbreaks of hostility, i.e. military attack. When East Asia is described as peaceful, it is when peace is defined as the absence of war. This ‘peace’, which rests on an absence, is, at best, *conditional*. It depends on the *immaterialization* of threatening intentions and dangerous words and plans. This is an ‘elusive’ outcome indeed. As Stephan Haggard has aptly put it, whether we are discussing peace or war, we are constrained in achieving a determined answer ‘because of the elusive quality’ of the issues being explored (Haggard, 2004: 1). Nonetheless, equipped with an implicit and, to a certain extent unavoidable, contentious premise that peace can be understood by reference to ‘a warless state’, the ‘peaceful East Asia’ thesis reaches its own unequivocal verdict, a verdict that only reflects one side of the complex, manifold equation of East Asian security and then discusses ‘what factors created the peace of East Asia’ (Yan, 2008).

In an essay under a telling title, ‘The imagined community of East Asia’, Acharya (2008: 327) defines a ‘vision’ as an ‘imagined outcome.’ Similarly to the imagined community, scholars have studied ‘visions’ of a peaceful East Asia, a mistake compounded by East Asia being a vision itself. In this regard, Acharya warns that ‘[s]ome acts of imagination carry a strong dose of *wishful thinking* that remains unfulfilled’ (Acharya, 2008: 328). The route which scholars have taken to arrive at the conclusion of ‘peaceful East Asia’ has been mired in just such a methodological flaw. In other words, this implicit focus on outcomes has permitted scholars to justify their ‘peaceful East Asia thesis’.

Here much the same can be said about the opposite end of the thesis. While there is little that would attract the attention of those studying ‘hard security’, such as war, there is much going on in terms of institutionalization, trade, and economic interdependence in East Asia; as such, some security analysts tend to ‘triumph over’ hostile intentions, although they have *not* been materialized or fulfilled. They often assert that ‘all the major players – Japan, China, Korea, Russia, and Vietnam – are candidates to become involved in a large-scale war’ or that ‘China cannot rise peacefully, and if it continues its dramatic economic growth over the next few decades, the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war’ (see, e.g., Layne, 1996: 72; Brzezinski and Mearsheimer, 2005; Bracken, 1999; Friedberg, 1993; Mearsheimer, 2001; Friedberg, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2010; Kaplan, 2011; Farley, 2015).

The corollary of this – regardless of what lines of arguments one might take – is to reduce the comparability to or cumulativeness with studies in the same academic field: although scholars, indeed, study different *aspects* of East Asian security with different *sub-regions* while either ignoring local differences or overplaying them, they often suggest that their findings are applicable to the whole East Asian security. As a result, when comparing them, we find ourselves comparing research outcomes under seemingly the *same* headline of ‘East Asian security’ that *de facto* analyze *different* regions. For this, their research outcomes hardly speak to each other, and their findings are resistant to comparison; and this in turn hinders the much-needed cumulative growth of theoretical knowledge for progress in the field. A discussion of Northeast Asia,⁴ a key sub-region in East Asia, will illustrate this point further.

An Empirical illustration: Northeast Asia, a sub-region that does not fit in

As mentioned above, in the study of contemporary East Asian security, it is not unusual to find the claim that the region has remained ‘remarkably peaceful

⁴ I define Northeast Asia as those countries of the Asian northeast that have also made it into the mainstream vision of East Asia, in order to illuminate a tension between subordinate Northeast Asia and overarching East Asia. These countries are Japan, China, and South and North Korea. Mongolia and Russia feature in some definitions of Northeast Asia, but rarely East Asia – thus, I exclude them from Northeast Asia here.

and prosperous.⁵ And one of the most commonly cited data sources to endorse the contention is that ‘the annual number of battle deaths from interstate and intra-state conflicts in East Asia has declined by 95% since 1979’ (see, for a recent example, Kivimäki’s 2014 monograph entitled ‘The Long Peace of East Asia’) Yet if we accept the ‘peace thesis’ for East Asia, then the instability of Northeast Asia comes across as a big surprise. In effect, even since the end of the Cold War Northeast Asia has been a region which displays not just hostile intentions, rhetoric, and strategies, but also physical conflicts that have claimed people’s lives in that region. Consider the 2010 North Korean artillery attack on South Korea, which killed two South Korean civilians and two Marines. Also observe the naval clashes between Seoul and Pyongyang in the Yellow Sea in June 2002, which claimed dozens of lives and one naval ship.

Several outstanding territorial conflicts in Northeast Asia are another case in point. The disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, for instance, have become involved in a three-way tug of war between China, Taiwan, and Japan with each sending fishing boats, even armed vessels, to the area. Specifically, in September 2012 Japanese and Taiwanese patrol ships fired water cannons at each other near the Islands.⁶ More recently, a destroyer and a helicopter of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force were targeted by a Chinese navy vessel’s fire-control radar; this was clear ‘a signal that Chinese forces were ready to shoot them in an instant’ (Iida, 2015: 432). Although such territorial disputes have not *yet* generated major armed conflicts among those concerned states, the disputes frequently lead to coastguard standoffs and diplomatic rows creating downward spirals of confrontation (Lee, 2011). In terms of the lurking bellicosity of Northeast Asia, a crisis point reached in the Taiwan Strait should also not be overlooked. Consider annually conducted large-scale air and naval maneuvers off China’s southeast coast which demonstrate the Chinese leadership’s determination to project hard power in view of tension in the Taiwan Strait. ‘Should [Taiwan] be bold enough to concoct major events [in the direction] of independence, we shall take drastic measures to uphold national sovereignty and territorial integrity at any cost’ said Cao Gangchuan, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission and former Minister of National Defense of China (Lam, 2007: 1–2).

⁵ For example, see the cover story of *Global Asia* (2011) entitled ‘Peace & Prosperity in East Asia: Are They Linked? Will They Last?’. As the title implies, the working premise of this cover story is that ‘Asia’s economic rise in recent decades has been accompanied by an unprecedented period of peace’ (<http://www.globalasia.org/issue/peace-prosperity-in-east-asia>, accessed 20 May 2015). In addition, when we approach security specialists across the region with a question on conflicts in East Asia, the answer tends to be: ‘conflicts? Which conflicts?’; a widespread belief appears to be that even the North Korean regime is calculative. A series of interviews were conducted at Seoul, Korea, Sydney University, Australia, and at Kyushu University, Japan between December 2013 and July 2014.

⁶ Also consider the fact that ties between Japan and South Korea have been put under strain by a territorial row over an island, known as Dokdo in Korea and Takeshima in Japan.

It is in this respect that many scholars have provided their ‘top three’ flashpoints in (East) Asia, all of which are concentrated in Northeast Asia. For Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, they are: Japan’s ‘historical shadow’, the Taiwan-China issue, and North Korea (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 152). For Hiro Katsumata (2009: 10), the key East Asian security issues are the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and Sino-Japanese rivalry. Peter Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara (2001/02: 174) identify the conflicts on the Korean Peninsula, across the Taiwan Strait, and in the South China Sea as the three most pressing security issues in *wider Asia*. Keisuke Iida (2015: 432) adds that the territorial disputes between Tokyo and Beijing have ‘reached a boiling point . . . and they could easily lead to full-blown military clashes if there were not handled properly’.

Seen in this context, it can be said that the malign intentions and hostile activities of the Northeast Asian states are minimized, if not downright ignored, within the ‘peaceful East Asia’ thesis *while* the absence of war and growing economic interdependence in the region are overemphasized. Such a focus on this absence has been the cause of undue attention being paid to tensions and confrontational intentions. Assuredly, some flashpoints in Northeast Asia might appear to merely be questions of intentions; yet some are not. If any interested party closely examines the recent security events of Northeast Asia, s/he can only cast doubt on the validity of the optimists’ arguments that the Northeast Asian regional states have maintained their commitment to ‘peace and the ability to tolerate crises’ (Choi, 2006: 19).

Indeed, the more we focus, the less peace we see. Northeast Asia is a region where ‘we must be concerned in the first instance with the prospects for militarized crises and war’ (Haggard, 2004: 1). In Kent Calder and Min Ye’s words (2010: 186, 258), ‘the central geopolitical challenges in Asia . . . have shifted northward, with Korea and the Taiwan Straits replacing Vietnam as Asia’s principal flashpoints . . . [Northeast Asia] is the site of the most immediate threats to peace and security in the region’. And this is what differentiates it from East Asia, where we ponder broadly conceived stability as opposed to ‘rivalry’. The bottom line is that it is not reasonable to depict Northeast Asia as either a stable or a peaceful region.

The following question then raises its head: ‘After all, shouldn’t claims made about a region be applicable to its very own *sub-region*?’ We have a Northeast Asia, marked by power competition, hegemonic rivalry, and territorial conflicts, that is also nestling in the ‘peaceful’ East Asian region. To repeat, can the same East Asia be at the same time ‘ripe for rivalry’ *and* ‘set for stability’? Although Northeast Asia is a sub-region of East Asia, the two are full of contradictions. Studying East Asia should be useful for understanding Northeast Asia; yet because of the way that East Asia has been portrayed and studied, it is not. Although Northeast Asia has its own distinctive security dynamics *independent of* wider Asia, let alone the international system, the existing literature has failed to pay appropriate attention to ‘the issue of sub-regional disaggregation and differentiation’ (Choi and Moon, 2010: 245).

Considering this, the real question would seem to distill down to such a simple, but critical, question as ‘What exactly do we want to explain?’

4. How to study East Asian security more effectively

Analytical problems

As seen above, malign intentions and hostile behaviors permeate throughout Northeast Asia; nevertheless East Asia (which geographically contains Northeast Asia) is conventionally depicted as remaining 'surprisingly peaceful.' In particular, the 'peaceful East Asia' thesis concentrates its explanatory attention too much on the outcome of the absence of war in the region. But, by tightening geographical focus and differentiating the subjects of investigation, we can recognize that the peace in East Asia is, indeed, *conditional on* what and where exactly we want to examine.

The same mistake also cuts across the other end of the spectrum of the thesis: as with the advocates of the 'peaceful East Asia' thesis, those arguing that East Asia is 'ripe for rivalry', and that 'Asia's future will resemble Europe's past' give exclusive or discrete explanatory priority to hostile intentions and activities centered on the sub-region of Northeast Asia *while* downplaying the facts that wider East Asia has long been free from major wars, and economic interdependence and political institutions are increasing and proliferating in the region.

What the foregoing discussion suggests is, then, rather straightforward: in the study of East Asian security, there is a need to *unpack* the regional dynamics both geographically and according to the subjects of analysis. Put otherwise, a more specified and non-linear analytical approach in which intentions and outcomes, and wider regions and sub-regions are differentiated will be able to bring about greater analytical purchase. To be sure, the analytical position advocated here does not have an ability to formulate testable predictions about how East Asian security dynamics are likely to pan out. Rather it is something akin to pre-theorizing practice. As such, *methodologically*, it can serve both as a useful mode of explanation and as a progressive model of theory building and theory refinement because it helps us recognize the inconsistency of intentions and outcomes, thereby encouraging linkage studies between the emerging 'conditional' peace and dormant, yet not inconsequential, regional tensions and confrontations. More importantly, it also leads us to exercise a necessary degree of *analytical caution* in terms of shunning over-stretched research findings. On top of all this, the alternative analytical approach can be used as a useful way of *adjudicating* the veracity of competing claims with respect to East Asian security.

The acute problem commonly identified in the study of East Asian security is that we tend to conflate incompatible security aspects and confuse distinctive geopolitical arrangements while overly expanding and generalizing our findings. Such a mistaken conflation of outcomes with intentions, parallel with the mistaken confusion of a sub-regional cleavage and a wider regional characteristic ultimately entail the result that East Asia becomes almost an indeterminate 'conceptual construct' rather than a specific geopolitical entity. That is, various parts of the region *do not fit* when disassembled and assembled again in an empirical sense. Consequently the comparability to or

cumulativity with studies in the same academic field of the East Asian security is to be reduced significantly. Nevertheless, the analysis of East Asian security continues to be cast in the form of *generalization* of a *broad* character.

Methodological and epistemological implications and suggestions

The foremost methodological and epistemological injunction that flows from the discussions thus far is, then, to scale down our ambitions for the construction of a broad, all-encompassing assessment and theory in the first place when it comes to the study of East Asian security. Rather than prioritizing the task of generalizing from the cases studied to the wider population, which runs the risk of ‘conceptual stretching’ (Sartori, 1970: 103–53), we ought to *delimit* geographically the scope of analysis and *differentiate, circumscribe* the subjects of analysis with the aim of making specific and differentiated generalizations, as opposed to probabilistic generalizations of a broad character. As was seen in the previous sections, the existing approaches to the study of East Asian security have failed to achieve high internal validity/consistency; thus what we need to do first is to achieve internal validity with limited-range analysis or theory. The point is: ‘How can external validity be achieved when internal validity is in doubt?’ (Bueno de Mesquita, 1985: 127).

Of course, in epistemological terms, producing knowledge of *limited* scope appears to be a modest enterprise; in particular, in terms of generalizability. The implications of unpacking security dynamics per sub-region, for example, are bound to be narrower than those of the study of wider regions, let alone of international systems. Moreover, generalizability, or generality, is often seen as the single most important measure of progress in the study of the social and political world: for instance, Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba’s *Designing Social Inquiry* – which has ‘become very influential as a guiding light of analysis in political science and IR’ (Kurki, 2006:195) – stresses that ‘the question is less whether . . . a theory is false or not . . . than *how much of the world the theory can help us explain*’ (King *et al.*, 1994: 101).

Yet doubtless the generality of social and political phenomena is an open question. Our world is not organized according to linear causality. In particular, East Asian international security and politics are full of complexity, intricacy, and variety. There is no escaping the fact that states in East Asia operate with diverse challenges in view and disparate objectives in mind: recall the fact that the security spectrum of East Asia cannot be fully understood by exclusive reference either to intentions or to outcomes. East Asia, both geographically and in the security sense is too complex to aspire to having a full account of all the dynamics at work. All of this calls into question the prioritization of the development of a formal model applicable to the wide range of security matters and political phenomena occurring in East Asia – a region ‘containing states with vastly different levels of development, with different versions of domestic capitalism, different domestic political structures’ (Breslin, 2007: 26), and ‘competing security agendas’ (Hughes, 2004: 148).

Additionally, the epistemological primacy granted to broad generalization or grand theorizing impedes development of the empirical and theoretical knowledge necessary to understand the complex ‘reality’ underlying regional security and politics of East Asia. In order to render analysis applicable across regions and phenomena, for example, our findings must perforce be stated in highly general terms. Yet such broad generalizations are ill-suited to understanding the puzzles about East Asian security – as seen in the example of the *inconsistency* between a conflictual Northeast Asia and a peaceful East Asia. On the contrary, specific and differentiated generalizations, commonly associated with the research findings gained from the analysis of East Asia at the level of sub-region, can be the ones closer to a true mapping of the real world, particularly given the different regional dynamics in East Asia. This indicates that carefully circumscribed scopes and scope conditions of observations and theoretical claims will be able to bring us more immediate and substantial explanatory and predictive merits.

What is more, our deliberate efforts to restrict the scope of empirical observation and specify theoretical propositions can produce a type of knowledge that satisfies one of the most important criteria for judging *scientific* knowledge: ‘falsifiability’ (Popper [1959], 2002). A well-specified and well-circumscribed approach leads, by its nature, to reifying the conditions under which its propositions and claims are likely to be true or false; and more detailed and explicit causal linkages among variables can be found with the approach. As such, it enables us to carry out rigorous empirical tests on the validity of theoretical claims or theses. In the words of Robert Jervis (1985: 128): ‘the more we spell out the links in the theory, the more relationships there are which will be available for testing ... [This] often leads to modifying and deepening one’s understanding of the theory itself.’ Put differently, the possibility of achieving high internal validity is enhanced by the explicitness of assumptions and scope conditions in that the latter allows observers to see more clearly whether the propositions match up with the empirical outcome. With *specifically* stated boundary and scope conditions, we would know whether the analysis was intended to apply to ‘this’ (e.g., intentions) or ‘that’ (e.g., outcomes) and whether the critic makes a valid empirical observation of ‘this’ (e.g., a wider region of East Asia) or ‘that’ (a sub-region of Northeast Asia).

By contrast, a broad and general approach merely asserts a probabilistic relationship without a clear indication of the logical linkages among variables and of the specific conditions under which the relationship does and does not hold; as such, it is difficult to rigorously test its theoretical implications or analytical claims. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita (1985: 128) notes: ‘In the absence of the careful specification of the exact logical linkages among the variables in one’s hypotheses, even the most rigorous empirical analysis is doomed to be inchoate.’ In effect, more than 100 years ago, Max Weber made it clear that being subject to ‘public criticism’ and ‘thoughtful ordering of empirical actuality’ should be the most important and indispensable characteristics of ‘scientific’ knowledge (Weber, 1999: 946–7). In the end, generalizations in itself must result from ‘constant testing and refinement’ of propositions (Snyder *et al.*, 1962: 227; Eun, 2012: 780).

In short, a specific and circumscribed approach is a better and more scientific tool, as compared with a simple and general approach, in terms of enabling us to *adjudicate* competing knowledge claims (e.g., incompatible explanations of a peaceful East Asia and a conflictual Northeast Asia) by recourse to rigorous empirical tests. To repeat, the more we specify regional security dynamics with a tightened geopolitical focus (which leads to a more specified and differentiated claim), the more opportunities we have to test whether the claims are likely to be true or false. This in turn opens up rigorous tests, careful modification, and refinement of the claims/propositions and thereby advancement of our knowledge. As a result, ‘problem-solving’ effectiveness can be increased, which displays what Tomas Kuhn (1977: 321–2) called the ‘fertility’ of knowledge – an important criterion of acceptability for scientific explanations and theories.

Assuredly, despite all of the above said, the implications of a specific and circumscribed are bound to be limited; yet I am not sure whether we have learned as much about the world by prioritizing generalizations about social and political phenomena as the standard approaches in international relations literatures imply. Every day, we experience improbable, rare, and novel phenomena. Nassim Nicholas Taleb notes in his famous book, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, that unexpected events may change the entire system (in the case of world politics, recall the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War), but unexpected events are hardly foreseen or accounted for by general theories, because such theories tend to ‘overestimate the value of rational explanations of past data, and underestimate the prevalence of unexplainable randomness in those data’. Proponents of law-like general theories replace the unstructured randomness found in real life with the structured randomness found in games: this is what Nassim Taleb (2007: 148–9) calls the ‘Ludic Fallacy’.

The challenges of change in the world are much richer than the current debates in IR. This is especially so when it comes to East Asia, a region whose complexities and dynamics defy any predictions made by parsimonious and general theoretical approaches. When we aim to develop specific and differentiated generalizations *as opposed to* probabilistic generalizations of a broad character, our research outcomes cannot only give us a more precise understanding of the real world of East Asian security, but also bring us closer to building knowledge satisfying the scientific criterion of ‘falsifiability’: as explicated earlier, the generated knowledge, despite its limited scope, is scientific in the sense that it is refutable/falsifiable *in rigorous manner*. By contrast, the prioritization of making broad generalizations may lead to a one-sided evaluation of the evidence or may induce us to suppress uncomfortable pieces of evidence in favor of those more suitable for confirming the evidential strength of the events or cases we chose a priori: recall inconsistency between a conflictual Northeast Asia and a peaceful East Asia.

Taken as a whole, ‘tolerance’ is therefore necessary in evaluating the methodological and epistemological postures put forward here that might appear to be ‘moderate’ or

'incomplete'. The reality of East Asian security is never easily commensurate with monotonic understating and generalizable analysis. This is, however, not to say that our explanation and theory ought never to be pushed to a higher level of generalization. Rather, what this indicates is that differentiated and specific generalizations – which can be achieved through delimiting geographically the scope of analysis and differentiating the objects of analysis – make more sense now, because empirical data and logical conceptualization are as yet inadequate to support such a complete theory or universal generalizations regarding the present and/or the future regional security orders and configurations in East Asia. I believe that until we have the latter – or ways to obtain it – it is probably best to focus on identifying the different parts and subsequently on pooling them to assemble the whole. We might then be able to see more clearly what the whole is. Viewed in this light, the role of an analytical framework for the study of East Asian security needs to be considered as an evolutionary guide to the empirical exploration and an emergent means toward the accurate explanation of the dynamic reality rather than as the simplification of it as a condition for the generation of predictive hypotheses.

As far as the present inquiry is concerned, a specific and circumscribed/differentiated approach brings more immediate and substantial profit – profit which in the end would provide the foundations for a broader understating and generalization. We need to capture miniatures of regional dynamics first, and later draw a larger picture.⁷ In this way, we can fill the empirical and theoretical vacuum left by the ambitions based around covering a broad region and making an all-encompassing analysis in the first place. This enables us to depict a more realistic picture of interactions among wider regions and sub-regions, and thus makes for more reliable predictions and better policy recommendations. The methodological suggestion proposed here is, then, a worthwhile venture.

About the author

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⁷ Therefore, my agenda is different from arguing for studying sub-regions exclusively *for the sake of* studying sub-regions.

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