ROUNDTABLE: INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND PEACEFUL CHANGE

The Regional Path to Peaceful Change: What the Asian and European Experiences Tell Us

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One of the more surprising features of the current interstate system is just how relatively peaceful it is. To be sure, there is more than enough chaos and mayhem in the world, but such conflicts are overwhelmingly found within the confines of national borders. Interstate conflicts are comparatively rare. This observation may provide little comfort to those suffering from the ravages of civil war and state failure, but the very fact that any form of violence appears to be in long-term decline is surprising, important, and induces mild optimism.[1] The idea that human beings might have some control over their collective fates and can act in ways that are likely to increase this happy state of affairs merits close attention.

Some parts of the world seem to have a more positive story to tell about the decline of violence than others. Sub-Saharan Africa has become emblematic of all that can go wrong at the regional level when it comes to reducing conflict and developing the sorts of institutions that are likely to make peace more secure. Western Europe and even East Asia, by contrast, have come to be associated with successful economic stability and long periods without conflicts of the sort that were endemic to both regions for long periods of their respective histories. Indeed, while we may still think of Western Europe as a model of successful economic development and (relative) tranquility, it is important to remember that it was formerly synonymous with religious intolerance, genocide, and civil disorder on an epic scale. Consequently, the key questions in this context are: How did these regions manage to transform their respective internal relations so peacefully?

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What role did institutionalized forms of cooperation play? Are these patterns of cooperation sustainable in the face of new challenges, especially climate change? Might there be lessons that other states could try to learn in order to replicate these regional success stories?

In what follows, I explain how first Western Europe and then East Asia managed to establish and secure largely peaceful intraregion relations, despite their respective troubled histories and the predictions of a corpus of international relations orthodoxy that remains hugely influential to this day. It is noteworthy that this intellectual dominance continues despite the failure of much of the scholarly community to account for either the durability of peace at the regional level or major systemic transitions such as the peaceful end of the Cold War at the global level. Indeed, scholars and pundits alike still make confident assertions about the likely prospects of war between the "great powers" despite its complete absence since World War II.[2] Such predictions may yet prove to be correct, of course, but even if they do, they will be of little value to their authors or the rest of us. Much better, I think, would be to try and understand the factors that may explain the surprising durability of peaceful change rather than the supposed inevitability of war. In this context, Europe's pioneering efforts to develop institutionalized forms of cooperation may not have been fully replicated in East Asia,[3] but they demonstrated the undoubted benefits that flow from cooperation and economic integration.

The European Miracle

People with no direct experience of the horrors of war or the dangers of xenophobia and chauvinism are unlikely to take them as seriously as those that experienced them firsthand. If nothing else, the cataclysmic impact of World War II and the seventy-five million or so deaths it caused did much to focus the minds of a generation of postwar policymakers. Understandably enough, there is now a temptation to take stability and peace for granted and to assume that they are part of the natural regional order. The troubling resurgence of nationalism in Europe is one possible indication of a failure to learn the lessons of the past in a region that has ample reasons to take history seriously.

There is one other important structural factor that distinguished the circumstances under which Western Europe gave up intraregional violence, however. No sooner had World War II come to an apocalyptic climax than much of the

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world became embroiled in the Cold War. While this may have been infinitely preferable to the "hot" wars that wrecked the economies of Western Europe and Japan, it profoundly influenced the way policymakers acted in the new era. The Soviet Union may have emerged from World War II bloodied and bruised, but it also gained an extensive empire in Eastern Europe. We also tend to forget that Soviet-style communism provided an attractive and seemingly viable alternative to a form of Western capitalism that many held responsible for the economic dislocation of the interwar period.

It was in this fraught geopolitical context that the period of American hegemony or leadership was born. The near-simultaneous invention and use of nuclear weapons meant that the superpower standoff paradoxically contributed to the decline of war.[4] While there is an open-ended debate about just how much credit weapons of mass destruction should get for the absence of interstate war, there is less doubt that their existence helped to transform both the geographic extent of geopolitical reasoning and the nature of the interstate relations that resulted. The weapons may have been too awful to use unthinkingly, much less rationally, but the calculus of potential conflict assumed a truly global reach and revolved around the Soviet Union and its ideological adversary, the United States.

America Saves the (Capitalist) World

Compared to the experiences of everyone else, World War II was a good war for the United States. This is not to minimize the sacrifice of the four hundred thousand or so Americans who died in combat during the war, but the United States emerged from it as the "hegemonic" power of the era. Indeed, in part as a consequence of the destruction inflicted on other great powers and in part because of the catalytic impact of the war on its own economy, the United States accounted for something around 50 percent of global GDP by the end of the war, and its economic expansion continued until the 1970s. Whatever one may think about the impact of American dominance during this period, there is little doubt that it was closely associated with the so-called golden age of capitalism, in which U.S. allies rapidly recovered from the ravages of war.[5] While the Americans may have been concerned primarily with the unfolding Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, their preoccupation with reconstructing successful *capitalist* economies proved a major boon for Europe. Crucially, it encouraged a process of rapid economic development and integration that helped to heal the divisions

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created during the war. The fact that Germany and France subsequently became the central pillars of first the European Economic Community and then the European Union is testament to just how effective American aid and assistance were.[6]

This story is well enough known for it not to need a detailed rehearsal here. There are, however, a number of points that are worth emphasizing. First, a powerful extraregional actor played a decisive role in encouraging peaceful change in a part of the world that had suffered nightmarish damage to its people, infrastructure, and economies. The second point to emphasize, consequently, is that Europeans were more than happy to go along with interventions that might otherwise have been seen as intolerable infringements of sovereignty. Importantly, what Lundestad[7] famously described as an "empire by invitation" rested on "the willingness of the major European powers, crucially France and Germany, to make European integration a top priority."[8]

In this context, the very successful institutionalization of this political impulse through initiatives such as the single market and European Court of Justice has underpinned and accelerated the "sovereignty pooling" that is such a distinctive feature of the European project. Even the conventional strategic aspect of this process, as embodied in the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, helped to create a "security community" among former foes. Despite the ending of the Cold War and a more uncertain relationship with the United States—and Russia for that matter—NATO persists to this day.[9]

Other postwar institutional initiatives have proved equally durable and influential and help to explain the continuity and importance of American influence. The so-called Bretton Woods institutions—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (which became the World Trade Organization)—are the most important examples of the institutionalized international order that the United States was instrumental in creating. It is not necessary to be an uncritical admirer of these bodies or the ideas they promoted (and continue to promote) to recognize that they have played an important role in underpinning a particular sort of broadly liberal economic order that allowed many countries to prosper, including many in East Asia.

The point to emphasize in this context is that there was both a collective learning process on the part of U.S.-led Western policymakers and a capacity to enact significant reforms and initiatives.[10] This policy learning and innovation not only kept the international economy open in a way it had not been during the Great Depression but it also bound former foes in Western Europe into a common

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collective endeavor. Such policies helped resolve collective action problems and produced precisely the sort of positive-sum results that liberals have always claimed would result from increased economic interdependence. They also had the sort of pacifying effect on former foes that the architects of these policies intended. In short, for all the self-interested geopolitical and geoeconomic goals that undoubtedly informed American actions, the net effect was to accelerate economic development and ultimately the greater institutionalization of Western Europe as a region-wide project.

Given the EU's current problems,[11] it may seem an inauspicious time to be highlighting its past successes and significance as a possible role model for other parts of the world. To be sure, there is no shortage of criticism that can be leveled at the EU's actions of late. But this should not blind us to the unparalleled and—when judged from the admittedly pessimistic perspective of mainstream international relations theory, at least—unlikely achievements of an institution with no precedent, especially when it comes to encouraging peaceful transnational cooperation in pursuit of common goals. At a time in global history when there is a great demand and short supply of organizations and relationships with which to encourage similar outcomes, there is still much to learn from the European experience. The credibility, consistency, and institutionalized nature of interstate commitments has been a key factor in the successes and durability of the EU,[12] the recent trauma of Brexit notwithstanding. Indeed, it is entirely possible that the British experience may actually cause other states to recognize the benefits of membership and the difficulties of withdrawal.[13]

Asia's "Long Peace"

One of the more surprising developments of the past half-century or so has been the remarkable economic development of the broadly conceived East Asian region. The economic renaissance of Japan, and then of the so-called tiger economies of South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, which followed in its wake, was dubbed "miraculous," not least because it was so unexpected. Indeed the likes of Marx and Weber would have been astounded that a geographical region they dismissed as plagued by social values and modes of production that were antithetical to modernity and "progress" had become the most dynamic economic region on the planet. The subsequent rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which has achieved an historically unprecedented economic expansion in terms of speed

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and scale, has cemented the region's reputation as perhaps the most important center of economic activity in the world.[14]

Again, much of this has now become the stuff of cliché, but it merits emphasis and brief repetition because the very success of East Asia's economic development has not only confounded many observers in the West but has also been integral to the equally surprising outbreak of peace within the region, too. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given the novel and largely unpredicted nature of these regionwide economic and strategic developments, there is still a good deal of debate about their origins and their durability. One thing is clear, however: for better or worse, the United States' hegemonic position and influence after World War II played a decisive role in creating the preconditions in which first the economies and subsequently the security of the region as a whole were transformed.[15]

A number of aspects of postwar American involvement in East Asia's security relations merit emphasis. First, U.S. involvement in East Asia was driven primarily by its concern about the expansion of communist influence in the region. The "loss" of China to what was often wrongly seen as a monolithic communist bloc was regarded as a major setback by the Americans, and one they did not want to see repeated. The Korean War and (especially) the subsequent Vietnam War were testaments to the willingness of U.S. policymakers to make enormous and costly strategic commitments to a region deemed at imminent risk of succumbing to communist influence. While we may retrospectively (and rightly) consider the Vietnam War to have been a pointless strategic blunder that cost millions of lives, it is important to recognize that it had a major stimulative impact on a number of regional economies as a consequence of the increased aid and economic activity the war generated.[16]

This should have come as no great surprise since precisely the same sorts of dynamics were integral to Japan's remarkable and hitherto unprecedented economic revival after World War II. The United States was determined to make Japan an outpost of successful capitalist development in Northeast Asia, even if this meant turning a blind eye to some of the internal political and institutional relations of which it disapproved but was unable to eliminate. Consequently, efforts to emulate Japan's powerful "developmental state" became the norm across much of the region, albeit with varying degrees of success. Even China would come to copy much of the Japanese developmental playbook, although its leadership would be loath to admit this.[17] For all the criticisms that are frequently made

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about American hegemony, it was instrumental in creating a geopolitical context in which at least some East Asian and Western European states were able to prosper.

The Benefits and Limits of Interdependence

As in Europe, therefore, economic interdependence has played a big part in encouraging peaceful relations among the states of East Asia, which had previously experienced more than their fair share of intraregional conflicts. Relations between Japan and many of its neighbors had been poisoned by Japan's imperial moment before and during World War II. The disastrous and abortive effort to coercively establish a "co-prosperity sphere" within the region was deeply resented and generated lingering hostility toward Japan after the war. Remarkably enough, however, Japan was largely able to transform its position and reputation in much of Southeast Asia, at least when its own successful economic development unleashed a flood of outward investment as it became the production hub of the region—in precisely the way many American strategic thinkers had hoped.[18]

There were and are limits to this process, however, and to the possible lessons that flow from this distinctly East Asian experience. Most importantly, perhaps, Japan's economic resurgence has done little to mend its relations with China, which was the country most badly affected by Japan's expansionary ambitions, and not just during World War II itself. On the contrary, during China's "century of humiliation" at the hands of European imperialism, Japan took advantage of China's position by invading the country, further contributing to China's misery. Despite the evident economic complementarity between China's (formerly) cheap and abundant labor and Japan's outward-looking, capital-rich national industrial champions, relations between China and Japan today remain frigid. Indeed, notwithstanding the undoubted benefits that have flowed from Japanese investment in China, China's occasional explosions of national resentment over Japan's wartime record continue to poison relations between East Asia's two great economic and strategic rivals.

And yet, despite the best efforts of former prime minister Shinzo Abe to turn Japan into a "normal" major power, replete with its own independent military capacity, it remains something of an aberration and even an unlikely exemplar of a distinctive road to peace in the region. On the one hand, Japan remains largely subordinate to and reliant on the United States in security terms, precisely in the way American strategic policymakers intended. It is worth recalling, after all, that as far as the United States was concerned, in the aftermath of World

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War II Japan was seen in equal parts as an opportunity and as a potential threat.[19] On the other hand, however, one of the consequences of Japan's subsequent strategic dependence on the United States was to encourage its rise as a "trading state," one that concentrated on economic development to the exclusion of much else. In this regard, Japan was hugely successful and—despite some recent economic and demographic problems—remains a potentially useful role model for the region and the world: economic development does not inevitably translate into strategic belligerency or assertion.[20]

Having said that, the rise of China and its increasingly assertive, not to say aggressive, foreign policies provides a searching examination of this claim. China is behaving in precisely the manner realists might expect: its increased wealth is partly used to underwrite military modernization. Given China's frequently traumatic history during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this is not entirely surprising. The hope in the West and in the rest of the region is that China's elites have been "socialized" into more cooperative behaviors through their participation in regional and global institutions. At one level, there is little doubt that they have: China is not the source of destabilizing revolutionary ideology that it was only a few decades ago. At another level, however, regional organizations such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) have shown little capacity or desire to try and curb the PRC's territorial ambitions in the East or South China Seas.

Even more strikingly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has proved even less capable of responding to the "China challenge," despite the fact that China's territorial ambitions directly impinge on the vital national interests and sovereignty of some of ASEAN's members. The key question this raises for those who claim that the institution has been central to Asia's long peace is whether it actually deserves credit for the absence of war in the region. In other words, would peace have prevailed in Asia even if ASEAN or the ARF had never existed? Such counterfactuals are impossible to answer, of course, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that the European success story demonstrates how crucial the absence of conflict can be in creating a virtuous circle of economic development and greater cooperation. While the ASEAN states may have recognized that institutionalized forms of cooperation were a good idea in principle, it is also important to acknowledge that there were and are limits to their emulation of the European exemplar: anything that infringed on their national sovereignty was avoided rather than embraced.[21]

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Even though ASEAN has studiously avoided the high levels of rule-governed cooperation that distinguish Europe, it is difficult to imagine that even the thinner sort preferred in Asia would have been feasible or attractive without the EU's pioneering efforts. If nothing else, the EU demonstrated that peace was not only possible among once implacable foes, but that there were major economic benefits if regional relationships could be stabilized and institutionally governed. Solving the "German problem" and reintegrating Europe's most important economic actor has been a landmark achievement. A similar process happened with Japan in East Asia. Crucially, however, China has not experienced the same sort of strategic socialization and neutralization, not least because it was a relatively minor economic and security actor when the United States was at the height of its hegemonic power. It is no coincidence that a resurgent China challenges both American dominance and the prevailing strategic and even normative order.

Conclusion

The histories of both Western Europe and East Asia offer surprisingly persuasive grounds for optimism about the capacity of human beings to learn from experience and take advantage of favorable historical conditions. Or they once did, at least. Unfortunately, the inescapable material reality is that the geopolitical and even geophysical conditions that allowed, and even encouraged, the process of peaceful change in Europe and Asia may no longer apply. Just as we seem to have overcome one formidable problem—the seemingly inescapable prospect of war—we confront an even more implacable and potentially irresolvable problem: climate change.

Space precludes a serious discussion of the possible implications of unmitigated climate change, but nearly all the commentary suggests that the implications are profound, not least for regional efforts to pursue and maintain peace.[22] To be sure, there are some plausible arguments about the conditions under which peace might develop and endure, but they generally do not take climate change as seriously as we might hope.[23] If even some of the more cautious and qualified predictions about climate change's impact prove accurate, it is difficult to see how many of the conditions under which peace became possible in any region of the world will continue. Those regions that were already burdened with environmental, developmental, demographic, and governance problems look especially vulnerable. It is not unreasonable to assume that climate refugees are likely to become

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a bigger issue and a direct threat to the underlying political settlements that allowed the EU, in particular, to flourish. Under such circumstances, it is perhaps inevitable that short-term crisis management will be privileged over environmental issues, despite the latter's unprecedented significance.[24]

Whether the EU—or any other country or organization, for that matter—will be able to manage existing problems, let alone those posed by new problems such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is unclear. But given the EU's totemic significance in the landscape of practical and theoretical international relations, it is hard to overstate what a catastrophe its demise or decline would be. After all, it pioneered peaceful regional transformation and confounded predictions of international relations theory. Without a credible model of the benefits of real and effective cooperation, it is difficult to see how even regional responses to collective action problems will be feasible, let alone the sort of global cooperation that seems necessary if we are to actually do something about climate change, in particular. The good news is that the EU remains at the forefront of attempts to address this problem, too. The bad news is that it is doing so without much support from the United States, and at a time when "national interests," rather than the transnational variety, are ascendant the world over.[25] Whether regions can make a difference under such circumstances is one of the more consequential questions of our age.

NOTES

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Abstract: One of the more striking, surprising, and optimism-inducing features of the contemporary international system has been the decline of interstate war. The key question for students of international relations and comparative politics is how this happy state of affairs came about. In short, was this a universal phenomenon or did some regions play a more important and pioneering role in bringing about peaceful change? As part of the roundtable "International Institutions and Peaceful Change," this essay suggests that Western Europe generally and the European Union in particular played pivotal roles in transforming the international system and the behavior of policymakers. This helped to create the material and ideational conditions in which other parts of the world could replicate this experience, making war less likely and peaceful change more feasible. This argument is developed by comparing the experiences of the EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and their respective institutional offshoots. The essay uses this comparative historical analysis to assess both regions' capacity to cope with new security challenges, particularly the declining confidence in institutionalized cooperation.

Keywords: European Union, East Asia, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, regions, peaceful change

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