Democracy and International Relations in Asia

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The nexus between democracy and international relations in Asia remains one of the least understood subjects, especially when compared with other drivers of Asia’s regional order, such as the balance of power, economic interdependence or regional institutions. Comparative politics scholars studying democratization in Asia have paid far more attention to exploring the domestic context and factors behind democratic transitions than to its external underpinnings (Acharya, 1999). On the other hand, disciplinary international relations scholars, especially those debating the “Democratic Peace” thesis, have given Asia a miss in developing their arguments about whether democracy is a force for peace or prescription for disorder. Preoccupied with large N analysis, debates about democratic peace have produced little insight into regional dynamics, especially outside Europe. But an additional factor behind this neglect has been the historical perception of Asia in the Western imagination as an “authoritarian region”, the illiberal (and in the case of East Asia partly Confucian) “other” to the West’s Kantian “self”. This belief is underpinned not only by the relative paucity of democracies in the region during the Cold War, but also by the fact that democracies that qualify as “liberal” are in scarce supply here.

In this paper, I will address the gaps identified in both types of literature and examine the linkage between democracy and international relations as a two-way process. The first part of the equation concerns how and to what extent international (including regional) forces have affected the prospects for democratization in Asia. The other part looks at how democratization affects the prospects of regional international relations.

International Factors behind Asian Democratization

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1 This article is based on the author’s presentation to the Conference on “The Experiment with Democracy in East and Southeast Asia: Two Decades After,” Centre for Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 2-3 May, 2008.
As hinted, failure to adequately consider how international factors promote democratic transitions was a major gap in the Third Wave literature. *In Asia, much of the literature was concerned with the role of domestic forces, such as that of the middle class, the impact of economic growth, and the role of (a largely national) civil society.*

International forces are a key force behind democratic transitions, but this does not mean Western pressure or its democracy-promotion campaign, the role of which could be overstated, to say the least.

During much of the Cold War, US policy towards democratization in countries formally allied with it, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the Philippines was ambiguous at best. In South Korea, as Bruce Cumming’s paper points out, the US not only ignored repression by Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan regime, especially its killing Kwangju massacre in 1980, but it might have contributed to the killings, and legitimized the harsh military rule subsequently. In Philippines, the US role in the toppling of the Marcos regime was minimal, and came very late in the people’s power uprising. The same can be said about the US role in the demise of non-allied authoritarian regimes, such as Suharto in Indonesia. On balance, the US has been an indifferent supporter of democratic transitions, and in many cases have directly or indirectly contributed to prolonged authoritarian rule.

Early expectations that the end of the Cold War will lead to greater Western support for democratization by removing one major factor obstructing it, namely anti-communism, failed to materialize. The rhetoric about “enlargement” adopted by Western governments collapsed after the 9/11 attacks. As the case of Musharraf’s Pakistan attests, the threat of Islamic terror replaced the threat of communism as the rationale for supporting authoritarianism. In Burma’s case, sanctions were tempered by the need to work with ASEAN, which had refused, still refuses, to ostracize the regime.

No Asian regional organization has helped democracy promotion in member countries, in sharp contrast to the European Union and Organization of American States. The EU formally requires any prospective members to be a democracy, while the OAS has an Inter-American Democratic Charter to counter not only coups, but also backsliding (although its not always effective). The mention of democracy as a common goal of the organization in the ASEAN charter is an empty one, since the organization has done nothing to promote democracy in the region.
The role of Asian democracies, including those which have undergone democratic transitions themselves, also merits attention. Japan has been a sometimes champion of democracy in Asia, but the sincerity of this effort has to be questioned. A good deal of it is to score points against China, but faced with competition from China in strategic authoritarian states, such as Burma, Japan has tended to tread carefully and sought to maintain a line to the regime. India has responded to China’s growing influence in Burma by doing its own cultivation of the Junta and abandoning the pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who received her schooling in India.

The role of China and Russia as the two authoritarian great powers has affected the global ideological and institutional climate for democracy promotion. China of course has emerged as the biggest supporter of Asian authoritarian regimes, with Burma, North Korea, and Cambodia being the three main examples.

In general, there is little evidence that either Western states, or Asian actors, or Asian regional institutions have had much role and impact in promoting democracy. Arguably, a far more important factor has been the contagion effect of democracy (some snowballing effect as evident in the case of Indonesia and Malaysia) and the communication revolution that one might associate with globalization. International civil society groups, including grant-making foundations, do support pro-democracy forces by offering moral encouragement and material support (as many did to Indonesian students in terms of helping with impromptu gatherings, printing of pro-democracy material, etc). And the mobile phone and internet have done much more for democracy in Asia than national governments and regional and international organizations. The former played a crucial role in the initial stages of the Saffron revolution, while the later was real heroes in the recent elections in Malaysia which humiliated the authoritarian ruling party, UMNO. But the internet can be muzzled and can be a double-edged sword in the hand of government propaganda machines.

The International Consequences of Asian Democratization

What about the consequences of democratization for regional and international relations in Asia? In considering this, there seems to be an impulsive turn to the question whether democratization is good for stability, national and regional. The nexus between democracy and economic
performance aroused controversy in the 1990s (remember the Lee Kuan Yew- Fidel Ramos debate). With the impressive economic growth of democratic India, apologists for authoritarian rule are more reticent in asserting their deeply ingrained belief that democracy breeds indiscipline and poor economic performance. But opinion on the relationship between democracy and peace has remained a rather one-sided affair, dominated by a reflexive pessimism. Shared authoritarianism has been credited, not the least by a few Asian leaders themselves, for the region’s economic miracle and political stability, and security order, even the success of its early regional institutions like ASEAN. In contrast, the impact of growing democratization in the region in the post-Cold War years has generated concerns and fears about greater regional disorder.

A curious alliance of Asian authoritarian leaders and Western academic analysts asserts that democratization is a prescription for disorder. They contrast the authoritarian calm under Suharto with the chaos that followed his downfall, adding earlier examples of Thailand, Philippines in Southeast Asia, and Taiwan and South Korea in Northeast Asia.

The most well-known of the academic perspectives, by Jack Snyder and Ed Mansfield of Columbia University, blames heightened nationalism for instability during democratic transitions. In their view, to put it simply, democratization increases the danger of war. Voting leads to violence.

The link between democratization and order has significant policy implications for international community’s support for democracy. It is also germane to the debate over the most important case of democratization the region could experience, that of China.

But the evidence largely contradicts these claims. The Asian experience does not show that democratization has led to greater conflict within and between states. On the contrary, democratization might have created better prospects for cooperative peace in the region. Let me elaborate.

First, can we link democratization with domestic violence? Comparing the violence accompanying transition to democracy and descent into authoritarian rule is instructive here. Pending detailed empirical studies, it seems reasonable to conclude from the experiences of Burma under New Win, SLORC and SPDC, Cambodia under Pol Pot, Indonesia under Suharto, South Korea under Chun Doo Hwan, Taiwan under Kuomingtang in the
early period of its rule, and Thailand under Thanom and Suchinda, that authoritarian rule has produced more mass violence in Asia than democracy. In fact the very first observation about democracy and violence in Asia is: authoritarian regimes have presided over, and in many cases themselves perpetrated, more violence and loss of lives than regimes in democratic transitions.

Two cases of violence during authoritarian rule and democracy or semi-democratic transitions deserve notice. Between 1975 and 1978, the Khmer Rouge killed between 1.5 to 2 million Cambodians, where as less than 1000 Cambodians have died under the governments, including the infamous Hun Sen regime, following UN organized elections in 1993, according to Uppsala Conflict data base. The bloody riots in Indonesia following the downfall of Suharto has done much to reinforce the myth of democratic violence among Asian apologists for authoritarian rule. But consider the statistics: during 1965-6, between half a million to a million people died in the violence that accompanied Suharto’s seizure of power, where was the death toll in anti-Chinese riots in May 1998 has been put at 1190, not including East Timor and Aceh. Even if we include the latter, which straddle both Suharto and post-Suharto regimes, the toll would not exceed the killings during the Suharto regime. In fact the East Timorese killings during Suharto regime were higher than those that followed the withdrawal of Indonesian military in August 1999. Only in the Philippines, violence leading to civilian deaths and extra-judicial killings, and killings of journalists, in the democratic era, especially the Arroyo regime, seem to match that during the Marcos, although this needs to be verified.

Here is a claim for you to refute. The proposition is as follows:

The worst killing of civilians by the government in a political crisis in an Asian country under authoritarian rule has involved more deaths than the total number of political deaths in the same country in the first two years of democratic transition.

This applies to South Korea (Kwangju massacre), Taiwan (Kuomintang), Thailand (1973, 1976, 1992), Cambodia and yes, Indonesia. It also applies to Burma, when comparing the military regime’s record of killings against that of the civilian government of U Nu which it toppled. My preliminary haunch is that Philippines might be an exception.
The record of democracies may be less benign if one includes killings in communist and separatist insurgencies. But even then, I suspect, democracy will have a more peaceful record when dealing with its citizens.

What about inter-state violence? Table 2 presents a list of countries that have gone through democratic transitions in the past two decades. Comparing and co-relating democratic transitions and incidence of inter-state war (with at least 25 battle deaths) involving South Korea, Taiwan, in Northeast Asia, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia in Southeast Asia, and Pakistan in South Asia, it can be confidently asserted that there is no single case in Asia where a new democratic regime has gone to war against its neighbour.

Of course, the absence of outright war does not preclude increased tensions with neighbours caused by, as Snyder and Mansfield argue, growing nationalism. Taiwan is a case in point. Arguably, Taiwanese democratization has led to greater Taiwanese nationalism, with stronger assertions of Taiwanese identity, thereby aggravating tensions with China. But this view ignores that fact that the building of Taiwanese identity had partly to do with top-down regime manipulation (rather than an entirely spontaneous occurrence) and is not irreversible. There is evidence of heightened nationalism accompanying democratization in South Korea, Philippines and Indonesia, but there is no evidence that this nationalism, which owes to pride in the overthrow of authoritarian rule, and the gaining of international respectability that goes with democratization, has spilled over into anger against neighbours.

Why have not democratic transitions in Asia produced violence as critics allege or expect? Available explanations linking democracy and peace in international relations academic literature are not very helpful in answering this question. The most well-known theory, Democratic Peace, argues that democracies do not fight other democracies. Some variants of this theory, including those which are most commonly used as a policy or propaganda tool by Western politicians from Thatcher to Bush and the neo-cons, is that democracies are generally more peaceful than non-democracies. Academic writings on DP offer two reasons for this: normative and institutional. The normative argument holds that democracies tend to externalize the domestic values and practices such as tolerance of diversity, competition, peaceful settlement of disputes, and respect of liberty, and this explains why they seek and maintain peaceful relations with other states. The institutional
argument focuses on constraints on the leaders of democratic states in going
to war, such as parliamentary scrutiny, media criticism, and pressure of
public opinion that might see war as waste of public resources.

But neither of these arguments about democratic peace applies to Asia.
Internalization of norms, any norms, take time, and the relative newness of
democratic regimes in Asia makes it difficult to speak of externalization of
democratic norms in the foreign policy behavior of many of Asia’s current
democracies, such as Thailand, Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and
Indonesia. Democratic norms may have a more significant impact on the
foreign policy of older democracies like Japan and India, but India’s
behavior towards its immediate South Asian neighbours belie such
expectations. To date, there is no study to assess the impact of domestic
norms of the democratic states of Asia on their foreign policy behavior.

The institutional argument, on the other hand, is undercut by the fact that
parliamentary scrutiny of foreign policy conduct is less institutionalized and
binding in Asia than in Western democracies, especially the USA. In most
Asian states, legislatures play an insignificant role in foreign policy making,
although this may be changing, as evident in the role of the Indonesian
national legislature and those of semi-authoritarian states like Singapore and
Malaysia on the issue of Burma. Moreover, and this is a general criticism of
DP, the very institutions that are supposed to rein in a democratic regime’s
war-making policies, whether the parliament, media and public opinion, can
be manipulated and act as a spur to conflict.

A number of other reasons may account for why democratic transitions have
produced less violence than critics expect. The first is the relative economic
prosperity of some of the states making democratic transitions: South Korea
and Taiwan. A second factor may be the “moral debt” of the leaders of
transitional regimes. This applies not just to leaders like Kim Dae Jung who
were sheltered by the West, but also more generally to leaders who received
significant international backing, including Western and other Asian
governments and civil society groups, during authoritarian rule. They have a
moral obligation not to disappoint the international community by engaging
in domestic or external violence.

The third, and possibly most important, factor may be the cooperative
security effect of democratic transitions. Not only have democratic regimes
not fought with their neighbours, they have actually sued their neighbours
for peace. The reasons for this vary, but generally include a desire to discredit and distance from the authoritarian predecessor’s foreign policies, the pressure to build domestic legitimacy through economic performance which would be undermined by war, the moral debt of the new regime (same as for domestic repression), by refraining from war with neighbours and there by sending a positive signal to the international community, including governments, donors, and civil society groups which backed in during authoritarian rule. To be sure, foreign adventures sometime help to divert attention from domestic problems and help legitimacy of new regimes, but this comes only after the new regime fails to achieve legitimacy through peaceful means, and peace with neighbours may be a good way to create the regional climate for domestic economic performance.

A brief examination of the impact of democratization of the foreign policy of states: South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, is useful here. In three of these five states, South Korea, Indonesia, and to a lesser extent Thailand, there are clear signs that democratization has been accompanied by more positive attitude towards problem neighbours. It was the democratically elected government of Chatichai Choonhavan which pursued the “battlefields to marketplaces” approach which broke the diplomatic deadlock in the Cambodia conflict and provided an opening for ASEAN’s reconciliation with Vietnam: the most peace-causing development in the recent history of Southeast Asia. (Although Chuan pursued a less friendly attitude towards Burma, and Samak now is more favourable towards the junta) A similar attempt at cooperative security was the sunshine policy of South Korea’s first truly democratic regime, Kim Dae Jung, pursued despite US resistance. While one might question its motivations and debate its implications, there is little question that this was intended to cause peace, rather than conflict, itself a major refutation of the Snyder and Mansfield thesis that democratization increases the danger of war. And last but not the least, post-Suharto Indonesia belied the expectations, not the least from of neighbouring Singapore bemoaning the loss of its long-time friend and “father of ASEAN”, Suharto, about a return to Sukarno-era nationalism. Contrary to fears that Indonesia might step back from regional cooperation, Jakarta has actually played a major role in strengthening ASEAN through a cooperative security approach by proposing the idea of an ASEAN Security Community.

Taiwan’s case is the most problematic one here. The advance of democracy in Taiwan appears to have led to a more hard line policy towards the
mainland and aggravated conflict with China. But Taiwan’s relations with mainland is a special case, because it’s a case of reunification, rather than inter-state relations, and hence is not directly relevant to considering how democratization will affect foreign policy behaviour elsewhere in Asia. The case of cross-strait relations is different from the Korea, another reunification project, because the driving force behind reunification in the Korean peninsula is the more prosperous and democratic South Korea, very different from the cross-strait relations where the driving force behind reunification is less prosperous (at least until now) and authoritarian China. The progress of democratization in Taiwan is caught up in the issue of competing identities, while in the Korean Peninsula’s case it is not. But even Taiwan’s case, evidence points to the fact that the pressure of public opinion, and interest groups operating within a democratic context, as much as American pressure, might have pulled Chen Sui-Bien from the brink of conflict with mainland by pushing for an unilateral declaration of independence.

Of course, there may be alternative explanations of why democratic transitions might not have led to instability as critics expect. The main alternative explanations include US military presence and economic growth. But US military presence did not mean possibility of intervention to suppress the domestic instability or inter-state war due to democratisation. This would have been unthinkable. Economic growth is a more plausible explanation, as discussed. But this does not explain relative lack of violence or war in the case of relatively poorer countries like Philippines and Indonesia.

Beyond the fear of conflict caused by democratization, another concern about democratization in Asia has been it potential to undermine alliances. Even if one accepts that US alliances have been a force for peace, and this is really debatable, and that their weakening would cause serious regional instability, there is no reason to believe that democracy is incompatible with the politics of alliances.

According to this view, anti-Americanism in South Korea has grown in keeping with democratization. But this view ignores the fact that anti-Americanism has always been present in South Korea from the very outset of the post-war period, albeit suppressed by the authoritarian regimes backed by the US, the very fact which was one major reason for anti-American and anti-alliance sentiments. Democratisation might have brought these latent
sentiments to the fore. And in the Philippines, while initial phase of democratization was accompanied by anti-US alliance sentiments in the public, closer relations with the US could be forged during a subsequent phase of democratic rule.

On the other side, democratization has the potential to strengthen regional cooperation. Democratization dilutes the traditional norms of sovereignty and regionalism, especially non-intervention, that have rendered Asian regional organizations ineffectual in dealing with transnational issues, such as financial crises, pandemics and terrorism. Thailand under the Chuan Leekpai government and Indonesia after Suharto have been more supportive of collective regional action that goes beyond non-interference, which is favoured by authoritarian rulers fearful of international criticism of, and action against, their domestic repression. On the other hand, democratization adds depth to regional cooperation, increasing the possibility of participatory regionalism, i.e. regionalism among civil society groups, thereby rendering regional cooperation and identity a less state-centric project and perhaps potentially more effective. This can certainly benefit Asia’s regional institutions, such as ASEAN, ARF and APEC, which remain very elite-centered, and thereby limited in their ability to deliver.

**Conclusion**

My conclusion is that democratic transitions do not necessarily lead to greater violence, and may in fact lead to increased peace and stability in Asia. This not only challenges the critics of democratic peace theory, but also encourages us to move beyond the narrowly focused and quantitative case obsessed research on democratic peace and focus on regional cases and dynamics. *This is all the more reason why the US and the international community should for once practice what they preach, i.e, actually promote democracy, although not in the manner if Iraq, if they want Asia to be stable.*

One of the key tests of my argument will be in China. International factors will play a role in China’s democratization, but Western and regional pressure will be less important than the communication revolution, snowballing effect, the international prestige value of democratization, and the perhaps the role of the international civil society in encouraging and empowering indigenous and more long-term pro-democracy forces. Will a democratizing China pose a threat to regional order? The answer depends very much on the nature and manner of this transition, which this paper is
unable to predict. But historical record provides no reason why
democratization in China, especially if takes place after the country achieves
a level of prosperity and through the South Korea and Taiwan pathway,
rather than the people’s power models in Philippines and Thailand, will
generate a virulent nationalism in China directed against its neighbours.
Nationalism in China is rising even before democratic transition takes place.
This nationalism is partly the product of regime manipulation, but also
generated by economic development and increase in national power. There
is a possibility that nationalism generated by democratic transition may
create pressure for taking Taiwan by force, but there is also reason to hope
that a democratic China will be a more attractive home for the Taiwanese to
reunite with.

There has been a recent Japanese-backed proposal for an Alliance for
Democracy, involving Japan, US, Australia and India. Like the American
neo-cons’ militant democracy-promotion agenda, this is a pernicious idea, it
turns the democratic peace approach into a democratic war approach, and
has the potential to gravely endanger regional stability by causing serious
provocation to China without actually promoting democracy in the region.

Increasing democratization in Asia through an indirect approach and
encouraging pro-domestic forces is a better approach, and might actually
dispense with the need for an alliance of democracies.

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