Democratization and Regional Stability in Southeast Asia
A Concept Paper for Comparative Study

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“If… the consent of the citizens is required to decide whether or not war is to be declared, it is very natural that they will have great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise.” Immanuel Kant

“To be safe, democracy must kill its enemy when it can and where it can.” Elihu Root

“What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?” Mahatma Gandhi.

Introduction

Will democratization promote greater security and stability in Asia? This question has become salient in view of recent political developments in the region. The collapse of the Suharto government in Indonesia, follows the advent and partial consolidation of democracy elsewhere in the region, especially Thailand, the Philippines and Cambodia. This was preceded by democratic transitions in Taiwan and South Korea. These developments are welcome news to the international community. But have they enhanced the prospects for regional peace and stability?

Critics have argued that Taiwan’s democratic transition has enhanced the prospect for conflict with China by creating an alternative political model of growth and prosperity which makes Beijing nervous and insecure. Indonesia’s domestic turmoil casts a long shadow over regional stability and undermined the intra-mural solidarity of ASEAN. The issue of democratic change in Myanmar, and more generally, human rights and democratization in Southeast Asia, has polarized the once cohesive regional grouping.


3 Mahatma Gandhi, Non-Violence in Peace and War (1942), vol. 1, ch. 142.
The Southeast Asian experience might give fresh ammunition to critics of the Democratic Peace argument which holds that liberal democracies seldom fight one another. These critics hold that while mature democracies may indeed share pacific relationships with one another, the democratization process itself can increase the danger of war by fueling narrow nationalism and ethnic hatred within and between states. This has given ammunition to those who argue that Asian societies need “discipline” over “democracy”.

Yet this view is questionable. The fact remains that most cases of democratic transition in Asia have been remarkably peaceful. This factor has often been overlooked in debates about democratization because no serious work has been done to bring it to the attention of policy-makers and analysts who question the pacific effects of democratization.

Against this backdrop, this research project is concerned with a detailed empirical study of the effects of democratization on regional stability in Asia. It will compare the experiences of South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Philippines, Cambodia and Indonesia and address more general conceptual and policy issues concerning the pacific effects of democratization on regional order. This is the first such study on the subject.

Research Framework

Democratization affects regional stability in two main ways. It can be a source of domestic and inter-state tensions, and it can affect the ways in which regional conflicts are managed and resolved. The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, first proposed that a community of liberal democracies might offer the best guarantee of a peaceful world. States with republican constitutions, Kant argued, tend to be more pacific than autocracies because of war-making requires the consent of citizens and the sovereign could not simply declare war “as a kind of amusement”, and because “a war will not force him to make the slightest sacrifice so far as his banquets, hunts, pleasure palaces and court festivals are concerned.” This proposition was refined and further developed in recent era by the American political scientist Michael Doyle. Both Doyle and a host of scholars who followed him in developing the Democratic Peace hypothesis in the post-Cold War period, shied away from the Kantian claim about the inherently pacific nature

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of democracies. After all, historical evidence suggests that democracies have not been reluctant to resort to force to settle international disputes. What is more incontrovertible, they argued, was the fact that democracies seldom fight one another. The extreme paucity of war among democracies was thus elevated to something of a fundamental law of international politics. And Western policy-makers, seeking a new paradigm for their foreign policy after the collapse of Soviet Union, embraced the Democratic Peace logic enthusiastically. The absence of war among democracies became the basis on which a new foreign policy of the West rapidly took shape.

In Asia, however, the democratic peace hypothesis has had a limited relevance. The relative paucity of durable liberal democracies in the region makes for a small sample with which to test the argument. To be sure, there has been no instance of an outright war between two democratic states in Asia. But this does not prove the pacific conduct of democracies towards each other, because there have been so few democracies in the region.

Moreover, several Asian democracies have been less liberal than their Western counterparts, which beg the question whether the logic of democratic peace can really be applied here. The pacific impulse of democracies towards each other is held to be true mostly of “liberal democracies”, i.e. democracies which guarantee political and civil liberties, especially open criticism of governments and where “citizens have leverage over war decisions”, rather than simply hold regular controlled elections. Hence the formulation “liberal peace” is held to be a more valid and causal notion than the idea of “democratic peace”.

Against this backdrop, the real question about democracy and peace in Asia should be cast differently, as a question about whether the democratization process is conducive to greater regional stability. As with most developing countries, the real threat of violence in Southeast Asia emanates from source within. And it is in relation to these domestic conflicts that the impact of democratization needs to be assessed.

Some scholars, notably Jack Snyder, have argued that democratisation can actually increase the danger of instability and war by stimulating aspirations for self-

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7 The democratic peace thesis has its fair share of critics. Much of the criticism focuses on key terminology, such as how does one define democracy, and what counts as a war. Believers in democratic peace have often been accused of tautology, i.e., defining these terms in ways so as to support and safeguard the democratic peace proposition.

8 John Owen makes the point that illiberal democracies (e.g. the ancient Greek City states, whovalued heroism and warrior ethic, or the contemporary Balkan countries who define themselves “not as abstract individuals, but according to religious categories”), are unlikely to enjoy democratic peace. John M Owen, “How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace”, International Security, vol.19, no.2 (Fall 1994), p.127-28. By this logic, democratic peace is less likely to hold for societies imbued in a predominantly communitarian ethic.

determination among ethnic groups in plural societies, which had long been suppressed under authoritarian rule. That there is considerable evidence for this assertion becomes quickly apparent by looking at Indonesia today. One might add other factors that could fuel ethnic strife at a time of democratic change. Newly empowered political leaders find it morally difficult to deny the legitimacy of such aspirations, thereby encouraging such centrifugal tendencies. At the same time, democratisation also produces a sense of heightened nationalism among the majority segments of the population, which might conflict with minority demands. This increases the potential for ethnic conflict in newly democratizing states.

Indeed, the fear of ethnic violence has in the past inhibited democratic reforms in Asia. In Indonesia, for example, the threat posed by separatism allowed Sukarno and the army in the late 1950s to block moves towards democratization. Today, the danger of ethnic strife is frequently used by the military government in Myanmar as its principal justification for blocking democratic change.

**Democratization as a Source of Conflict**

Against this backdrop, a number of arguments can be made to link democratization with regional instability:

1. Democratization dispenses with many political institutions created under authoritarian rule. While politically necessary and inevitable, the above might also reduce the state’s capacity to cope with domestic violence, including violence perpetrated by criminal elements with no political agenda. Governments of newly democratic states often have to innovate or rely upon freshly-crafted and untested political institutions. Such a situation lends itself to exploitation by the remnants of authoritarian rule, such as disgruntled elements in the armed forces and the bureaucracy, to create mischief and discredit the new leadership.

2. Newly democratic states have a tendency to export their “revolutions”, either actively or passively (they may show sympathy for pro-democracy struggles in their neighbourhood), which make their authoritarian neighbours fearful and hostile. Thailand’s recent pro-democracy foreign policy agenda (under the Chuan Leekpai government)\(^{10}\) created insecurities in its immediate neighbours such as

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\(^{10}\) Thailand under Chuan Leekpai has been the only ASEAN member to openly promote democracy in ASEAN, ostensibly to create a new democratic bloc within the grouping. As Asada Jayanama, a top Thai diplomat, put it, “We want to encourage Indonesia to move towards democratisation because then we’ll have three important democratic countries in Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. That will change the picture.” “Interview/Asada Jayanama: Is Thai Diplomacy Abreast With the Times?”, Dow Jones Interactive, [http://ptg.djnr.com/ccroot/asp/pipe](http://ptg.djnr.com/ccroot/asp/pipe). Access 31 August 2000, p.3. Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuan hoped that Thailand’s democratic system “will be an inspiration to freedom and democracy-loving peoples in other countries, without interfering in their internal affairs.” Despite affirming the non-interference principle, Surin explained his sovereignty-eroding Flexible Engagement policy as a reflection of Thailand’s “commitment to freedom and democracy”. Surin Pitsuan, “The Role of Human Rights in
Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. Taiwan’s flaunting its democracy to gain international diplomatic leverage against Beijing makes the latter both angry and insecure. The demonstration effect of Suharto’s collapse has caused anxieties in some of its neighbours.

3. A more serious threat to regional stability is the possible transboundary spill-over effect of domestic strife accompanying the democratization process. The cross border outflow of political or ethnic refugees can become a source of bilateral tensions. Cross-border support and sanctuary for such refugees from sympathetic elements within a neighbouring state sharing ethnic ties with them could aggravate such inter-state conflict.

4. Countries that have just undergone democratic transition are inexperienced in democratic processes and norms and hence unable to ensure democratic conflict resolution internally.11

5. Preoccupation with internal matters during democratic transitions diverts the attention and resources of leaders from regional cooperation.

6. The advent of a new and legitimate regime may revive tensions over issues “settled” by an unpopular ousted regime. Resurgent nationalism, which is often a feature of newly democratic states, could fuel such tensions.

7. Civil society groups remain hostile toward regional institutions which had backed the ousted regime. If the new regime happens to be led by people who, as opposition leaders, were severely persecuted by the ousted authoritarian but pro-regionalist regime, then the former’s commitment to the regional institution could be weak. In any regional institution, change in the top leadership of member states can disrupt socialization with fellow members. But this is especially true of regional institutions founded upon close inter-personal ties and informal contacts among leaders and the elite. In other words, regional institutions established and maintained by authoritarian states could lose legitimacy and support from within the population of their member states that have experienced greater domestic political openness.

8. Democratization may also call into question the sanctity of existing regional norms and the relevance of mechanisms and practices for pacific settlement of disputes. The spill-over effect of democratization may strain the norms of regional institutions committed to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states. Democratic rulers, pandering to nationalist sentiments, could become less

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inclined to resort to collective procedures and practices for conflict-management. Institutions and procedures favoured by an ousted dictator, especially if he happens to be from a leading member state, may be discredited in the changed political climate. Adding to this are the consequences of democratization for self-determination in ethnically-divided autocracies. Leaders of separatist movements who become leaders of new states created by the collapse of an authoritarian polity are likely to be hostile towards a regional grouping which had previously not supported their cause or even acquiesced with their suppression out of deference to regional norms. Finally, uneven democratization within a regional grouping could polarize members over key political issues, including promotion of human rights and democracy through regional means. The non-democratic members are likely to strongly resist any political proposals for pro-democracy changes coming from the democratic camp.

**Overstating the Risk**

But the claim that democratization produces political strife is exaggerated. First, while the risks are real, no one could claim with any degree of certainty that the collapse of authoritarian rule would be accompanied by large-scale domestic instability. The consequences of democratization for regional stability actually depend on several factors, foremost among them the length and severity of authoritarian rule. As the case of Indonesia post-Suharto suggests, the transition to authoritarian rule might prove particularly destabilizing if the authoritarian ruler had a long run in power.\(^{12}\) It is also plausible to argue from the Indonesian case that the more severely repressive and close-minded the authoritarian ruler, and the more violent its eventual collapse. On the other hand, authoritarian rulers who promoted economic development and co-opted a wider section of the elite need not plunge the country to instability when they give way to more democratic rulers. This is evident from the case of relatively bloodless transitions in South Korea and Taiwan. The question whether democratization induces domestic instability thus remains an open empirical question.

Second, the Asian experience also suggests another counter to the argument linking democratization with domestic and regional instability: that transitions to authoritarian rule are often no less violent than transition from authoritarian rule. Indonesia’s slide into authoritarianism in the 1960s – from Sukarno to Suharto - was marked by violence and ethnic carnage that saw the deaths of perhaps half a million people. This far surpasses the toll from the post-Suharto violence that has ravaged the country. The advent of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia in 1975 saw the extermination of at least a million people (although some estimates put it at two or three million), while its transition to

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\(^{12}\) This argument is supported by an extensive historical analysis by Betts and Huntington, who found that the longer authoritarian rulers “stayed in power, (and hence the more ‘stable’, in that sense, their regimes apparently were), the more likely the death of the leaders was to be followed by instability.” Richard K. Betts and Samuel P. Huntington, “Dead Dictators and Rioting Mobs: Does the Demise of Authoritarian Rulers Lead to Political Instability?”, *International Security*, vol.10, no.3 (Winter 1985-86), p.142.
democracy was quite peaceful. Even the instability that followed the transition to democracy in the Philippines following the ouster of Marcos (mainly because of repeated coup attempts against Cory Aquino), compares well against the human rights abuses and instability that followed the Marcos regime’s imposition of martial law in the country in 1972. And in Thailand, the death toll from the 1977 retreat into authoritarian rule was as severe, if not more, than that during the 1992 Bloody May episode which eventually led to the restoration and consolidation of democracy.

Third, while newly democratic polities in Asia might have been prone to domestic violence (which usually subsides with democratic consolidation, as in the case of Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines), authoritarian rule is also inherently unstable. Citizens are more likely to demand transition from authoritarian rule (even when it has delivered well on economic performance), than seek the collapse of their democratic experiments, no matter how much they lament its economic record. The case of Taiwan and South Korea suggests that economic growth and performance legitimacy does not prevent people from seeking an end to authoritarian rule.

Fourth, the risk of democratization producing inter-state conflict could be overstated. There is little evidence to suggest that democratization actually increases the danger of regional war. While the limited number of samples make it difficult to make any dyadic assessment of pacific relationship between democracies towards each other, one should nonetheless note that no country under democratic rule, liberal or otherwise, in Asia has initiated a war against its neighbour. Wars in East Asia have been fought mostly between non-democracies; the two major examples being the war between North and South Vietnam, and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978. The only major instance of a war between a democracy and a state under authoritarian rule, is Indonesia’s Konfrontasi against Malaysia (which to some extent was inspired by Sukarno’s need to divert attention from domestic troubles), and this offers greater evidence of war initiation by the authoritarian state.

**Recent Developments**

How has democratization altered the political climate of regional interactions in Asia? Democratic transitions in three out of the four cases in Southeast Asia (Philippines 1986, Thailand 1991-92, Cambodia, 1993 and Indonesia, 1998) during the past 15 years have not produced a regime which would willingly undermine existing regional arrangements. There was no downgrading or change in the commitments of the Philippines and Thailand to ASEAN in the wake of democratic transitions, instead, the solidarity shown by ASEAN leaders to President Cory Aquino might have enhanced the regime’s dependence on ASEAN support and strengthened regionalism. The democratization of Cambodia under the UN’s auspices made it more suitable for membership in ASEAN, although it is debatable whether this move strengthened or weakened ASEAN. Hun Sen’s tirade against ASEAN for postponing Cambodia’s accession to ASEAN in 1997 in response to his “coup” disappeared when Cambodia was finally admitted in 1999 after undertaking necessary democratic changes.
In Northeast Asia, democratic transitions in Taiwan and South Korea have led to their greater engagement in the region. South Korea is a staunch advocate of multilateralism. Taiwan has participated in regional dialogue forums whenever circumstances allowed.

Indonesia’s has not reneged on any of the commitments of its predecessor to ASEAN, and has become more active in regional diplomacy with its idea of an ASEAN Security Community. Indonesian nationalists would have been heartened by ASEAN refusal to endorse the East Timorese self-determination campaign even at the height of the bloodshed during the referendum period, and its formal declaration of support for Indonesia’s territorial integrity in 2000. To quote Adian Silalahi, Director General for ASEAN, Indonesian Foreign Ministry: “We still adhere to those principles [of ASEAN], but I believe that on this issue [non-intervention] we are more open now... Indonesia is more open, more flexible because of the democratization process.” 13

Democratization has led to a growing criticism and rejection, both within and outside the region of the time-honoured ASEAN Way, which has been credited with conflict prevention and dispute settlement in ASEAN. But this has been offset by ideas for reforming ASEAN, such as the former Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuan’s call for “flexible engagement”. The debate over non-interference in ASEAN has highlighted an interesting trend: the strongest supporters of a more relaxed sovereignty are those which have undergone major democratic transitions. Thus, Thailand and Philippines have been among the major supporters of a flexible engagement. There is little question that time favours the pro-democracy camp who have come up with more concrete ideas for reform and revitalization of ASEAN. While the debate over non-interference divides ASEAN, over the long-term, it could prove to be a blessing in disguise. The criticism of the ASEAN Way has entailed a call for more transparency within ASEAN, and the development of a new culture of peer criticism and review. Thanks to the debate, ASEAN is developing mechanisms which could permit more effective tools of transparency, crisis prevention and conflict management.

**Long-Term Effects of Democratization on Regional Stability: Towards A Democratic Security Community in Asia**

The democratic peace hypothesis assumes that democratic states enjoy a shared commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes. They generally harbor positive feelings about each other and usually seek to expand positive sum interactions with other democratic states. Drawing upon the work of Karl Deutsch, recent scholarship has proposed the idea of a “democratic security community”, in which states sharing liberal democratic values develop the long-term habit of peaceful interactions and rule out the use of force in dealing with each other. 14

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Despite the immediate challenges posed by democratization to regional stability, a longer-term perspective suggests a number of ways in which it may actually improve the conditions for regional stability in Southeast Asia.

First, democratization creates more domestic transparency in ways beneficial to regional understanding and trust. Transition to democratic rule brings in its wake availability of greater information about a state’s national security and financial policies and assets. This could reduce suspicions among neighbours and expand regional security and economic cooperation. Third, democratization may lead to more open and regularized interactions among states, reducing the importance of inter-personal contact. Democratization produces greater openness and the rule of law not just within states, but also between them. Rule of law in the domestic context often leads to demands for rule-based interactions in the regional arena. This can be more conducive to regional collective problem-solving.

Since the late 1980s, defence expenditures in ASEAN has been a matter of considerable intra-mural anxiety and suspicion, despite the justified rejection of a region-wide arms race hypothesis. Now, democratic reforms in Thailand and Indonesia have removed some of the sources of such tensions. Greater and more reliable information of Thai defence spending is now available, even the army’s “secret fund” is under challenge. In Indonesia, the extent of corruption in arms procurement that drove defence expenditures in the Suharto era was officially acknowledged, if not yet addressed, by former President Wahid himself. Greater transparency in other ASEAN members makes it easier for them to cooperate in the defence and security arena, which have until now been stymied by the fear that such interactions are a form of intelligence gathering and territorial familiarization.

Democratization also creates a deeper basis for regional socialization by according space to the civil society and accommodating its concerns. Most forms of regionalism in the developing world (indeed anywhere for that matter) have been highly state-centric, which in turn invites opposition to their agenda from domestic and international civic action groups. A grouping of more participatory polities could change that and thereby increase their chances for more effective responses to transnational issues.

Regional cooperation among illiberal states tends to be a narrowly state-centric variety that enjoys little legitimacy among the people. Socialization based exclusively on elite-level interactions among authoritarian states does not usually survive the downfall of one of more of the governments. For regionalism to be robust and durable, it must extend to, and incorporate the civil society. Social movements in Southeast Asia have felt certain resentment towards ASEAN for its past and continuing reluctance to support their cause or involve them in its decision-making. This lack of support for ASEAN is itself a call for ASEAN to become more open, as the NGO community in Indonesia joins its Thai, Philippine, Cambodian and Malaysian counterparts in demanding institutional change and greater openness in ASEAN. So democratization has not undermined the legitimacy not of regionalism per se, but of a certain type of regionalism associated with ASEAN.
The regional civil society is not rejecting regionalism, but is now becoming more vocal in its demands for a more inclusive ASEAN. If this becomes a reality, Southeast Asian regionalism would be strengthened, not weakened.

Further democratization in the region could help Asia in securing better support for regional integration and cooperative project from outside powers. In the changing international climate, where democracy and human rights have become ever more influential international norms, regional groupings of authoritarian states, or groupings that reluctantly tolerate authoritarianism out of deference to the principle of non-interference, are unlikely to find sympathy and support from international donors. Domestic pressure in donor countries makes it difficult for them to support regional groupings perceived to be anti-human rights and democracy. On the other hand, more aid is now available to regional groupings which promote democracy and human rights.

Notes
Tentative Program

Duration: Three Years: 2004-7

Three International Conferences:

1. Southeast Asia: Singapore (IDSS)
2. South Asia: New Delhi (in partnership with Centre for the Study of Developing Societies)
3. Northeast Asia: Korea (in partnership with Dr Chung-in Moon of Yonsei University)

One Taiwan Conference (Partner to be decided)

One Post-doctoral Fellowship at IDSS: 2 years

10 short-term visiting fellowships (3 months)

Output:

3 Volumes of edited papers, plus a small book by the project director

Budget:

Approximately 400,000 US dollars (Detailed budget to be submitted)

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