

Dynamics of East Asia: Cultural Connections, Contested History, and the Rise of China

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Abstract: This paper presents a critical discussion of the concept of the East Asian region, drawing on perspectives from History and International Relations. Taking the region of 'East Asia' to refer to the contemporary countries of China, Japan and South Korea, I argue that the region is bound together primarily by the rich cultural contributions of the Chinese, or 'Sinic', civilization, and by a growing economic interdependence due to the rise of China as a global and regional power. Regional integration and cooperation is impeded, however, because of a number of interconnected issues. These include a rivalry leadership competition between China and Japan at the region-level and between China and the US at the global-level, as well as a range of tensions that stem from varied historical memories of Japan's colonial and imperialistic past. I argue these historical memories are not static, but are continuously adapted and repurposed as political tools by the ruling governments in the three countries to maintain control and deflect criticisms of domestic policies. The paper concludes with the suggestion that growing economic interdependence, time, and the efforts of a range of actors may eventually lead to the re-emergence of an East Asian region committed to cooperation and mutual understanding.

Keywords: East Asia, international relations, regional integration

1. Introduction

Ideas about what constitutes a region vary by perspective and purpose. Less rigid than nation-states, the borders of regions can blur and overlap, and differ based on political, economic and cultural relationships. Historically, regions have often been synonymous with empires, dynasties and civilisations, and typically exhibited geographical coherence. In the modern age, and increasingly in the globalizing post-Cold War era, regions are more complex, manifesting through a range of structures such as supra-national organisations, multilateral trade agreements and political-security alliances. Today, the European Union (EU) is the most prominent example of a comprehensive regionally-integrated economic and political entity, although the recent rise in populist movements advocating isolationism in a number of member states has highlighted the potential fragility of regional integration.

In contrast to the EU with its boundaries delineated by official membership, the countries that inhabit the area known as East Asia vary depending on the way the region's borders are defined. While the Southeast Asian nations that make up the regional entity known as ASEAN are by many accounts included in definitions of East Asia, for the purposes of this paper this region will be regarded as distinct. 'East Asia' will refer instead to the Northeast Asian countries that have been most directly influenced by the traditions of the Sinic, or Chinese, civilization; namely China, Korea, and Japan¹⁾. While there are many socio-cultural, political and economic characteristics that distinguish China, Japan and Korea from one another, I argue the three countries share a number of broad traits that are conducive to regional categorization. One of these is a rich, inter-connected cultural history. According to Holcombe (2011):

“East Asia has an historical coherence as a civilization that is roughly equivalent to what we think of as Western civilization, with the Bronze Age prototype that first emerged in high antiquity in the region we now call China providing approximately the same sort of core historical legacy for the modern countries of China, Japan and Korea that ancient Greece and Rome left for modern Italy, France, Britain, Germany, and what we think of somewhat vaguely and imperfectly as “the West” (p.3).

Arguably the strongest historical bonds that unite the region are the cultural connections that have been established over millennia. Some of the most important influences that have shaped the cultures and societies in all three nations are Confucianism, Buddhism, and the legacy of the Chinese writing system. These are discussed below.

2. Cultural connections between China, Korea and Japan

2.1. The influence of Confucianism

A major influence that has shaped the development of East Asian societies is Confucianism. The core teachings of Confucian philosophy came to be canonised in the five Confucian Classics which served as the heart of formal education in East Asia for over two thousand years (from the late second century BCE to the early twentieth century CE) (Holcombe, 2011). Confucian teachings emphasise a humanistic and ethical philosophy that promotes self-cultivation, filial piety, loyalty and social hierarchy. In addition, leadership by virtue and scholarly merit are hallmarks of the teachings, the adoption of which led to the imperial examination system in China that flourished during the Tang and Song Dynasties. Today, screening by examination still serves a major function in East Asian education systems. Speak with any final-year high school student

1) As Korea is today split into two autonomous nation states, references to 'Korea' will depend on the historical context; mentions of Korea in the contemporary period will refer to South Korea. Furthermore, other countries and societies such as North Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan - while arguably members of Northeast Asia - are not discussed in detail as the focus of the paper is on the international relations of the states participating in the Triateral Cooperation Secretariat: mainland China, Japan and South Korea.

seeking to gain entrance to university in Japan, China or Korea and it becomes readily apparent how profound an effect the legacy of the examination system still has on the lives of individuals, their families, and broader society.

Hierarchy and deference to those senior are also observable in the three societies, as are high levels of respect paid to educators, academics and others with particular forms of expertise. While these hierarchies serve to stratify society, value placed on education and self-cultivation entail anyone can rise in society through studious hard work. Holcombe explains:

“Some of the most important Confucian virtues,... such as filial piety and loyalty (*zhong*), can only be expressed through hierarchical relationships. This is one side of the Confucian equation. The other side of the equation, however, was a pointedly egalitarian and meritocratic strand of Confucian thought. Anyone, it was assumed, could potentially perfect himself or herself through self-cultivation and then lead the world by his or her example” (2011, p.37).

The Confucian Classics spread beyond China to Korea, Japan and Vietnam. While this transmission inherently brought with it facets of Chinese culture and language, the universalist message of Confucianism (and Buddhism as well) meant that other cultures could adopt and adapt the teachings as their own. In some instances, the adaptation entailed a removal of this very notion of universality. An example can be seen in Japan, with a shift in emphasis from universalism and meritocracy towards hierarchy, loyalty and the moral obligation to fulfil one’s role (*ibid.*, 2011). Eisenstadt (1996) claims:

“The definition of the religious or “cultural” community that developed within Japanese Buddhism or Confucianism was distinctively national and did not strongly emphasize those transnational, civilizational dimensions that could be found in most other Buddhist communities or those universalistic orientations typical of most Confucian and especially Neo-Confucian schools. On the whole, both Confucianism and Buddhism in Japan have continually reinforced some of the basic prevalent political orientations, premises, and symbols of legitimation of authority in Japan...thus greatly transforming certain basic tenets of “original” Chinese Confucianism” (Eisenstadt, 1996, p.184).

The transmission of Confucianism to Korea also entailed localization, and even fostered a strengthening of Korean identity. With the fall of the Ming Dynasty and the reign of the Manchus during the succeeding Qing Dynasty, the Koreans came to see themselves as the sole exemplars of a true Confucian society (Holcombe, 2011). The purging of traditional Chinese ways of life under the Communists in China and the tendency for Japan to favour Buddhist and nationalistic worldviews means Korea still holds this status today. According to Tu Wei-Ming (1996), Korea is still the most Confucian of the East Asian societies:

“The Korean moral fabric woven by family, school, and government has such a thick structure of Confucian ethics that, even though South Korea is the most Christianized of all East Asian societies, its social network (both the vertical order and the horizontal relationships) is remarkably Confucian in character” (Tu, 1996, p.188).

The influence of Confucianism is arguably a major unifying factor that connects East Asian societies. However, it is clear that each country has developed its own unique versions of Confucianism, and both Japan and Korea view their own versions as distinct and removed from that of China.

Traditional Chinese Confucianism is an ethical system that was developed in antiquity. Much like the revival of Greek philosophy and Roman law that occurred during the Renaissance period, subsequently shaping modern Western institutions, a movement known as *Neo-Confucianism* became a major influencing force in East Asia during the Tang Dynasty and continued until the twentieth century (Holcombe, 2011). While there are inherent tensions between traditional Confucianism with its emphasis on social harmony and the public good, and Buddhism, which entails a self-centred rejection of an illusory world, Neo-Confucianism melded traditional Confucian ethics with Taoism and Buddhism. In addition to the influences Buddhism had on Confucian thought, the religion itself had a profound impact on the cultures and societies of East Asia.

2.2 Buddhism in East Asia

Buddhism spread across East Asia during the Chinese ‘Age of Division’ after the fall of the Han Dynasty (220 to 589 CE) (Holcombe, 2011). This period coincides with the beginnings of recorded history for both Korea and Japan. Holcombe writes:

“A relatively common elite culture spread throughout East Asia in this period, extending to modern China, Korea, Japan, and northern Vietnam. The various local East Asian elites of this period in some ways even had more in common with each other than with the peasants in their own nearby villages. This was the age when East Asia was born. One of the key features of this new East Asian cultural community – and one that simultaneously also linked it, at another level, to a much larger world – was Buddhism” (ibid., p.70).

The primary form of East Asian Buddhism is Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) Buddhism, a tradition that “promises universal salvation, in which the Buddha and Bodhisattvas have come to be worshiped deities and rebirth in paradise is often seen as a more immediate goal than an end to reincarnation in *nirvana*” (ibid., p.71). Another important form of Buddhism that developed in China was *Chan*, commonly known in the West by its Japanese name, *Zen*. This was a uniquely Chinese form of Buddhism that was heavily influenced by Taoist thought. The emphasis was on meditation, with the idea that enlightenment can be attained instantly by removing the illusion of duality and

awakening to the reality of the world (ibid, p.101). Zen Buddhism had a major influence in Japan in particular, informing much of the cultural developments of the Kamakura and Muromachi periods (1185-1568) such as rock gardens, art and architecture, and the *chanoyu*, or tea ceremony (ibid., pp.152-157).

2.3 The legacy of the Chinese written language

The third major unifying feature of East Asia was the adoption of the Chinese writing system in both Korea and Japan. With the spread of the influence of the Confucian Classics so too did literacy in the Chinese written language become essential for cultural elites in these countries. This influence lasted for centuries up until the age of modernization, when attention was redirected towards the West. Holcombe writes:

“Despite the strengths of this [the Chinese writing] system, in the twentieth century, under the impact of modern Western influences, Chinese characters were largely abandoned in Korea, while in Japan they have been so thoroughly domesticated as to seem part of traditional Japanese culture. Even within China, sweeping language reforms were implemented, including the abandonment of the classical written language in favour of a modern vernacular in the early twentieth century and script simplification in the People’s Republic. It is still the case, however, that over one-third of the vocabulary items in each of the modern Japanese and Korean languages derive from Chinese, so the ghost of this once-shared premodern written language still hovers over East Asia” (p.24).

Unlike the written language, however, there are dramatic differences between the other linguistic features of Korean, Japanese and Chinese. While Korean and Japanese are considered to be distant relatives of the same language family, the many variations of Chinese come from a completely different family. Thus, if linguistic competence in one of the three languages isn’t shared between peoples of these three nations wishing to communicate, the default means of communication tends to be in the *lingua franca* of English (Graddol, 2000).

2.4 Strong State Control

Connected to the Confucian tradition that places faith in a hierarchical system, loyalty and rule by virtuous example, modern East Asian states tend to exhibit strong steering and control of social and economic life by centralised governments. The most obvious contemporary example is the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in China, but evidence can be found in Japan and Korea as well. In Japan, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has had almost continuous control of the government since the 1950s (Jacques, 2012). Jacques argues that:

“Since the end of the American occupation, Japan has been regarded by the West as democracy in its own image, but in reality it works so differently from any Western democracy that it cannot be meaningfully described as such. Indeed, unlike

Western democracies, it is extremely doubtful whether in practice Japan gives primacy to the idea of popular sovereignty ... on the contrary, as in China, another Confucian society, state sovereignty rather than popular sovereignty is predominant” (p.73).

Similarly, South Korea was founded in 1948 as a constitutional democracy, but in reality the country has undergone a tumultuous process of development with little semblance of true democracy until very recently. After a series of military coups and rigged elections, 1961 saw the installation of Park Chung Hee, who was to serve as president of South Korea until his assassination in 1979. Under Park the government established an authoritarian and militaristic developmental state, which was to last until 1993. By this time, Korea began to shift its approach from state-guided capitalism to policies based on globalization and free trade in response to pressure from trading partners, in particular the United States (Holcombe, 2011). While Korea’s developmental state was heavily modelled after that of Japan’s, the 35-year colonial subjugation of Korea by the Japanese in the early twentieth century had left bitter resentment in the hearts of many Koreans. It was not until 1998 that Korea lifted its ban on Japanese cultural products. These and other tensions between the three nations are discussed in more detail below.

3. Tensions between the three nations

The rapid economic growth of China in the first decade of the 21st Century has led to a substantial increase in intra-regional trade volumes, and China is now both Japan and South Korea’s most important trade partner in terms of imports and exports (Byun & Um, 2014, p.125). While economic interdependence has arguably contributed to regional stability and cohesion, a range of socio-political issues continue to cause tensions between the three countries. Many of these issues have connections to the contested history of Japan’s imperialistic past, and a survey of the news will frequently reveal the latest iteration of these tensions. At the time of this writing, a number of events have sparked controversy and rekindled antagonisms between the three countries. In 2017 in Japan, the owner of a sizeable hotel chain placed a revisionist history book in hotel rooms that denied the Nanjing Massacre and the existence of “comfort women²⁾”, sparking protests and boycotts (The Japan Times, 2017b). In the same month, an ultranationalist school accused of bigotry against Chinese and Koreans was linked to Japan’s First Lady, highlighting the growing prominence of a right-wing nationalist education movement in Japan (Soble, 2017). Recent activities in South Korea have generated tensions with both Japan and China in the diplomatic sphere as well. The placement of a memorial to comfort women in front of the Japanese consulate in the city of Busan led Japan to recall its ambassador to South Korea, and Japan has become

2) ‘Comfort women’ is a term used to refer to the women and girls who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II (Argibay, 2003).

further incensed by a proposal for erecting a similar memorial on the disputed island of Dokdo/Takeshima (The Japan Times, 2017a). In the security arena, South Korea's deployment of the U.S. Thaad missile defence system has enraged China, which views it as a threatening exertion of American power that upsets the regional security balance. In response it has banned Korean TV shows and pop stars, and the state-controlled media has urged the public to boycott South Korean products and has even threatened possible military repercussions (Perlez & Sang-hun, 2017).

The above-mentioned events that have gained media attention in the recent past are but an example of a wide range of issues that spark enmity among the three countries. Many of these tensions are aggravated by the actions of political leaders, a recurrent example of which is the visits of Japanese prime ministers to Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine, a memorial to Japan's war dead (including convicted war criminals). Others have to do with disputes over sovereignty of islands in the East China Sea and issues related to regional security, particularly regarding security issues involving the United States.

Much of the tensions between the three countries relate to events that have taken place since Japan embarked on its project of modern-nation building at the start of the Meiji Era in the late 19th-century. Japan's activities since this time have generated reactions among elites and the general publics of neighbouring East (and Southeast) Asian countries ranging from admiration to deep-seated resentment. Portrayals of Japan in these and other societies have varied widely, including images of Japan as a successful model of Asian modernization, a brutal colonizer and unrepentant military invader, an economic powerhouse, a pop-culture trendsetter, and an "obedient prop of American hegemony" (Morris, Shimazu, & Vickers, 2015, p.4). Particular portrayals of Japan in East and Southeast Asia have been strategically emphasised in different societies at different times and played an instrumental role in the construction of national identities in a number of countries. In the case of China and Korea, notions of collective victimhood at the hands of the Japanese have become a central tenet of each country's respective nationalist mythologies (ibid., p.6).

3.1 Nationalism as a political tool

The strong, centralised state power found in the three nations has been frequently utilized for the development of national identities which has served to rally populations to work hard and sacrifice for 'the good of the country', but has also at times fuelled xenophobic regional tensions and forms of ultra-nationalism (Hammond, 2016). The similarity for each nation to exhibit strong nationalistic traits is a shared characteristic that serves to not only set China, Japan and Korea apart from one another, but frequently against one another. The ruling elites have often been the instigators that fuel popular resentment towards the other countries, often for the purpose of deflecting criticism away from themselves or unpopular domestic policies (Vickers, 2007).

While the trajectories of the development of nationalisms in China, Japan and Korea are

distinct, some scholars point to a number of similarities that unify state-driven national identities in East Asia. According to Rozman (2012), “[w]hether in a strictly top-down process or in contentious politics, states construct an identity meant to legitimize their existence and orient the aspirations of ruling elites. These ideas about a state’s past, present, and future are meant to instruct people, both at home and abroad, on why they should accept this state as the primary institution for controlling the use of power and deciding the rules of operation for important institutions (Rozman, 2012, p.7). Rozman argues that all three countries in East Asia exhibit characteristics of what he terms the East Asian National Identity Syndrome. These characteristics are:

“(1) a premodern legacy mixing a Confucian civilization of historical honor with an incipient inward-oriented, closed national pride; (2) a desperate catch-up mentality for modern reform with uncommon ambivalence about management of the historical legacy as top-down transformation and international borrowing occur at breakneck speed; (3) an era of extremist claims isolated from international currents that face sudden rejection but lie in the background as potent factors in limiting convergence with outside thinking; (4) pride in an economic miracle accompanied by a strong sense of entitlement that cannot easily be satisfied, as expectations and frustrations both mount; and (5) sudden spikes in optimism that a desired breakthrough is within reach, accompanied by sharp letdowns in which other countries are blamed for frustrating their hopes” (Rozman, 2012, p.10).

Among the three East Asian states, the ‘other countries’ that are frequently blamed are those within the nearest geographical proximity (with the exception of the United States, which has a complicated relationship with China). The historical and contemporary factors that have fostered tensions between these countries are discussed below.

3.2 Japan and China

Japan’s history with China was relatively untroubled throughout much of recorded history. Japan played the role of an intermittent tributary state for much of this time, while borrowing a number of the cultural, religious and philosophical traditions described above. This all changed dramatically, however, with the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Looking up to the West as a model for modernization, Japan began to distance itself from its Asian neighbours. The Confucian emphasis on hierarchy that shaped Japanese society internally through the rigid caste system expanded outward during this time, with the Western nations revered for their progress and deemed superior, and the backward nations of Asia regarded as inferior to the modernizing West and to Japan (Jacques, 2012). In addition to scientific knowledge, innovative production techniques and new technologies, Japan also sought to emulate the Western powers in the practice of colonization.

Defeat in the Sino-Japanese war in 1894-5 humiliated the Chinese, who themselves viewed their own civilization as superior to the Japanese. The indemnity China was

forced to pay Japan as a result of its defeat in the war was a major driver in Japan's subsequent rapid industrialization (Holcombe, 2011, p.205). Japan eventually launched a campaign of occupation and subjugation in neighbouring China, Manchuria and Korea (expanding again dramatically in World War II) that is a major source of tension and resentment to this day. The Nanjing Massacre in particular, in which as many as 300,000 Chinese civilians were murdered over the course a few weeks, has left a scar on the Chinese national consciousness that has yet to heal, a fact that the current government is utilizing to its advantage. The historical memory of this tragedy has been exploited as a political tool in recent years by the CCP, which began state-led commemorations of the massacre (hosted by Xi Jinping) in 2014. The date commemorating the massacre is now one of three new public holidays that focus on the conflict between the two countries (BBC, 2014). The response from Japan has not helped the situation. The resistance of Japan to properly apologize for this atrocity has only fuelled anti-Japanese sentiment in China. Another connected issue has been the publication of revisionist history textbooks in Japan that downplay Japan's crimes against China and other East Asian countries during the war.

Furthermore, like many other countries in the region, there are disputes between China and Japan over islands that both countries claim as their own. China argues that international maps from the Ming Dynasty show the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands were a part of China in that period, while the Japanese have claimed the islands since they were colonized after the Sino-Japanese War. Like the other contentious issues between the two countries, this serves as an ongoing source of tension and potential conflict.

However, while tensions persist, increasing economic interdependence also characterises the evolving relationship between China and Japan. Inoguchi writes,

“as development deepens, the links between China and Japan intensify simply because China is significantly dependent on Japan for infrastructural technology and product components, while Japan is mutually reliant on China for its cheap and abundant labour and favourable conditions. This deepening interdependence is irreversible, especially since the lifting of economic sanctions against China in 1991-92 accelerated China's march to global power” (Inoguchi, 2011, p.346).

In 2009, China became Japan's largest export market with the value of exports to China doubling between 2000 and 2003, and it has also become a key manufacturing base for Japanese transnational companies (Jacques, 2012, p.400). Trade with the US fell during this period. Thus, from an economic standpoint at least, China and Japan are drawing closer together.

3.3 Japan and Korea

Japan's history with Korea is complex. In an attempt to ultimately invade China in 1592,

a Japanese warlord named Hideyoshi first sent 158,000 men to the south-eastern tip of the Korean peninsula. The warriors ravaged the country, and although they eventually conceded defeat five years later, Korea was devastated by the invasions (Holcombe, 2011). Relations between the two nations once again improved in the 1600s and lasted until the Meiji Restoration. At this point tensions once again began to emerge. The Koreans objected to the new Western-style approaches to trade (as well as the Western styles of dress) adopted by the Japanese, and refused to acknowledge the Japanese emperor. Doing so would put the Japanese emperor on equal footing with the emperor of China, to whom Korea served as a tributary state. It also meant that Japan's ruler would be ranked higher than that of the Korean king (ibid.). This refusal to recognize the emperor outraged Japan, and from 1875 they began to dispatch warships and soldiers to Korea. This pressure led Korea, under the advice of China, to sign a Western-style treaty that granted Korea independent status but also permitted port-style concessions to Japan.

During this period splits occurred within Korean leadership, with conservatives aligning with China and modernizers and reformers aligning with Meiji Japan (ibid.). Soon both countries became involved on Korean soil. An uneasy peace treaty was shattered by a popular religious uprising, which led both China and Japan to send troops to Korea (ibid.). After the uprising was quelled, the Japanese never left. War was declared between China and Japan on 1 August 1894. Japan was victorious against China, taking territory in Manchuria and some areas of coastal China. China was also forced to concede the island of Taiwan, and formally acknowledged Korea's independence. This led to expanding Japanese presence there.

Not all Koreans resisted Japanese occupation, with some pro-Japanese Korean officials instituting modernizing reforms and removing many of the Chinese influences from society such as the Chinese calendar and the civil service examinations (ibid.). During this period Korea was still nominally independent from Japan, and began to assert its own national identity. In 1897 the new *han'gul* alphabet was introduced, replacing Chinese characters. The Korean emperor (as he now called himself) was able to play Russian interests off of those of Japan, which helped to keep the rapidly industrializing country at bay (ibid.). Russia had interests in Manchuria and Japan's lay in Korea, and neither country was willing to reach an agreement. Great Britain aligned with the Japanese which gave confidence for Japan to confront Russia. This sparked the Russo-Japanese war in 1904. Once again two foreign powers battled on Korean soil. Japan was victorious against Russia as a result of strategic naval battles, and by 1905 Korea was reduced to the status of a Japanese protectorate. By 1910, Korea was a formal Japanese colony, a status it was to keep until the end of World War II.

This period had mixed effects – while Koreans were undeniably subject to inhumane oppression and racism under Japanese rule, the country also became thoroughly industrialized, second only to Japan itself by 1945. Holcombe writes:

“Modernization in Korea thus followed a complicated trajectory, including simultaneous Japanese-ization, Westernization, and also the maturation of a new sense of Korean nationalism” (2011, p.247).

With the outbreak of World War II in 1937, attempts to assimilate Korea into the Japanese Empire intensified. Koreans were forced to worship at *Shintō* shrines and take Japanese names. The Korean language came to be banned in government, schools and the private press, even though it is estimated that in 1942 only about 20% of Koreans could understand Japanese (ibid.). In 1943, Koreans began to be drafted into the Imperial Army. So too were more than 100,000 Korean women forced into sexual slavery at the service of the Japanese military. These inappropriately named “comfort women” are still the subject of heated debate between Korea and Japan, with controversy frequently erupting over the Japanese government’s approach to formal apologies and financial compensation for survivors. Conservatives and revisionists in government, including current prime minister Shinzo Abe, have frequently exacerbated tensions in the region by downplaying this and other issues related to wartime atrocities both publicly and through revisions of Japanese history textbooks.

Twenty years after World War II relations between Japan and Korea began to improve somewhat, albeit slowly. Holcombe writes:

“Korea re-established formal diplomatic relations with Japan in 1965, moreover, Japan quickly became South Korea’s largest trading partner. But if history explains Korea’s close connections with Japan, it also explains deep Korean feelings of bitterness toward their formal colonial masters and an understandable desire to assert Korea’s own independent national identity. Japanese cultural products were officially banned in South Korea until as late as 1998, and although generic modern Japanese appliances such as TVs might be acceptable, Japanese automobiles were totally excluded. Japanese-language education was also banned in Korea (and not reintroduced into Korean high schools until 1973)” (2011, p.307).

While tensions continue to be played out in the political sphere, relations between Japan and Korea continue to evolve. Today South Korean cultural products are arguably the most popular in the region, with Korean TV dramas and K-pop music attracting die-hard fans. The so-called Korean Wave has had a dramatic soft power effect in the region and increasingly on a global scale.

3.4 China and Korea

For hundreds of years the kingdoms that made up the Korean peninsula served as tributary states for the Chinese Empire. However, after World War II South Korea became an ally of the United States, “a relationship that was cemented in the Korean War, with no small part of its subsequent economic success being due to its position as an American vassal state during the Cold War” (Jacques, 2012, p.365). In the Korean

War the Chinese sided with the North. In the conflict thirty-three thousand US lives were lost, and by comparison a staggering 800,000 Chinese (including Mao Zedong's own son), and 3 million Korean people were killed (Holcombe, 2011). Once the North was established as an independent country, however, it tended to chart its own course. Today, China has far greater cultural and commercial interests in South Korea, though it still retains some diplomatic and trade relations with the North. Jacques (2012) outlines the complexity of the situation:

“Clearly, in the long run, China’s relationship with South Korea is far more important to it than that with North Korea: China’s trade with the South, for example, is 70 times greater than that with the North. On the other hand, the Chinese would probably prefer to see the Korean Peninsula remain divided for the foreseeable future because it does not want to share a border with South Korea given its military alliance with the United States and the continuing presence of the latter’s troops. The Chinese, as a consequence, are anxious to maintain a reasonably close relationship with North Korea while also seeking to ensure the country does not implode...There is no question, however, that China’s relationship with Pyongyang constantly puts Beijing in a difficult and defensive position both regionally and globally: once again, these events served to strengthen the bonds between the US, South Korea and Japan, while also alienating South Korean public opinion” (p.366-367).

However over the last decade or so, South Korea and China have begun move closer together, and Jacques predicts this will continue as China’s economic might continues to grow and the US loses its influence in the region (ibid.).

3.5 The ‘Elephant in the Room’

It is impossible to study East Asian international relations without consideration of the influence of the United States, whose presence in the region Jacques likens to an ‘elephant in the room’. He writes:

“with its military alliance with Japan, its military bases in South Korea, its long-term support for Taiwan, and various other bilateral alliances and arrangements, not to mention the Korean and Vietnamese wars, it has been the dominant military power in the region ever since it replaced Europe in the 1950s” (p.401).

While the US still boasts the strongest military presence in the region, its political and economic clout is waning. However, the US is not willing to concede the region to China so easily. Military alliances with Japan and South Korea remain strong, although these ties have become more tenuous during the era of the unpredictable Trump administration. The presence of US interests in the region has implications for any attempts for China, Korea and Japan to entertain ideas of regional integration, as the US tends not to condone alliances of which it is not a part. But the potential volatility in the region entails

that for some, the US presence is a welcome and stabilising force:

“recent flare-ups of popular Chinese nationalist fury have most commonly been directed at still bitter memories of Japanese aggression during World War II. Conversely, some Japanese understandably feel considerable apprehension about the rising Chinese giant nearby on the mainland. The relationship between Taiwan and the PRC remains a potential flash point that could erupt into war. And for North Korea, the cold war still does not appear to have ended. In this potentially highly unstable security environment, the continuing presence of American power remains a welcome stabilizing influence that few East Asians are really eager to see disappear anytime soon” (Holcombe, 2011, pp.350-351).

4. The Rise of China

During the 1990s, China refused to be a part of any regional multilateral arrangements “fearing it would be obliged to play second fiddle to Japan, mindful that the United States was strongly opposed to regional organizations from which it might be excluded, and, not least, still imbued with that traditional aloofness born of its enduring sense of historical superiority” (Jacques, 2012, p.348). A new strategy came to be implemented by the end of the decade, however. China’s strategy at the outset was to establish multilateral relationships with the ASEAN countries. With a rapidly growing economy, and feeling increasingly confident that it would not have to be subordinate to Japan, China began to feel more comfortable with its position in the region. The Asian financial crisis further pushed China and the surrounding nations together. According to Jacques, “[F]rom being a rival to be feared, its motives always the subject of suspicion, China increasingly came to be seen as a friend and partner, primarily because it refrained from devaluing the renminbi, a move which would have inflicted further pain on their economies, together with its willingness to extend aid and interest-free loans during the crisis” (p.350).

This newfound diplomacy on the part of China has been welcomed in the region, particularly during the time of the Bush Administration in the US, which focused its attention much more on the Middle East. With the apparent decline in influence of the US in the region and steady rise of China as a regional and global power, what is the likelihood of the development of an integrated East Asian region? A number of trends point the possibility that once again an East Asian region may be emerging.

5. Economic interdependence

According to Kuroda and Passarelli (2009), regional integration in East Asia has been spurred primarily by economic rather than political developments. Inoguchi highlights

the rapid rate at which economic integration has occurred by comparing the region to the EU:

“Domestic economies are rapidly becoming closely interlinked regionally and with the rest of the world. Whereas the European combined economy took more than 50 years to achieve an intra-regional trade figure of 60 percent, the East Asian economy surpassed the 50 percent level in a mere 15 years” (Inoguchi, 2011, p.347).

The increasing economic interdependence may be a precursor for political, cultural and other forms of integration. However, it will be essential for the three nations to learn to reconcile or at least come to a mutual understanding about the recent past. Japan in particular may need to come to grips with the reality of China’s rise and address the wartime treatment of its neighbours appropriately. The Democratic prime minister Hatoyama instituted a dramatic shift in policy by advocating for an East Asian Community and closer ties with China in 2009-10, but this shift (and his tenure as prime minister) was short-lived. US support for Japan during the Fukushima disaster reoriented Japan to its long-time ally and conservatives with nationalistic and revisionist tendencies once again gained power.

It has been predicted that by 2050, the Chinese economy will be the largest in the world, nearly double the size of the US. If this prediction begins to manifest in reality, it may be the case that the US sees its relationship with China more important than that with Japan or Korea, which would undoubtedly shake things up in the region. For the time being, it looks as though Japan is going to ignore these possibilities in favour of the status quo, “postponing the day when they are required to engage in a fundamental rethink – by far the biggest since 1868 – of their relationship with China in particular and East Asia in general” (Jacques, 2012, p.401).

According to Inoguchi and He, attitudes toward regionalism in East Asia differ dramatically by country. “In Asia regional identity is shown only by those citizens of small countries such as South Korea, Thailand and Mongolia. Big powers such as China and India seem to think that they themselves are Asia” (He & Inoguchi, 2011, p.173). Japan continues to be polarized by conflicting ideologies:

“Japan is torn between Asianists and non-Asianists. For the latter, Japan is posited as against Asia: ‘Japan and Asia’ rather than ‘Japan in and among Asia’. Asian regional identity is not easy to inculcate for this latter group” (Inoguchi, 2004 cited in He & Inoguchi, 2011, p.173).

In addition to regional economic interdependence, China, Korea and Japan also have “some of the most dense and wide-ranging networks of economic transactions in the world, and each of the three adopt a highly global orientation” (ibid, p.174). Coinciding with any agreements made between the three, the nature of the globalized political

economy is such that there will also be the continuation and expansion of a range of other bilateral and multilateral agreements with countries around the world.

Conclusion: Is there an East Asian region?

The countries that make up East Asia are an important part of the more expansive Asia-Pacific region, which includes ASEAN member countries and powerful global players such as Russia, India and the United States. The Asia-Pacific has been characterized as “a mosaic of divergent cultures and political regime types, historical estrangements, shifting power balances, and rapid economic change” (Ikenberry & Mastanduno, 2003, p.2). While economic power has been shifting in the region, the United States remains the dominant force in the security arena. Many nations still welcome the U.S. presence as a stabilizing force against volatile and unpredictable states like North Korea, and as a check against the rising global power of China. Nevertheless, He and Inoguchi state that “Asia is ripe for conflict, if not outright confrontation. The armed populations on the Korean Peninsula and on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are the two largest armed groups in the world” (2011, p.174). Within this potentially volatile broader system, relations between East Asian states have proven to be equally complex. While regional economic interdependence has been rapidly increasing, a range of geo-political issues and historical tensions between Japan, China and South Korea, as well as a rivalry leadership competition between China and Japan, present obstacles for regional cooperation and integration (Byun and Um 2014). Tentative efforts have been made, however, towards region-building at the government level:

“In 1997, the ASEAN plus Three (Japan, Korea, and China) was instituted. Japan, Korea, and China were major economic engines. Both ASEAN and the Three wanted to benefit from being closer [to] each other. No less important was the consideration to help the Three to talk to each other without too much fuss. The Three were at odds when they came together as a trio because of their insistence on face, rank and politics before they even reached the negotiation table. *For example, during negotiations it was necessary to use a room with three entrances and a desk of a triangular shape*” (Inoguchi and He, 2011, p.167; italics added).

This somewhat humorous image paints a vivid picture of the tensions still alive between the three nations. Rekindled tensions between China, Japan and Korea threaten to undermine developments for regional integration, and the arrival of the unpredictable and reactionary foreign policy of the Trump administration creates even more uncertainty for the region. While four to possibly eight years of a Trump presidency may seem like an infinitely long and arduous time for some, it is worth reframing the current issues facing East Asia within the context of the long, interconnected history of the region that spans thousands of years. While politicians may fan the flames of regional discontent by pandering to nationalistic contingents within their own countries, civil

society, pop-culture influencers, and globally-oriented universities may be able to facilitate improvements in mutual understanding and regional cooperation. Furthermore, de facto economic integration will most likely continue apace, as will the expansion of informal networks of collaboration in the social and higher education spheres. The younger generation by and large is free from the bitter resentments that impede mutual understanding and rapprochement, and one day they will be in charge. Over time and with concerted efforts by a range of social actors, East Asia may become once again a thriving, integrated region.

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