Enduring Rivalries in the Asia-Pacific

Enduring rivalries recurrently ensnare states in militarized disputes and wars. Are they poised to intensify in the Asia-Pacific, a region characterized by regime and cultural differences, territorial contests, and competing nationalist and regime claims? It is often argued that these conditions and recent power shifts are likely to lead to conflict escalation and contagion, especially in Sino-American relations. Steve Chan’s book challenges this common view and argues instead that Asia-Pacific rivalries are likely to be held in abeyance. He suggests that the majority of leaders in the region wish to base their political legitimacy on their economic performance rather than on popular mobilization against foreign enemies. Economic interdependence and political multilateralism have restrained and in some cases reversed rivalries. Although Asia-Pacific states will continue to quarrel, Chan argues that their relations are more stable today than at any other time since 1945.

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in the Asia-Pacific

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Preface

This book is about interstate rivalries in the Asia-Pacific, especially East Asia. Interstate rivals are defined as adversaries engaging in a competition. They are parties to long-running feuds described by the international relations literature as “enduring rivalries” (Diehl 1998; Diehl and Goertz 2000). Examples such as Greece and Turkey, Israel and Syria, and Pakistan and India come to mind. These relations attract the attention of scholars because they account for a disproportionately large number of interstate conflicts: although representing just about 1 percent of all the dyads that had existed in the interstate system during 1816–1992, they were responsible for 40 percent of the militarized disputes and almost half of the wars that occurred during this period (Stinnett and Diehl 2001). These rivals also have a history of recurrent crises that seem to become more frequent over time (Colaresi and Thompson 2002). Thus, enduring rivals are especially disputatious, and they are especially dangerous to international peace and stability.

Given their propensity for conflict, it is only natural that interstate rivalries have become an important subject for those who study Asia-Pacific relations. Aaron Friedberg (1993/94) wrote shortly after the Cold War's end that Asia was “ripe for rivalry” in a new multipolar world. More recently, Jonathan Holslag (2010: 1, 169) remarked that “China and India will not grow without conflict with each another [sic],” and that their “enduring rivalry for regional power means that instability is [only] temporarily suppressed.” Commenting on Sino-Indian relations, Shalendra Sharma (2009: 183) was also pessimistic: “[their] growing ambitions, competing interests, and long history of distrust and suspicion cannot be easily overcome, not even through vigorously growing economic and diplomatic linkages.” Others have called attention to intensified rivalry on the Korean Peninsula in light of Pyongyang’s nuclear program and its bellicosity, for example in sinking Seoul’s naval vessel Cheonan in March 2010. In the summer of 2012, there was renewed tension between China and the Philippines and between China and Japan over their competing sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas, respectively.
Although relations across the Taiwan Strait have become more stable since the election of Ma Ying-jeou as Taiwan's president, the risk of a military confrontation still remains. When enduring rivalries are combined with rapid power shifts and polarized interstate alignment, this mixture can create a combustible brew that produces cataclysmic conflicts involving many countries, such as in World War I (Thompson 2003). The potential for Washington to become involved in a conflict starting on the Korean Peninsula or across the Taiwan Strait motivates much of the US discourse on Asian rivalries.

I disagree with the generally pessimistic conclusion of much of this discourse, suggesting that Asia-Pacific countries are poised to renew or intensify their rivalries. This region is yet to become a security community like the North Atlantic, of course (Deutsch et al. 1957), but compared to the 1950s and 1960s there is now a significant relaxation of tension and a large increase in economic interconnections. The alignment patterns prevailing during the Cold War have broken down, resulting in most Asia-Pacific states multilateralizing their external ties. Moreover, defense spending as a share of national economy has stayed stable or trended down for most countries in the region. For many (though clearly not all) of the contentious dyads, militarized disputes have declined in recent years. China, which has often been identified as a party to several rivalries in the region (e.g. with Russia, Japan, India, Vietnam, Taiwan, and the United States), has settled most of its border disputes (Fravel 2008), although its territorial settlement with India and in the South and East China Seas is still pending. Pointing to different economic, military and other indicators, I will argue that the general trend is toward an abatement rather than an exacerbation of rivalries in the region. This argument, however, does not deny the existence of remaining sources of distrust and even antipathy, which might kindle a renewal or intensification of the competitive dynamic. Mutual recriminations and public displays of anger can recur, especially when domestic partisanship and nationalist sentiments become involved in highly publicized disputes. I contend, however, that Asian elites’ general pivot to pursue economic openness and interdependence and their increasingly multilateralized relations contribute to containing the danger of conflict escalation.

Robert Jervis (1968) once remarked that officials are more likely to exaggerate the threat from other countries than to make the opposite mistake of underestimating it. Scholars are likely to commit the same error: they tend to give too much emphasis to the security dilemma that perpetuates the competitive logic underlying rivalries, and not enough to interests, ideas and institutions that incline leaders to override a narrow conception of relative gains and encourage them to break out of the
dynamic of a rivalry. Thus, analysts are constantly surprised by momentous developments such as when Mikhail Gorbachev decided to accept retrenchment and end the Cold War, when Anwar Sadat visited Israel, and when Richard Nixon went to China. I question especially the view that cultural similarity, ideological affinity and regime character are either necessary or sufficient conditions for the genesis or conclusion of rivalries. These being relatively static conditions, they cannot in themselves explain why rivalries emerged in the first place, went into remission in some cases, and were terminated in others (as in Anglo-American, American–Japanese, and Sino-Russian relations). For instance, cultural similarity has not prevented contentious relations on the Korean Peninsula and in the Middle East in recent decades, or the historical rivalry between Prussia and Austria. The Sino-Soviet dispute also shows that a similar ideology and regime type do not stop rivalry from developing. Moreover, authoritarian regimes and regimes with different ideological outlooks have been known to tame their rivalries, in order to form the United Arab Emirates and the Concert of Europe, for example (Kupchan 2010). When citing factors such as those just mentioned as causes for rivalries, scholars often risk the error of idiosyncrasy or irrelevance (when the same alleged cause produces different historical outcomes, or when the same outcome has occurred both with and without the supposed cause).

I also question the tendency by many scholars to lump different kinds of contentious relations under the common label of “rivalry,” and to treat these relations primarily as bilateral matters. Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson (2007) have distinguished “spatial rivalries” between neighbors that compete against each other mainly for territorial control or regime legitimacy, and “strategic rivalries” in which the participating states mainly compete for international influence and status. Spatial rivalries are often derivative of strategic rivalries in that the great powers’ competition tends to motivate them to support opposing sides in local contests, thereby sustaining many such contests that would have otherwise ended without third-party involvement. One cannot understand Asian rivalries without grasping the history of foreign influences, whether direct or indirect – especially the role played by the United States. To a greater or lesser extent, local spatial rivalries in Asia are influenced by the strategic rivalry that engaged Moscow and Washington during the Cold War, and more recently the strategic relationship between Beijing and Washington. That these rivalries are nested or interconnected is one reason for their tendency to become protracted and difficult to resolve. Many enduring rivalries involve asymmetric contestants – that is, they consist of competing sides with very lopsided capabilities. One of my
main arguments is that the weaker side in these contests would not have
dared to accept, not to mention instigate, repeated confrontations with
its stronger opponent had it not expected support from a more powerful
third party. Third-party intervention, actual or expected, is therefore a
cause for enduring rivalries of the spatial type. Anticipated support from
a powerful ally encourages the weaker side to hold out and even to pre-
cipitate a crisis in the hope of mobilizing this ally's support for its cause.
This motivation sometimes engenders the fear of entrapment by an ally
(Snyder 1997). When outside support is withdrawn in an asymmetric
rivalry, the weaker side often seeks rapprochement with its counterpart,
such as in the case of German reunification. Wars have expanded in
the past primarily due to the intervention by a major state in a conflict
originating from a dispute between its ally (typically a minor state) and
another country (Vasquez 2009). Major states’ involvement in local con-
flicts has influenced the life histories of large multilateral conflicts (Miller
2007).

When scholars privilege ecological variables (such as cultural homo-
geneity, regime similarity, and ideological affinity) in their explanation,
they tend to give short shrift to the role of policy calculation by the
rivals – and by their respective foreign sponsors or allies. We saw recently
policy reversals across the Taiwan Strait and in inter-Korean relations –
albeit in different directions (Chan, Hu and Sohn 2013) – between the
Chen Shui-bian and Ma Ying-jeou administrations and between the Roh
Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak administrations, respectively. One reason
for these reversals was the different policies pursued by the US George
W. Bush administration in restraining Taiwan’s pro-independence forces
(after the US president’s initial public statement to “do whatever it takes”
to defend Taiwan) and in getting tough with North Korea (in naming it as
a member of the “axis of evil,” thus arousing Pyongyang’s suspicion that
Washington was bent on bringing about its “hard crash”). In both cases,
Beijing and Pyongyang responded more to Washington’s posture than
to that of their immediate neighbor, Taipei and Seoul respectively (Kim
2011; Scobell 2011). One can cite other examples of the important role
played by third parties in perpetuating, exacerbating, or dampening and
even terminating enduring rivalries. Mikhail Gorbachev’s withdrawal of
Soviet support was a critical factor in New Delhi’s and Hanoi’s decisions
to accept détente with China. It also led to Hanoi’s withdrawal of troops
from Cambodia, thus satisfying one of the conditions for Sino-Soviet
reconciliation.

Although the spirit of Camelot has yet to pervade Asia, the ghost of
Hobbes has been banished to a remarkable extent since the Cold War. We
are likely to see the trend of rivalry abatement continue. This proposition
goes against the grain of realists’ expectations. Realists tend to emphasize the primacy of military power and the persistence of structural anarchy and self-help in interstate relations. They question the importance or relevance of economic interdependence, domestic politics, and non-state actors. They often exaggerate the extent of interstate conflict and conversely, underestimate the potential for interstate cooperation. East Asia has experienced a transformative change such that it is more stable and peaceful now than at any other time during the past century or so. This statement does not deny that acrimonies and distrust continue to exist, as has been shown recently in various sovereignty disputes in the East and South China Seas. Such disputes, however, are far less likely to escalate to larger military confrontations today than they were three or four decades ago. Although occasional territorial disputes can be expected to recur (I use the analogy of “streetcars” in later discussion) and nationalist sentiments can add fuel to public anger and mutual recrimination, ongoing trends are likely to restrain the prospect of a reversion to the rigid, exclusive alignment patterns characteristic of the Cold War. In advancing this proposition, I will point to the following reasons.

First, East Asian states have generally shifted to a policy agenda emphasizing economic development and interdependence. In contrast to the contemporary Middle East and their own past, East Asian elites have abandoned an inward-looking approach to national development and/or a model of garrison state (Lasswell 1941) that prioritizes foreign confrontation as a means to elite control (Solingen 2007). They have instead increasingly pivoted toward economic performance based on opening to the outside world as a source for their legitimacy and popularity. This is a huge transformation because one of the principal sources for sustaining rivalry has now been significantly dampened, if not entirely removed from the domestic politics of East Asian countries. Diversionary tactics to blame foreign scapegoats for one’s own domestic failures and the dynamics of partisan outbidding in order to demonstrate one’s “toughness” in facing down external adversaries no longer provide the powerful domestic fuel to motivate foreign contests that they once did. Naturally, nationalist demonstrations and political posturing can still occur, such as in Sino-Japanese interactions during September 2012. I see such occurrences more as aberrations of a more basic trend toward fostering regional economic interdependence and political accommodation, however. A national priority stressing economic development based on access to foreign markets and capital requires a stable international environment, and the success of this prioritization thus far has gained itself an increasingly large number of domestic proponents and stakeholders that are likely to further entrench and enhance this internationalist
orientation, favoring stability. North Korea is the exception rather than the rule, while Myanmar is the latest example of a long succession of Asian states that have turned away from isolation. The adoption of the “trading state” model (Rosecrance 1986) has both caused and resulted from a realignment of domestic interests and influence in favor of prioritizing economic performance and interdependence to the benefit of regional stability and abatement of rivalry. Increasing commerce across the Taiwan Strait (Kastner 2009) is but the most dramatic example of this ongoing trend. In contrast to the “trading state” model, the “strategic state” model prioritizes the pursuit of national security and power – defined primarily in terms of “hard power” and exemplified by territorial expansion, military alliances and armament procurement, which are the typical practices emphasized by traditional realists.

Second, when many countries in a region pursue a similar strategy of emphasizing economic performance and interdependence, they create a synergistic effect that restrains interstate tension and rivalry. Cross-border production chains and multinational investments have the consequence of engaging third parties, which acquire a vested stake in interstate stability. When tension rises across the Taiwan Strait, US interests are engaged. Similarly, Chinese interests become engaged when Pyongyang roils the Korean Peninsula. Naturally, Beijing and Washington have always had important strategic interests in these areas. What is being underscored here is that with increasing economic interdependence there is now an additional commercial dimension to these interests and that there are now powerful economic stakeholders in each of the relevant countries with a vested interest in stabilizing interstate relations. It is, moreover, important to stress that whereas external ties were highly polarized during the Cold War (with dichotomization between the communist and non-communist states), this alignment pattern has broken down recently. Asian states have generally multilateralized their relations, departing from the structure of bipolarized regional relations prevalent during the earlier era. This multilateralization of ties – when states reach out beyond the traditional political or ideological divisions, as most clearly demonstrated by the developing relationship between Seoul and Beijing – is important because bipolarization was one of the key ingredients in the confluence of factors that produced World War I (Thompson 2003). The demonstrable success of the export-led model of growth by Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan encouraged emulation by subsequent generations (including China and Vietnam). Success therefore breeds more success, fostering a contagion process that has the security dilemma operating in reverse. The holdouts are under increasing pressure to revise their policy lest they suffer further decline in their international
status – a realist reason that contributed to Mikhail Gorbachev’s and Deng Xiao-ping’s motivation to undertake policy reform.

Third, as already mentioned, strategic rivalries among the leading powers have often abetted local spatial rivalries. Soviet–American competition for influence played into the rivalry dynamics in East and South Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East during the Cold War. The weaker side in the local contests often counted on outside intervention to boost their cause in confrontations which they had sometimes deliberately provoked or instigated, such as in Greece’s involvement in the Cyprus crises, Somalia’s incursions into the Ogden territories controlled by Ethiopia, and the wars fought by Pakistan and Egypt against India and Israel, respectively (Leng 2000). In the near future, Sino-American relations will be an increasingly pivotal factor affecting various historically acrimonious relations in Asia. These relations pertain not only to the obvious ones across the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula, but also those involving relations among China, Japan, Russia, India, Pakistan, and Vietnam. Although China’s recent rise has led many to look to power transition theory (Organski and Kugler 1980), with its ominous implication of a possible Sino-American clash, much more is involved in this theory than is sometimes argued in its simplistic interpretations. Analysts tend to focus only on states’ changing capabilities, without questioning their changing incentives. I argue that although China’s capabilities to change the rules of the road have increased, it has also acquired a greater stake in these rules which have contributed to its rise. That is, its incentives to undermine the international system should have declined – it should have instead acquired a greater interest in preserving regional stability that is imperative for sustaining its economic priority. Conversely, the United States faces mounting resource constraints on its various domestic and foreign objectives. Although the United States still enjoys preponderant military power, China has become more important economically for its neighbors. It has displaced the United States as the most important export market and investment destination for Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, among others. This bifurcation of military and economic influence should work against bipolarization of regional relations, enabling the other countries to hedge or equilibrate between Washington and Beijing. Under these circumstances, Beijing and Washington would also be wary of the moral hazard that their support for their allies might be exploited by them. We have already seen some evidence showing China and the United States distancing themselves from North Korea and Taiwan, respectively, lest the latter be emboldened to instigate crises in order to commit their sponsors in an unwanted confrontation with South Korea and China, respectively. Thus, the danger of
“chain ganging” (Christensen and Snyder 1990) – whereby the leading states are dragged into conflicts because of their alliance ties with secondary powers (as shown by the chain of events set off by the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914) – has receded considerably in the Asia-Pacific in recent years. Naturally, and unlike the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which is a multilateral alliance, the traditional hub-and-spokes pattern of US bilateral alliances in East and South Asia presents another firewall against conflict contagion transmitted by these ties. The absence of formal alliance ties among US partners in East Asia, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (Cha 1999), also serves as a barrier to conflict contagion.

My approach to this book seeks to integrate substantive knowledge about the region and international relations theorizing. These two areas of scholarship should be mutually informative, but this has often not been the case. Area specialists tend to dwell on ideographic narratives, and international relations analysts have been often attracted to abstract theorizing or statistical analyses divorced from historical contexts. Both suffer unnecessarily as a result, and miss the opportunity for cross-fertilization.

This book is not about detailed analysis of particular countries or rivalries, nor does it offer a compilation of statistical evidence. It seeks instead to strike a balance in the hope of reaching a wider audience without losing sight of the need to combine substance, theory and policy relevance.

Although I refer occasionally to “Asia,” my discussion focuses primarily on East Asia. I do not attend to the historical animosities in the Middle East or Central Asia, and give only limited attention to South Asia. Sometimes I refer to “the Asia-Pacific” in order to communicate the involvement of countries located in Oceania and North America, especially the United States.

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