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Asia's Ascent

By Parag Khanna

As the coronavirus roiled global economies and fractured relations among major powers, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for the five permanent members of the Security Council to declare a global ceasefire to calm conflict zones such as Syria and Yemen. But geopolitics does not stop in crisis. Often, it accelerates. In Asia, China has used its rapid recovery from the pandemic to accelerate its probing for weaknesses from Taiwan to Indonesia to India, seeking to tilt outstanding disputes in its favor. This reminds us that there are two interpretations of the adage to never let a crisis go to waste: To press for advantage or to build a new and more stable order. China is doing the former. But can its actions ultimately inspire the latter?

The most fundamental test of whether Asia's principal powers can maintain stability is whether they can resolve outstanding territorial disputes. Asia has managed three post-Cold War decades of great power stability, keeping major escalations from crossing the point of no return. From the South China Sea and Taiwan to North Korea and the Senkaku Islands, many flashpoints that have elevated fears that World War III would break out in Asia have not yet come to pass. But past success does not guarantee future stability: Asia's evolution into a mature system is far from guaranteed. On the contrary, Asians have not developed sufficiently robust dispute resolution mechanisms to keep conflicts from boiling over.

The biggest risk of conflict in the twenty-first century thus stems from not settling the conflicts of the twentieth century. Can Asians embrace a cartographic pragmatism similar to what they have achieved in the economic and social spheres? The answer will play a key role in determining whether today's Asian arms race can give way to the type of stable multipolar equilibrium that has characterized Asia's most prosperous eras.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Asians have made remarkable strides in maximizing economic interdependence. More than 60 percent of Asia's trade is internal to the region (ranking just behind Europe at 70 percent), and most foreign direct investment is intra-regional as well. Recent events make clear, however, that we cannot neatly separate geoeconomic convergence from geopolitical divergence. Furthermore, America's potent military presence across Asia and its regional alliance system have been a continuous factor in suppressing escalation. The 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis and the 1999

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India-Pakistan Kargil War are among the most prominent examples.

But over the past two decades, the George W. Bush administration's shift in focus and resources to its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, President Barack Obama's inability to deliver a comprehensive strategy for Asia (including failure to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement), and President Donald Trump's highhanded demands that Japan and South Korea pay more for housing U.S. troops (while imposing tariffs on their industries) have rankled many Asians to the point where Japan and South Korea are more seriously considering crossing the nuclear threshold. America's allies in Asia, therefore, sense that while they still need America, they no longer necessarily want America.

There is no doubt that the United States remains engaged across the region. While its attempts at peacemaking with North Korea have proved futile, it has been crucial (as in the Cold War) in mediating between Japan and Korea during a significant rupture in their trade and intelligence sharing ties. The Trump administration has been strongly committed to Taiwan's security, and the U.S. Navy's Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) through the disputed South China Sea have served as a partial deterrent to some Chinese aggression (though not its island building activities). However, because these U.S. operations do not in themselves actually resolve the island disputes, they inadvertently justify China's accelerated deployment of military assets to the region.

The greatest challenge to the longevity of America's outside-in security architecture for Asia thus comes from China's growing assertiveness. While China's preferences have been clear, its ability to act on them has changed the dynamic with all its neighbors as well as the United States.



China's rapid military modernization in all domains from undersea warfare to space-based weapons has signaled its willingness to inflict devastating attacks on American assets in its immediate proximity as well as out to the second island chain that includes Guam, from which the United States withdrew all bombers in April. Meanwhile, China's multifaceted commercial and social ties with most Asian states have forced even American allies into complex calculations. South Korea's plans to deploy the U.S.-made THAAD anti-ballistic missile defense system to counter the threat from North Korea has rankled China given its potential to deter Chinese missiles as well, leading to harsh reprisals against key Korean industries from tourism to entertainment to cosmetics. South Korea has pledged its good offices to mediate between the United States and China in the event of a direct confrontation, a sign that it holds self-preservation higher than alliance loyalty.

At the same time, new patterns of military coordination are emerging that signal neither an end to America's fundamental commitment to Asian stability nor China's unilateral substitution of U.S. hegemony. Notably, Chinese aggression has prompted Japan to boost investment in hypersonic weapons and India to upgrade its armed forces to more confidently patrol the Indian Ocean and Himalayan frontier. Together with the United States and Australia, these Indo-Pacific democracies have formed a tacit "Quad" partnership, both to coordinate their own military strategies vis-à-vis China but also to reinforce the capabilities of South China Sea littoral states such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines, enabling each to more confidently stand up to China. This complex multi-directional hedging implies that while China may not give up its recently gained possessions, it faces limits on future territorial coercion.

Asia's powers have become confident enough in their own capabilities—not least due to significant arms procurement from the United States—that they want to take more of a lead role in determining a regional security architecture. Ironically, then, U.S. defense analysts tend to focus too much on China's growing capability and too little on these complex regional dynamics within which it would be exercised. Despite the power asymmetries and economic leverage China has accrued vis-à-vis its many neighbors, it is the complexity of having so many neighbors that constrains China more than its increasingly sophisticated military arsenal suggests. If America can continue strengthening Asians' military capabilities while allowing them to lead their own security architecture, China might be convinced that peaceful conflict settlement is more in its interest than preemptive aggression.

What can be done to resolve Asia's numerous legacy conflicts? What strategies might lead both to conflict resolution as well as to building a new and more stable Asian equilibrium? As is evident from today's confrontations, "frozen" conflicts are nothing of the sort. Until they are settled, they are a perpetual, latent *casus belli*. To move beyond today's dangerous escalations, we must do more than tactically suppress historical tensions. We must hack the map.

Maps are history's foremost propaganda tool, a nationalist rallying cry for an exclusive cartographic vision. But we can also use maps as a visioning tool to create an image of a common destination, a layering of political boundaries, functional connections, and institutional partnerships that provide sufficient security guarantees and mutual benefit to all sides. Like economics, geography does not have to be zero-sum.

Image: Indian Coast Guard warships form up during an Indo-Japan joint exercise in the Bay of Bengal. Reuters/Babu.

The fact that Asian leaders such as Xi Jinping, Shinzo Abe, Narendra Modi, and Moon Jae-in are all in strong positions domestically is an important underlying condition favoring settlement negotiations. With political capital in hand, they boast a desire to prove that they can resolve their own disputes without foreign intervention, and each can afford to make compromises while claiming them as evidence of their statesmanship. At the same time, none can unilaterally dominate their adversaries (either materially or ideologically), and conflict would undermine their more important domestic agendas of restoring economic growth and historical greatness. Whether authoritarians, strongmen, or democratically-elected leaders, each is a realist but also a pragmatist. Endless military maneuvering is the result of tactical thinking. Asians have the capacity for collective foresight with the aim to eliminate the need for such tactics in the first place.

What has been missing is a process suited to taking advantage of these propitious conditions. Asia requires its own version of the prevalent Western paradigm known as "Democratic Peace Theory," which states that democratic societies do not wage war against each other. Democratic peace theory is both inspirational and aspirational, but either way, it is of limited applicability to Asia given its dissimilar regimes (including non-democracies such as China) and cultures. An approach more suited to Asia might be what I call "Technocratic Peace Theory." Less than a predictive hypothesis, it suggests that expert arbitration is the approach to permanent dispute resolution best suited to the region's heterogeneous landscape. Given that Western scholars and diplomats lack the empathy to grasp both their own and Asian perspectives simultaneously, much less the creativity to reconcile them, it is up to Asians to do this themselves.

An important virtue of a technocratic approach is that it is not biased towards legal conventions or frameworks that not all parties view as legitimate. In the border dispute between India and China, as well as over the South China Sea, boundary demarcations have their origins in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial-era conventions. These conflicts, then, are effectively *pre*-legal with respect to contemporary international law. Until sovereignty is settled, how is the law of nations to apply? Western diplomats often speak of the need for a rules-based international order, but in many of these conflict formations, the rules have yet to be agreed in the first place.

Technocratic deliberations over outstanding boundary disputes must involve credible senior representatives from disputant parties authorized to make binding decisions. Their autonomy—even their anonymity—is essential to ensuring the consensus nature of outcomes. Neutral international mediators can also play important roles in building consensus and certifying that agreements are considered formal on all parties. The confidentiality of the proceedings is equally important. Deliberations should be held away from public scrutiny, even though publics may be aware they are occurring. This is essential so that representatives can pursue bold compromises rather than defaulting to political expediency. As the political psychologist Philip Tetlock has argued, too much transparency into decisionmaking inhibits participants from making apolitical judgments in the long-term public interest. Extended to the realm of diplomacy, this means negotiators must be liberated from the fear of backlash.

This is not to say there is no role for politicians or the public. To the contrary, as parties come close to settlement, parliamentarians and other national political figures can be briefed on the contours of the agreement to prepare to sell it at home. The



same applies to leaders themselves, who will be able to claim certain victories and point to others' concessions.

Independently managed negotiations provide a novel precedent worthy of replication. In 2017, after a conciliation process under the auspices of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Australia and East Timor accepted a package of proposals offered by a five-person commission that provided for maritime boundary delineation and revenue sharing from a large gas field straddling their respective territories. Former Singaporean foreign minister Tommy Koh, one of the architects of UNCLOS, points out that such processes have the advantage of not being adversarial legal proceedings such as at the International Court of Justice. Rather, they are inclusive of two representatives from each side plus an agreed-upon independent commissioner. Rather than endless legal proceedings with appeals, the Australia-East Timor conciliation set a deadline of one year to reach a settlement—and did so.

There is no ideal way to resolve international conflicts, especially given their diverse historical origins, power asymmetries, and diplomatic posturing. But in conflict resolution, the perfect should never be the enemy of the good. And good approaches involve sharing sovereignty, sequencing solutions, and settling boundaries in order to achieve greater collective security. Without prescribing a specific end-state, these tools can deliver a roadmap to peace for Asia. Leaders know that the same back-of-a-napkin approach that caused so many of today's territorial tensions can also just as easily be used to resolve them. This is a good time to do just that.

Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

When China and Japan agreed to normalize relations in 1945, it was stipulated that the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (a string of uninhabited rocks equidistant from Japan, China, and Taiwan) would not be militarized and the dispute would be put off for future generations. That future

Image: Australian prime minister John Howard and his East Timorese counterpart Mari Alkatiri watch their nations' foreign ministers sign the Treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea. Reuters/David Gray.

is here—and the past has come with it. China views the Diaoyu Islands as the only ones not returned by Japan after World War II, while Japan holds on to the Senkakus claiming they were *terra nullius* taken by Meiji Japan after the 1895 Sino-Japanese war. The Japanese government's purchase of three of the islands from a private owner in 2012 sparked significant outcry in Beijing. Xi Jinping recently warmed to Japan in light of the U.S.-China trade war, and may well continue to offer large sums of commercial deals with Chinese companies during his upcoming state visit to Japan in the fall. But it should be clear from Japan's exclusion of Huawei from its planned 5G network and development of anti-carrier missiles that greater trade does not imply Japanese tolerance of China's deployment of coast guard vessels within the islands' twelve-mile exclusive zone. Additionally, since the islands are covered by the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation, China's inclusion of the islands in its East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone has not been obeyed by foreign aircraft.

Given the geopolitical stalemate, China and Japan should agree to "shared sovereignty" involving coordination of patrols, fishing, and oil exploration, with the islands remaining forever uninhabited. While China would be giving up on its quest to have Japan fully return the islands, it would buttress its image in the region while diminishing American claims that its military presence is essential to maintain stability—both core Chinese interests far more important than these islands in themselves. Indeed, such a settlement would strengthen the hand of Japan's vocal constituency that has called for America's base at Okinawa to be closed. An eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Japan, however, would also elevate calls for Japan to cross the nuclear threshold to maintain an independent deterrent capability. Though one cannot



directly link settling the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute to Japan building a nuclear arsenal, such a settlement would certainly represent one less conflict scenario between the two powers in the first place.

Kuril Islands/Northern Territories

A similar dispute clouds the relationship between Japan and Russia over the Kuril Islands lying between Japan's Hokkaido and Russia's Sakhalin. Though the 1875 Treaty of St. Petersburg clearly gave sovereignty over Sakhalin to Russia and all the Kuril Islands to Japan, the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese War (in which Japan triumphed and annexed parts of Russia) and Japan's capitulation in World War II led to stipulations in agreements reached at Yalta, Potsdam, and San Francisco that granted the Kurils (which Japan calls the "Northern Territories") to Russia. At the moment, there is little risk of armed hostility between Russia and Japan; only one Japanese fisherman has been killed by the Russian coast guard in the past sixty years. In 2018, Russia also refrained from using the Kurils during its large-scale military exercises with China. But settlement would very much serve both parties' long-term interests.

Japan has made economic overtures to Russia, effectively seeking to buy the islands back, but Russia demands that Japan recognize Russian sovereignty before any peace treaty or modification of status can take place. Given that three times more Russians (approximately 18,000) inhabit the dilapidated towns of the Kurils than Japanese (whose numbers are dwindling as they resettle on Hokkaido), a shift in sovereignty is unlikely. At the same time, Russia courts Japanese investment in Sakhalin and Russia's Far East to develop its energy, mining, and food sectors, and has suggested visa-free travel between Sakhalin and Hokkaido. From Russia's point of view, a post-Abe government would lose interest in the Kuril dispute, ceding full sovereignty to Russia through a peace treaty in exchange for deeper strategic ties between the two powers, both fearful of China's military prowess and ambitions. Russia, therefore, could concede more ground to Japan in terms of fishing rights and investment on the islands in the short-term while attaining enhanced military cooperation with Japan in the longer term.

Taiwan

Taiwan represents the Northeast Asian dispute with the most significant conflict potential. Since the Kuomintang's "great retreat" at the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, Taiwan has been self-governing yet ensnared in internecine hostility with mainland China. After the 1954 U.S.-Taiwan mutual defense treaty (a response to Communist China's involvement in the Korean War), the U.S. 7th fleet found itself defending Taiwan in armed confrontations with China such as the Taiwan Straits Crisis of the late 1950s. Pursuant to President Richard Nixon's landmark visit to China in 1972, the United States normalized relations with China and by 1979 had officially proclaimed the "One China" policy and transferred its diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

But America has also remained Taiwan's protector, with several hundred millions of dollars of arms sales annually. Though the Trump administration has increased deliveries of early warning radars and F-16 upgrades, there has been discussion in Washington about the extent to which the United States should backstop Taiwan in its stalemate with China. As a result, successive Taiwanese governments have shown greater restraint in calling for independence. However, China's army and navy drills rehearsing an occupation of Taiwan and air force incursions into Taiwanese airspace remind that the United States remains the only external power capable and willing to defend Taiwan's autonomy.

Image: A Chinese marine surveillance ship cruises next to Japan Coast Guard patrol ships in the East China Sea near the Senkaku Isles. Reuters/Kyodo.

Taipei and Beijing must ultimately decide how they will coexist politically. Taiwan's success in handling the coronavirus crisis became a reputational irritant for China, as well as its offer of refuge to Hong Kong residents fleeing the ongoing crackdown in the wake of the new National Security Law. Yet Hong Kong's fate makes Taiwan's resolve firmer than ever—a fact that Beijing should be constantly reminded of as it simulates an invasion. Hong Kong can no longer live up to the "one country, two systems" moniker, but Taiwan can. This remains Beijing's best option as well.

North Korea

North Korea presents the most salient case of Asian powers signaling their own approaches to resolving long-standing disputes. One reason the Korean Peninsula has so drastically escalated into such a dangerous flashpoint over the past seven decades is that the Korean War itself was never formally ended in 1953. The Six-Party Talks, which went on for two decades, served as confidence-building measures but not a forum for conflict settlement. Despite the recent summits between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un, North Korea continues its tactical threats such as launching missiles into the Sea of Japan and blowing up the joint Kaesong industrial cooperation complex on their border. As of now, the situation is once again at high alert.

What is needed is a clearer sequencing of three major priorities: Declaring a formal end to the Korean War, reunifying the two Koreas, and denuclearizing the peninsula. While the lifting of American sanctions is contingent on denuclearization, China, South Korea, and Russia accept that Kim will not denuclearize prior to the other steps being completed. Across the DMZ, views differ on whether the Korean War can be formally ended absent reunification. A phased process is imaginable whereby the two sides agree to formally end hostilities and recognize each other's statehood, then proceed incrementally towards reunification in areas such as the economy and governance, after which the gradual deepening of cooperation across military commands can lead to agreement on nuclear status. Such an approach would, at a minimum, substantially de-escalate the current situation while also paving the way for North Korea to be constructively absorbed into the region.

South China Sea

While the collection of uninhabited islands and maritime features known as the Spratly and Paracel Islands are claimed variously by five littoral states, China, Vietnam, and the Philippines are the main disputants. Like the Senkaku/Diaoyu or Kuril, the Spratlys and Paracels are not in themselves valuable. However, sovereignty over them entails both strategic positioning in the South China Sea as well as the extension of exclusive economic zones for exploration of an estimated 100 billion cubic feet of natural gas. In recent years, China has promulgated both an expansive claim to effectively the entire Sea through its nine-dashed line as well as conducted extensive land reclamation and construction of military fortifications on Fiery Cross Reef, Mischief Reef, and other formations.

In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favor of the Philippines' de jure ownership over the Spratly Islands, denying China any legal basis for its claims. In practice, however, China's physical occupation of most of the islands represents its unshakeable de facto control over them. The Philippines itself lacks the military strength to oust China's naval positions and forces, and while U.S. FONOPs have been welcomed by littoral states (and even joined by European allies), the United States has been careful not to present itself as a tripwire.

In 2019, Xi Jinping offered Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte the possibility of joint oil and gas exploration in the disputed

waters, with 60 percent of the profits going to the Philippines in exchange for the latter giving up on its claims to islands China has already seized. If the Philippines accepts, it may also insist on maintaining control over those islands on which it already has populations or ongoing commercial activities. While no doubt unfair from a legal standpoint, such a deal would be a recognition of reality while opening up a new and mutually beneficial chapter in Sino-Philippines commercial relations and a marked contribution to calming the waters.

Whereas Chinese coercive diplomacy has been effective against the Philippines, it is far less so against Vietnam. Vietnam is far more militarily capable than the Philippines, and also has a history of bellicosity with China. At the same time, Chinese National Offshore Oil Corporation and PetroVietnam conducted nearly a decade of joint energy exploration under the Gulf of Tonkin before recently abandoning the effort. Along the way, China continued to establish fortifications on a number of the disputed Paracel Islands—and recently designated Xisha and Zhongsha Islands as official districts—and has intimidated Vietnam into cancelling energy contracts with some foreign companies. America's Exxon and Russia's Rosneft remain active, however, and China has not yet protested. The more these energy giants extract with their Vietnamese partners, the more China will have to accept the de facto (and de jure) weakness of its nine-dash line claims that it could not enforce against powerful adversaries.

Furthermore, as the Quad countries cooperate to boost the naval capacity of Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia, where Chinese fishing vessels have regularly encroached in the Natuna Sea, China may well accept the status quo rather than fight a three (or more) front war in the name of hegemony over the sea's full expanse. The conditions are, therefore, propitious for China to recognize others' sovereignty over their existing possessions while seeking inclusion in lucrative exploration and extraction opportunities. In exchange for acceptance of China's *de facto* island possessions, China would forfeit claims to exclusive sovereignty over international waters and aerial zones. Settlement now is better than uncertainty and uncontrolled escalation later.

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India-China

China and India, Asia's largest and most populous states, have two significant outstanding territorial disputes, both in forbiddingly mountainous geographies. The 1914 Simla Convention signed between British India and Tibet demarcated the McMahon Line which accorded what was known as the North East Frontier Agency to India, who designated it Arunachal Pradesh. China rejected this agreement, and, after the Tibetan uprising of 1959 that witnessed the Dalai Lama flee to India, the two countries fought a war in 1962 both along the McMahon Line as well as in the Aksai Chin region (which India claims is part of Ladakh, and China designates as part of Xinjiang).

Despite dozens of high-level meetings and sharing of maps, both sectors have witnessed troubling escalations in recent years. For example, the opening of the Nathu La pass in eastern Sikkim in 2006 for trade and pilgrims did not prevent the 2017 stand-off in the Doklam Plateau tri-border



region with Bhutan. Unlike in 1962, the Doklam altercation did not result in victory for China, but rather a stalemate from which China withdrew its forces. More recently, China's intrusion beyond the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh involved several dozen Indian casualties and significantly inflamed passions, especially on the Indian side. Even though China established new fortifications several kilometers insides India's previously claimed territory, once again there is stalemate. The situational parity achieved in the Himalayas has created an opportunity for Asia's two greatest powers—in both Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin—to turn de facto realities into de jure settlements. The recognition that each is powerful at home but cannot win decisively abroad is a powerful alignment of the stars.

Kashmir

The unresolved status of the princely state of Kashmir at the time of the 1947 partition of South Asia has also been the direct or proximate cause of three major wars and a hot stand-off in 2001 between post-colonial cousins India and Pakistan. Much as in the eastern Himalayas, codifying de facto circumstances into de jure settlements is a sensible approach to the Kashmir conundrum. This is also the fait accompli India has engendered through its removal of special status for Kashmir in August 2019. By asserting direct rule over Kashmir, India rendered moot Kashmiri hopes of greater autonomy (or independence) as well as Pakistan's hopes to unite all Kashmiri Muslims under Pakistan's flag. At the same time, India has also implicitly acknowledged that it will not be able to reclaim Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, especially given China's firm backing of Pakistan and extensive infrastructure projects there. Despite the fiery rhetoric and recent shelling across the Indo-Pak border, it seems only logical that the next step should be to convert the Line of Control in Kashmir into a de jure border.

Image: Demonstrators shout slogans as they burn an effigy depicting Chinese president Xi Jinping during a protest in Kolkata, India. Reuters/Rupak De Chowdhuri TPX.

Military conflict, whether swift or protracted, could certainly occur in any of the aforementioned situations. The result would need to be ratified by an agreement to end the hostilities and a treaty to recognize the new borders. The settlement may not be considered fair by all sides, but it would be a modern rather than colonial settlement, and one determined by Asians among themselves. They have only themselves to blame for the outcome.

Despite Asia's range of conflictual fault lines, the process of intensifying interactions—even frictions—also contributes to the formation of a nascent strategic culture. Strategic culture generally refers to the preferences that emerge from a nation's own history and thought. China's Great Wall serves as lasting evidence of its fear of nomadic invasions. The Tang Dynasty's defeat by the Abbasid-Tibetan coalition at the Battle of Talas in 751 AD reminds China not to over-stretch and invite counter-coalitions. Centuries of internecine conflict with the kingdoms of Vietnam and Korea warn China about the perils of protracted conflict.

Europeans fear the security dilemma and balance of power dynamics that led to World War I, but Asians look askance at formal alliances within their region; they prefer the fluidity of multi-alignment.

But centuries of shared experience have laid the foundation for an emergent regional strategic culture as well. For example, the ancient Silk Roads that privileged commercial and cultural exchange over military rivalries animate today's resurrection of trade networks despite unresolved border disputes. Consider how India has boycotted China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) summits over its projects in Pakistan but is the second-largest shareholder in the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the largest recipient of its loans. This background is essential to understanding why and how China has responded to pushback to the BRI. As countries such as Pakistan, Malaysia, and Myanmar have axed projects and renegotiated debts, China has rolled with the punches rather than forcing the issue. All of these precedents are contributors to a common Asian outlook on the world even as rivalries persist. The more Asians invest in such regional accommodation, the more an Asian strategic culture will move from aspiration to reality. In time, an "Asian Security Conference" could arise, an enlarged and more institutionalized Security Council-like version of the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Even as Asian states compete in the military, economic, and technological domains, they remain as or more likely to bury the hatchet as to resort to arms. If they pursue mutually beneficial integration while incrementally resolving disputes, they will demonstrate that Asians can manage their own affairs without Western tutelage. This is a reminder of the poverty of European analogies to Asia's reality. Though Asia has inherited many of its cartographic conflicts from the European colonial era, it does not follow that Asia must follow Western history or theory with its rigid conceptions of hierarchy and alliances. Many Western scholars hold unipolarity (such as Pax Britannica or Pax Americana) to be the most stable order, yet Asian history features nearly four thousand years of almost uninterrupted multipolarity across its vast geography of heterogeneous civilizations; Asians have mostly abided by the principle of "live and let live." Europeans fear the security dilemma and balance of power dynamics that led to World War I, but Asians look askance at formal alliances within their region; they prefer the

fluidity of multi-alignment. Unlike Europe a century ago, disputes across Asia are not linked by any mutual assistance treaty; each can be treated individually, and a conflict in one does not mean a chain reaction that destabilizes the whole region. 1914 Europe is therefore not the best template for Asia in 2020.

Though Asia's geopolitical mood has shifted in a more confrontational direction, regional powers wisely continue to prioritize stability over warfare. But one cannot be glib about Asia's conflict formations. Until they are formally settled, they are very much unsettled.

The question facing Asia is whether settlement can be achieved without conflict. China's strategy to date has been to pursue favorable settlements by modifying ground realities without provoking a military response. Whether by stealth action, intimidation, or coercion, it has been working. But as Asian powers stand up to China, the calculus must shift. As China comes to accept the durability of Asia's multipolarity, it may also accept diplomatic settlement to disputes it is far less likely to win as time goes on. In other words, China can either have settlement on agreeable terms, or risk conflict followed by settlements not to its liking. Imperial Japan was the last great power to assert regional hegemony, with self-destructive consequences that are a lesson for any future would-be hegemon of Asia. China should quit provoking while it is still ahead.

Asia's leaders must seize this opportunity for a multi-step regional grand bargain that puts collective peace above individual pride. It is particularly Asia's next generation that has a golden opportunity to break from past patterns of complacency and mental frames that put slavish nationalism over collective pragmatism. As Henry Kissinger put it in his treatise on the post-Napoleonic order in Europe, "Each generation is permitted only one effort of abstraction; it can attempt only one interpretation and a single experiment, for it is its own subject."

Today's Asian youth have largely grown up with greater material comfort and international exposure than previous generations. Many have studied abroad, intermarried, and learned each other's languages at an unprecedented scale. They largely view climate change and pandemics as a greater threat to regional stability than inter-state military conflict. South Koreans strongly favor reunification, and youth across China, Japan, and South Korea are more favorably predisposed towards each other than the elderly who have wartime memories. They are a very important pro-peace constituency and should be utilized as such. There is, therefore, a tragic banality to watching junior civil servants adopt the mindsets and tropes of more nationalistic elders who slip so easily into the vocabulary of a "new Cold War" or "new era of great power competition." Once idealistic young professionals get molded by older bureaucratic reflexes. It would be a pity if their fate is merely to relapse into the old ways of a fading and uncreative generation.

There is another way. Asians can evolve beyond cycles of rivalry and conflict if they accept both the inevitability and virtue of multi-polarity, devise processes for permanent conflict settlement, and embed these mechanisms in a collective Asian strategic culture and robust regional institutions. Asians have tasted the benefits of three decades of stability and prosperity, and know that a peaceful concert of Asian powers could guarantee several more. They tacitly agree that their tensions are better resolved unfairly than violently, and that they each face more pressing economic, demographic, and environmental challenges. The price any of them pays now to settle their map is much smaller than what costs that war would impose on all of them later. ▯