

# **Understanding the East Asian Peace**

**Informal and formal conflict prevention and peacebuilding  
in the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula,  
and the South China Sea 1990-2008**

**av**

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# Abstract

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The overall purpose of this dissertation is to provide an empirical study of the post-Cold War East Asian security setting, with the aim of understanding why there is an East Asian peace. The East Asian peace exists in a region with a history of militarised conflicts, home to many of the world's longest ongoing militarised problems and a number of unresolved critical flashpoints. Thus, the post-Cold War East Asian inter-state peace is a paradox. Despite being a region predicted to be ripe for conflict, there have not only been less wars than expected, but the region also shows several signs of a development towards a more durable peace. The dominant research paradigm – neorealism – has painted a gloomy picture of post-Cold War East Asia, with perpetual conflicts dominating the predictions. Other mainstream international relations theories, too, fail to account fully for the relative peace. One of the greatest problems for mainstream theories, is accounting for peace given East Asia's lack of security organisations or other formalised conflict management mechanisms. Given this paradox/problem, this dissertation sets out to ask "*Why is there a relative peace in the East Asian security setting despite an absence of security organisations or other formalised mechanisms to prevent existing conflicts from escalating into violence?*"

In order to answer this question, the case of East Asian peace is approached by comparing three embedded case studies within the region: the Taiwan issue, the South China Sea, and the Korean nuclear conflict. It explores the full range of informal and formal processes plus the Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Mechanisms (CPPBMs) that have been important for the creation of a continuing relative peace in East Asia between 1990 and 2008. The study furthermore focuses on China's role in the three cases, on an empirical basis consisting of interviews conducted with key persons during more than 1.5 years fieldwork in China.

The three cases show that informal processes exist, and that they have furthermore been important for peace, both by preventing conflicts from escalating into war, and by building conditions for a stable longer-term peace. Their impact on the persistence of peace has been traced to a range of different CPPBMs. Returning to the level of the East Asian case, a common feature of many of the identified processes is that they can be understood as aspects or manifestations of the East Asian regionalisation process. Specifically, elite interactions (personal networks, track two diplomacy), back-channel negotiations, economic interdependence and integration, and functional cooperation have together with (China's acceptance of) multilateralism and institutionalisation (of peaceful relations) been of high importance for the relative peace. Whereas formalised conflict management mechanisms and the U.S. presence have also contributed to peace, this dissertation shows their contribution to be much more limited.

Keywords: International relations, Peace, East Asian Peace, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, conflict management, informality, informal processes, regionalisation, regionalism, track two diplomacy, informal networks, personal networks, East Asia, Taiwan Strait, Korean Peninsula, China, Taiwan, North Korea, DPRK, South China Sea, ASEAN, ASEAN-way