

WHY ASIA WILL BE UNSTABLE BUT NOT AT WAR: TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC REALIST PERSPECTIVE^{©Σ}

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ABSTRACT

This article advances the argument that (Indo-Pacific) Asia as a broad region is likely to experience growing instability because of the ongoing nuclear threat posed by North Korea, territorial disputes among maritime powers, and the rapid rise of China. But the region will not be at war mainly because of the preponderance of collective democratic power.

Keywords: North Korea and Asian peace, war and security in Asian Pacific, East Asian conflict and stability, superpower rivalry in the East Asia

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***MENGAPA ASIA TIDAK STABIL TETAPI TIDAK BERPERANG: KE ARAH
PERSPEKTIF REALIS DEMOKRAT***

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengutarakan hujah bahawa (Indo-Pasifik) Asia sebagai rantau yang luas berkemungkinan mengalami ketidakstabilan yang semakin meningkat kerana ancaman nuklear yang berterusan yang ditimbulkan oleh Korea Utara, pertikaian wilayah di kalangan kuasa maritim, dan kebangkitan pesat China. Tetapi rantau ini tidak akan berperang terutamanya kerana kelebihan kuasa demokrasi kolektif

Kata Kunci: *Korea Utara dan keamanan Asia, perang dan keselamatan di Asia, konflik dan kestabilan Asia Timur, persaingan kuasa besar di Asia Timur*

Introduction

Asia as a broad region has emerged as the new zone characterized by economic miracles in many states, but policymakers and scholars still disagree on whether regional peace will prevail. This article advances the argument that this region is likely to experience growing instability because of the ongoing nuclear threat posed by North Korea, territorial disputes among maritime powers, and the rise of China. However, the region will not be at war mainly because of the collective preponderance of democratic power. Although no one can ever say never, theoretical insights from democratic realism (DR) and empirical evidence suggests that the probability of a major war is low. To advance this argument, the article is divided into three parts: 1) Toward democratic realism: a theoretical framework in a nutshell; 2) What academic literature says about war and peace in the region; 3) The emerging preponderance of collective democratic power. Together these parts make the case that Asia will experience growing instability but will not be at war.

Toward Democratic Realism in a Nutshell

Democratic realism is the theoretical perspective advanced elsewhere (Peou 2022b, 2021), but it is worth stating that it seeks to explain the policy behaviour of liberal democratic states toward each other and undemocratic states or dictatorships. Democratic states have a long history of peaceful co-existence and may accept undemocratic states as junior allies but begin to distrust anyone of the latter when one is rising and capable of threatening democratic freedom. The DR assumptions are drawn from theoretical traditions such as political realism and democratic liberalism.

Political realism has got a bad rap because of its emphasis on competition and conflict among sovereign states instead of cooperation and peace among them. In general, this theoretical tradition is based on the assumptions that states are the principal or primary actors in international politics characterized by anarchy, the absence of a global Leviathan (whose authority is higher than that of states). The absence of a world government, as it exists today, means that sovereign states are locked into the behavioural mode of mutual competition and conflict with no prospects of perpetual peace in sight. Realists, however, do not argue that war breaks out all the time, but interstate war is a constant possibility. Beyond these general assumptions, realists do not share the same perspective on how the world works. There are different realist perspectives.

While realists generally recognize international anarchy as the permissive cause of war, classical or neo-classical realists place emphasis on the role of human nature or political leaders and their perception, relative power, revisionist ambition as the causes of conflict and war, and unipolarity or hegemony as the system that maintains peace (Peou 2021, 23-35). International organizations like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) are established and maintained because their members share a common threat and are led by powerful states, such as the United States (in the case of NATO) and France and Germany (in the case of the

EU). Hegemonic stability and unipolarity are central to neo-classical realism.

There are other realist perspectives. Some view themselves as offensive or defensive realists, respectively viewing states as power or security maximisers. For offensive realists, states struggle for control and domination by pursuing power as an end in itself, whereas defensive realists view power maximization as delusional because weaker or rising states are forced to band together by forming military alliances to balance the power of the incumbent hegemon or its threat and, if possible, even bring it down. Hegemony, therefore, is not a stable system or one for international peace and stability. Realist institutionalists pay attention to the role of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) but differ from neo-liberal institutionalists in their emphasis on hegemonic leadership or concert of power. For instance, the UN Security Council is dominated by five great powers. Collective security, ranging from concert-of-power arrangements to UN members' preponderance of power, provides a policy framework managed by five permanent members: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The collective preponderance of power as a concept can be traced back to the time of creating the UN, based on the collective security framework and the assumption that all members of the international organization are under obligation to take collective action designed to punish any aggressor state or to prevent state aggression in the first place (Peou 2021, 49-63).

Realist institutionalism is the most optimistic realist perspective and evidence suggests that collective security led by the five great powers has contributed to the maintenance of international peace and security. The collective action taken by UN members during the Korean War (1950-1953) and after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 are the best examples of how collective security has its operational merit. But how significant this collective contribution is a matter of debate. For DR, these 'UN' peace enforcement operations worked because of US leadership, without which collective action would not have been possible or effective (Peou 2022b, 59-60). During the Korean War, the Soviet Union did not participate in the UN operation as it lent support to North Korea. Not a permanent member until 1971, China was on the side of North Korea and took part in the war to counter the UN forces. During the Gulf War, China and Russia abstained from voting in 1991 to allow peace enforcement against Iraq. The US forces led the way.

To some extent, DR assumes that power and the pursuit of security by states can never be eliminated at the international level. History shows that this is the case. The elusive search for world government as first evidenced by the creation of the League of Nations and subsequently the United Nations and the growing instability of the international system today still validates the realist assumption that state sovereignty still matters. The pursuit of hegemonic power status has not ended either. Just when the world looked set to enjoy peace in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War, policymakers and scholars now cannot ignore the fact that the world seems to be back on fire. The Russian war on Ukraine, the nuclear threat of North Korea, and the rise of China are among the best examples of just how far we are still away from perpetual peace.

Furthermore, political realists still question the merit of not only idealism, which advocates the establishment of world government for a unified world (Peou 2022b, 363-392), but also socialism and capitalism or liberalism. For them, the socialist and liberal/capitalist systems do not have a clean record of producing peace. This realist proposition runs contrary to what socialists say about imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism and as the principal cause of war but socialism as the way to peace. Political realists would agree with socialist thinkers that wars have been waged between capitalist states (such as World War I and World War II, as Vladimir Len's theory of imperialism suggests), but capitalism is not the main cause. Political realists do not place much of their hope on international commerce and economic interdependence as factors that pacify or mitigate war-prone state behaviour. Capitalist states went to war against each other in the past, as evidenced by what European states did in the 20th century. Additionally, liberalism is or can be a cause of conflict and war among states. Arch-realists like Mearsheimer (2014) find fault with the EU, NATO, and the US government for causing the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Other realists such as Walt (2022) blame the arrogance of American liberalism.

And unlike socialist thinkers, political realists would further point out that the past endeavours to replace capitalism with socialism is not the way to peace either. The Age of Imperialism is said to have occurred between the 15th and 18th centuries when European powers colonized the Americas, India, and the East Indies and continued until the early 20th century when other countries in Asia and Africa were colonized. However, wars broke out long before this Age, which is even much older than the 15th century or the Age of Capitalism when one takes a close look at ancient empires such as Chinese Empire, the Assyrian Empire, the Persian Empire, the Greek Empire, the Roman Empire, and the Ottoman Empire (from the 13th to the early 20th century). Socialist states like the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia, and Vietnam fought each other during the Cold War (Peou 2022b, 180-185). Hence, political realists do not seriously consider economic and political systems or global capitalism to be the main cause of conflict or war.

In short, the enduring wisdom of political realism lies in its ability to explain the causes of conflict and war by making the case that they have broken out since the dawn of mankind. Even families often break down and relations between spouses or partners often end up in divorce, even though they are not a capitalist or socialist institution. The oldest conflict in the Bible, one could argue, is one between two brothers, Cain, and Abel, when the former who burned with anger killed the latter (Genesis 4:1-16, *Bible*). Conflict within academic departments and between academics does occur, even though very few of them are capitalists. Contemporary political realists offer other explanatory variables, ranging from human nature to personal or political ambition (such as the lust for power and the pursuit of glory in the Machiavellian sense of the term, as also hypothesized by classical realists), relative power and perception (by neo-classical realists), unbalanced military power (by defensive and offensive realists), and the international system characterized by anarchy (which applies to all forms of political realism).

While political realism helps shed light on the enduring nature of international

competition conflict and war, proponents of this theoretical tradition offer little hope for a world far less prone to these negative phenomena. Even national identities are important in terms of maintaining national unity, but they are not the eternal glue that forever binds people together either. States often fail or fall apart and are at war, even though their people share the same languages and cultural traditions or civilizations. But political realists overlook what democratic liberals say about war and peace: namely, democratic states have almost never gone to war against each other, though they have a history of waging war against undemocratic states (Peou 2022b, 96-111).

There is also a necessary reason to take a closer look at what states do at the regional level and there is still a valid reason for optimism. While all regions are different, Western Europe, North America and, to a much lesser extent, Southeast Asia display some concrete evidence of member states' propensity toward finding solutions to the challenges they face together through cooperation and a common desire for peace in their effort to build regional security communities whose members develop dependable expectations for peaceful change (Peou 2022a).

With that said, the EU and North America security communities are far more premature than the Association of Southeast Asia (ASEAN). What differentiates the first two communities from the latter one appears to be based on at least two factors: democracy and democratic leadership. The states that belong to the EU and those in North America have been democratic for a long time and they have enjoyed the presence of democratic leadership. However, ASEAN is a regional organization made up mostly of undemocratic states and there is no democratic leader willing and capable of providing effective regional leadership (Peou 2022a).

In short, the anarchical international system can be mitigated, not by international organizations *per se* but most importantly by regional or global democratic structures, norms, values, and leadership. A pluralistic security community is what democratic states, and their powerful leaders make of it, but they are unlikely to tolerate powerful undemocratic challengers when perceived as capable of threatening them or undermining their political and economic freedom. When faced with a threatening or powerful and rising dictatorship, democratic states are expected to cooperate with one another, and the preponderance of their collective democratic power is likely to prevent the power of undemocratic states from starting a war.

How to measure the preponderance of collective democratic power is no easy task, but the point of this exercise requires that one comes up with a rough estimate or preliminary assessment. Power is defined as relative (some states have more power than others, but none enjoys absolute power) and can be roughly measured at least in military, economic, demographic, and political terms. Military power can be measured by looking at state military capabilities, which can be compared by looking at indicators like defence spending and military rankings. Economic power can be measured by looking at the sizes and strengths of national economies. Population size also matters. Although political realism in general does not factor in political systems or regimes, DR assumes that they also matter significantly. After all, democratic states within the EU

and North America and their powerful leaders prove capable of building regional security communities, which have so far prevented or disincentivized them from going to war against each other.

In sum, *democratic* realism is not the same as *political* realism since the former rests on four general assumptions similar to the latter in some respects but different from it in others: 1) states are the primary actors in international politics; 2) war is waged by states, including wars between democratic and undemocratic states, with both sides finding each other untrustworthy and threatening, especially during a power transition period in which the rising power is a powerful dictatorship regarded as revisionist by the democratic hegemon, exacerbated by the absence of world government; 3) the preponderance of collective democratic power (*vis-à-vis* undemocratic ones) is one of the most important structural requirements for the prevention of conflict and war but not necessarily for ensuring instability; 4) democratic states and their leaders perform more effectively than undemocratic ones in terms of their collective ability to build security communities. The following sections further demonstrates, empirically, that the existing ways of thinking about prospects for war and peace in Asia appear to be inadequate, if not misleading.

Exploring the Literature: Two Opposing Approaches to Peace and Security in Asia

The literature on peace and security in this region contains at least two opposing general approaches, one of which contends that North Korea's nuclear threat is not war-prone, and the rise of China is and will generally be peaceful. This optimistic approach has been advanced by those who subscribe to the liberal and constructivist theoretical traditions. In contrast, scholars who belong to the socialist and realist traditions view North Korea's nuclear threat as destabilizing and the rise of China as unpeaceful. As will be demonstrated, however, none of these theoretical perspectives paints a clear or accurate picture of what is or will be happening in the region.

No one denies the fact that North Korea has been provocative with its efforts to build nuclear weapons and threaten others. In September 2017, for instance, a North Korean state agency threatened a nuclear war that would "sink" Japan and reduce the United States to "ashes and darkness" because of their support for the UN Security Council resolution that imposed sanctions on Pyongyang over its latest nuclear test. But nothing has been done to carry out the threats and the supreme leader of this nuclear state subsequently declared that there would be no war because his country is now armed with nuclear weapons and thus safe. This state did start a war in 1950 but ended in defeat because of the international forces led by the United States that rolled back the communist forces and re-established the status quo, which remains today.

If North Korea is no longer prone to war, an answer may be found in the fact that it is now a defensive and secure power, not an imperialist one. Since the 1990s, certain policymakers and scholars in the social constructivist camp have also advocated the idea of Concert of Asia. But no such concert is in sight. Political realists, thus, have a point about why North Korean leader Kim Jong-un himself appears to conform their

assumption when he declared in a speech delivered in late July 2022 that his country that, "With our reliable and effective self-defensive nuclear deterrent, there will be no more war on this earth, and our country's safety and future will be secured forever" (cited in Berlinger and Seo 2022). The leader's self-confidence about the national security of his country rests on the logic of nuclear deterrence and there are security experts who would agree with him because of their conviction that nuclear deterrence works.

North Korea is no longer able to do what it did in 1950 for several reasons, even if it chose to use conventional weapons. Despite its nuclear weapons, this state ranks low in terms of its overall military capabilities (34th in the world), nowhere compared to South Korea's military power, which ranks 6th. South Korea is also much stronger than its adversary in terms of its military alliance with the United States and international diplomacy. North Korea is still one of the most internationally isolated states in the world. Pyongyang has very few allies in the region and elsewhere, if any, and China is the only patron on which Kim Jong-un could reluctantly rely for his country's economic survival and political/diplomatic defence. Heavily sanctioned, though not effectively enforced (Peou 2019), its economy is nowhere compared to that of South Korea whose GDP was more than 50 times greater than that of North Korea in 2021.

The North Korean leadership also knows starting a war would simply be a suicidal mission. David Kang (the director of the Korean Studies Institute at the University of Southern Carolina) has this to say about North Korea being a rational actor: "North Koreans aren't crazy," he argued, "and they are not going to invade [South Korea]." In his view, "We have been having the same debate about North Korea for 70 year... We are in the same place today that we were with North Korea 20 years ago, 40 years ago, 70 years ago. Literally, it's the only place in the world where we are where we were in 1945, at the end of World War II" (cited in Jones 2029).

Kang's point is well taken, but would North Korea go to war if China did? The question would be answered in the negative by those who see China's rise as peaceful. There are several reasons. For liberal and constructivist optimists, China does not have a history of imperialism or world conquest. This power has been interested in peace rooted in prosperity via international commerce and remains integrated into the world capitalist economy. It is also part of global and regional systems (i.e., the UN, the World Trade Organization or WTO, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation or APEC, and the ASEAN Regional Forum or ARF). Chinese leaders themselves now show interest in building an Asia-Pacific security community (Peou 2022a).

To some extent, the 'peaceful rise' thesis has its theoretical appeal. China has not yet started a war or invaded Taiwan. The threat of an invasion against the much smaller neighbouring state, which Beijing views as a "renegade province," can be treated as "all bite, no bark." The successive leaders in Beijing, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, have wanted to reunify the two territories but proved unable to do so. But, for socialists and realists, being unable to start a war against Taiwan is not the same as saying China's rise is peaceful. There is where the optimists fall short in their explanation and their

critics seem to offer greater explanatory power. After all, international commerce and organizations did not stop Russia from pursuing aggressive policies against its neighbours, such as Georgia and Ukraine, and geopolitical adventures in the Middle East.

In contrast to the optimistic approach to regional peace and security in Indo-Pacific Asia, scholars offer their pessimistic perspectives on the reasons why China's rise is and will be unpeaceful. Neo-Marxist/socialist thinkers are among the pessimists. As a capitalist state with the second largest economy in the world," according to Chan (2022), China "today fits well in Lenin's definition of imperialism, and in fact only the strongest imperialist countries generally meet all these characteristics. He adds, "Today, China's economy is the second largest in the world, and its financial and military development is one of the strongest in the world. It is difficult to imagine that such a scale of development under capitalism would not be imperialistic" (Ibid.).

To an extent, China's growing ambitions and imperialist behaviour are observable. Its territorial claims in the East China Sea and the South China Sea are quite evident. Moreover, China has made a series of threat against Taiwan and some top US military leaders now predict a war between China and Taiwan within the next few years, perhaps followed by a war between China and the United States. Evidence now appears to make *The Coming War With China* (Bernstein and Munro 1997) and Navarro (2006) more compelling than ever before. War seems inevitable when unbridled capitalism and a foreign policy are unrestrained by moral considerations.

Realists would not disagree with the socialist perspective on Chinese capitalism and imperialism but would not agree with them on these causes of war. As noted earlier, realists place much emphasis on states as being alike regardless of whether they are capitalist or socialist since they all are caught in the nasty security dilemma dynamics within the anarchical international system. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was not like China today, as Moscow did not adopt capitalism the way China has since the late 1980s, when economic reform under President Deng Xiaoping was institutionalized. And yet, the Soviet Union was turned into a superpower pursuing imperialist policy. Before turning to the West and embracing capitalism, China under Chairman Mao Zedong was also turned into a great power with regular national armed forces like those of other great states, not just the army of peasants mobilized for revolutionary warfare.

To a large extent, the realist argument about China's rise offers some explanatory power in terms of China's hegemonic ambitions and its unpeaceful rise. This rapidly rising power is likely to pursue hegemonic power status, especially in a world where its leaders see other major states as being hostile to their state. Historically, China fought its former socialist friends, the Soviet Union and Vietnam. The border war between the two great socialist states in 1968 over their unresolved border disputes is one good example. The border war with Vietnam in 1979 was waged by China's People's Liberation Army with the aim of punishing or giving a lesson to the smaller state that shares its southern border for the sin Hanoi had committed when invading China's client state, Cambodia (at the time run by the radical Khmer Rouge regime). These wars

validate the realist assumption about sovereign states pursuing national security, thus defying socialist optimism. Since their normalization in 1991, and despite their shared worldview, realist factors in relations between China and Vietnam matter more and more, as their interests have diverged, including shifts in the security environment, economic calculations, and rising nationalism (Do 2021).

Both offensive and defensive realists, thus, offer very few reasons for optimism when they explain the security dynamics in Asia. John Mearsheimer (2006) advances the thesis about the unpeaceful rise of China. His thesis assumes that great powers as power maximisers will do what is possible to become regional or even world hegemony, since doing otherwise would result in their insecurity or a threat to their survival. Great-power politics grows nasty and intense when rising powers like China are driven to undermine the incumbent global hegemon like the United States today. China is expected to act aggressively and will not settle for anything less than being the new regional hegemon capable of pushing the United States out of the region — unless China grows weaker, or its economy can be slowed down.

Whether China will *start* a war is a different matter. There is no doubt that the anarchical and competitive international system makes great power politics nasty and the international system unstable. But two important factors overlooked by the optimists and pessimists alike are the DR assumptions that democratic states are different from undemocratic ones and the preponderance of collective democratic power may be the reason why neither North Korea nor China will start a war. Until China, North Korea and Russia as dictatorships become democratic, prospects of the region being transformed into a peaceful zone are elusive.

The divide between these two types of states (democratic vs. undemocratic) today sheds light on instability and war within the region. The Russian war against Ukraine from 2014 when it annexed Crimea to 2022 when it invaded Ukraine is not simply about Putin being the aggressor. As noted earlier, Mearsheimer finds fault with the EU, NATO, and his government; Walt blames the arrogance of American liberalism; Sachs (2023) also blames the West. All point fingers at Western liberal states for pushing EU and NATO expansionism, which invited Putin's aggressive responses. Walt (2023), for instance, puts it this way, "Had the United States and its European allies not succumbed to hubris, wishful thinking, and liberal idealism and relied instead on realism's core insights, the present crisis would not have occurred." Certainly, the arrogance of American or Western liberalism is a major problem; however, from a DR perspective, neither the West nor Russia *per se* was "at fault," largely because the struggle for security and power between democratic and undemocratic states has been evident throughout world history, from the Peloponnesian War in ancient Greece to the last Cold War that went on for about 40 years.

Once again, competition and conflict in the Asian region appear to escalate but they are mostly between democratic and undemocratic states, not even between those that belong to different national identities or civilizations. The two Chinese states that have been locked in conflict are China (a dictatorship) and Taiwan (a democracy). North

Korea (a dictatorship) and South Korea (a democracy) share the same national identity but fought each other in the early 1950s and are still technically at war. Japan (a democracy) and China, as will be discussed later, are rivals. China and India (a democracy) are also regional rivals, which have engaged in border clashes and even went to war against each other in 1962. Australia and the United States are democratic states and consider China and North Korea threatening. If the United States finds 30 to 40 North Korean nuclear weapons more threatening than 225 British nuclear weapons, could it be that the United Kingdom as a democracy is more trustworthy than North Korea?

Is the United States planning to go to war with China? Critical Thinkers like Bruce Cumings are raising this question and filmmaker John Pilger (2018), who believe that the United States threatens China (and North Korea). Pilger's film, *The Coming War on China?* (2016) provides some insights but has received criticism from others (Hutt 2016). DR also offers its critique. While the United States has initiated wars against some dictatorships, it has not attacked all dictatorships, especially when they are considered allies (such as Saudi Arabia). It is unlikely that the United States would start a war with nuclear power as formidable as China or as weak as North Korea. The possibility of a nuclear war occurring accidentally between nuclear powers is slim. The only time atomic bombs were used was in 1945, when the United States was the only nuclear power. Since then, nuclear deterrence has replaced nuclear monopoly. India and Pakistan have not engaged in a major war after gaining nuclear weapons (they conducted their first nuclear weapon test in 1998). However, this does not mean nuclear deterrence is justified because the ultimate hope for humanity depends on the DR assumption that democratic states will eventually maintain peace.

In summary, the two general approaches to war and peace in the region (as briefly discussed) have limited explanatory power. Some liberals and social constructivists are among the academic optimists but have yet to provide evidence proving the pacifying or mitigating effects of international commerce or organizations. Moreover, there is not a single well-functioning regional security community in the region. Asia is now locked in rivalry and instability.

The Preponderance of Collective Democratic Power

This section further advances the argument that Asia will witness growing instability but not be at war. North Korea, as shown, will not start a war against South Korea or Japan or the United States. There is only one possibility that North Korea would engage in any time of militarily aggressive action: if China were to start a war against Taiwan. But here's the rub: China in all probability won't and the biggest reason may lie in the preponderance of collective democratic power.

When the concept of democratic preponderance power is assessed, several factors can be established. Together North Korea and China will be in no position to start a sustainable war. China's rapid rise may now be questionable. Economically, China's rise is not inevitable and may be slower than faster. Japan provides a good example of how the new economic superpower in the 1980s experienced a lost decade in the 1990s.

It is no longer the super economic power that observers had once expected to see emerge on the world stage. Whether a dictatorship like Chia can prevent such a lost decade is a matter of debate. However, growing evidence further suggests that China's mounting national debt and is likely going to get worse. *The Straits Times* (TST-Singapore) wrote the following: "Goldman Sachs estimates that China's total government debt is about US\$23 trillion (US\$ 31 trillion)" (TST May 22, 2023). China's local governments' collective debt alone stands at an astounding US\$10 trillion (He 2023). Its real estate crash (Farrer August 29, 2022; Chen July 14, 2022) and growing domestic protests make it increasingly difficult for the Chinese economy to keep growing fast. The dictatorial regime is also likely to limit technological innovation.

The Chinese economy is likely to face other growing woes, such as demographic decline. The Chinese population is on a downward trajectory, as it is expected to decline by 45 percent at the end of the 21st century. But the impact of this decline on the economy in the coming years has already been felt. According to an expert on Chinese demographics, "It is perhaps no coincidence then that 2022, as well as being a pivotal year for China in terms of demographics, also saw one of the worst economic performances the country has experienced since 1976" (Wang January 18, 2023). Population decline and an aging society mean that there will be fewer and fewer workers, most costly support for a growing post-work population, and a potential threat to the communist regime's political legitimacy. Would a major war reverse this downward trend? That remains to be seen, but a major war would put China out of business with the West and reduce the welfare of Chinese people who would then be angrier with their government than ever before. Going to war against Taiwan whose 90% of global semiconductor production on which China depends will not be a walkover because of Chinese companies' limited capacity to produce high-end chips.

In terms of its military power, China's rise is evidenced by the size of its armed forces and the rapidly growing level of defence spending, but it is nowhere closer to being invincible for at least several reasons. It is worth mentioning that the Russian war on Ukraine has been costly for Moscow and far from victorious, although Russia has been ranked second in terms of its military might compared to Ukraine's 15th place (GFP 2023). China's armed forces are not yet the best in the world. If its economy slows down, its defence spending might be negatively affected.

China also has very reliable security allies in the world. Cambodia, Russia, and North Korea are informal 'allies' of China, but there are no guarantees that they would join China if the latter were to start a war against Taiwan. China's alleged naval base in Cambodia remains controversial, as Phnom Penh has consistently denied this rumour. On March 22, 2022, Phnom Penh even voted in favour of the UN General Assembly resolution demanding a Russian withdrawal from Ukraine, even though the Soviet Union was the only permanent member that supported the political regime in Phnom Penh in the 1980s. North Korea ranks 34th in the world in terms of its military power. Although it depends on China for its survival, Pyongyang does not trust Beijing. Russia ranks 2nd as a military power in the world, but will Moscow come to China's aid if the latter were to start a war? Both Russia and China were rivals during the Cold War and

China has not done anything significant to support Russia's war against Ukraine.

The Chinese military and its 'allies' together are nowhere closer to the US military and the combined military power of US allies in Asia and the West. China ranks third in the world, behind both Russia (which stands in 2nd place) and the United States (which occupies first place). More importantly, the United States and its democratic allies have a combined economic, demographic, and military power that is collectively far superior to that of China and its few 'allies.'

In Northeast Asia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are the most stable democratic states and have taken steps to keep China's rise in check. Japan once defeated China in a 1894-95 war, although a new war between the two states might not be as easy it was in the late 19th century. Evidently, Japan seems to be preparing for war with China. Japanese pacifism is dead! Tokyo even reconsiders the need to build nuclear weapons. China's navy may be the best in Asia, but the Japanese navy is technically advanced and "ship for ship, the best navy in Asia" (Mizokami July 15, 2021). "Japan," according to one study, "is in the process of acquiring the largest fleet of this jet [F-35 fighter jet] outside of the United States, thrusting it into a position in which it is able to compete with its regional rivals for military supremacy" (Wong 2019: 1). Moreover, Japan has recently worked to tighten its security ties with the Philippines and Vietnam, both of which have territorial claims that overlap those of China (CTV News 2023; Vue and Lies 2022). Japan has also promised to join the United States in defending Taiwan if attacked by China (Klingner 2021) and is working to open a NATO office on its territory. According to one report, "NATO's planned new liaison office in Tokyo – to open next year [2024] – will be the first of its kind in Asia and will allow the military alliance to conduct periodic consultations with Japan and key partners such as Australia" (Hurst 2023). South Korea is now a major military power, ranking 6th in the world, and its defence system has been strengthened with military assistance from the United States. Taiwan has also boosted its defence system and US President Joe Biden promised to defend the country if attacked by China, even though his officials tried to walk back his personal commitment. Even if the United States did not wish to defend Taiwan, an attack on this island state would quickly get out of control and Washington would have no choice but to get dragged into the war.

None of the states in Southeast and South Asia would choose to support China in a war against Taiwan. Nine of the 11 Southeast Asian states voted for the 2022 UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Russian war on Ukraine and demanding a Russian withdrawal. Only Laos and Vietnam abstained, but neither of them (the two socialist states in Southeast Asia) would lend China (the world's largest socialist state) the support it needs if it were to start a major war. China and Vietnam have been on bad terms with each other. Not only did they go to war against each other in 1979 and were hostile to each other throughout the 1980s but have also since failed to join hands in challenging the United States they once had accused of being the world imperialist warmonger. In fact, the two socialist states have been at loggerheads over territorial disputes in the South China Sea and Vietnam has moved closer to its former enemy, the United States (Do 2021). Several other ASEAN members also have territorial claims that overlap China's and would not side with it in a war on Taiwan. Indonesia (the

ASEAN member that can be judged as the only democratic state) just made an "announcement of the first-ever ASEAN joint military drills in the South China Sea spotlights ongoing efforts to showcase a regional approach to the issue amid sobering realities" (Prashanth June 11, 2023). In South Asia, China would also have a tough time facing off against its major regional geopolitical rival: India, a QUAD member, the fourth military power, the fifth largest economy, and now the most populated democracy in the world.

In the West, European democratic states have also taken steps to constrain China. Although "France," as one analyst puts it, "is...the only EU country to have permanently pre-positioned forces in the Indo-Pacific and regular warship, submarine, or aircraft deployments. France systematically carries out high-level interactions with its strategic partners such as India, Japan, the United States, and Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam in Southeast Asia" (Bachelier and Frécon December 21, 2021), other European states have now paid more attention to the region. In North America, even Canada which has never been a military player in the region now shows more interest amidst China's perceived aggressive behaviour. Its newly adopted "Indo-Pacific Strategy" includes 5 interconnected strategic objectives, one which is entitled "Promoting peace, resilience, and security," committing Canada to additional activities such as reinforcing its Indo-Pacific naval presence and increasing Canadian Armed Forces participation in regional military exercises. The US military unquestionably remains the most powerful in the world, with more than 700 military bases in various regions (particularly in Asia). The United States has been the most strategically important player in (Indo-Pacific) Asia. Together with Japan and South Korea the United States puts the biggest constrain on China's territorial ambitions in East Asia. Relations between the United States and Vietnam has already been considered "a quiet US victory" (Eyler May 9, 2022).

Together the democratic states and their undemocratic allies enjoy the overall preponderance of collective power in demographic, economic, and military terms. In terms of population size, India alone (with 1.417 billion people) has 5 million more people than China. In terms of economic size, the economic preponderance of democratic power includes the United States, South Korea, Taiwan, India and Australia, all of which have the combined GDP of over \$30 trillion, compare to only US\$ 20 trillion if China and Russia are put together. There is also a global move toward countering China's BRI. India, the United States, and Arab states join hands to take on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), amidst efforts by China to grow its influence the Middle East through its initiatives like the BRI, Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative (Basu May 13, 2023). The EU's strategy to counter the BRI is also being developed, viewing the initiative as a scheme that "runs counter to the EU agenda for liberalizing trade and pushes the balance of power in favour of subsidized Chinese companies" (cited in Stanzel January 17, 2019).

In the area of military cooperation, the democratic states have also made progress on different fronts. The QUAD (Japan, India, Australia, and the United States) appears to be growing stronger. According to one report, "As of 2021, leaders in all four countries

have become more aligned in their shared concerns about China's increasingly assertive behaviour in the region and are more willing to define a constructive agenda of cooperation. All four navies participated in their first joint exercise in over a decade in November 2020" (Smith May 27, 2021). Although it is regarded as a major power reluctant to confront Russia because of its dependence on Russian oil, there is no reason for India would abandon the QUAD or would not fight China if the latter were to start a war of aggression. The security cooperation among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) provides another front that would counter China's rise: Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States announced a historic security pact in the region, seen as an effort to counter China by allowing Australia for the first time to build nuclear-powered submarines with US technology (BBC News September 16, 2021). If China were to attack the United States, for whatever reason, NATO or at least some of its members would no doubt get involved. Some NATO members participated in the war started by North Korea in 1950. NATO members also participated in the global war on terrorism in Afghanistan after the terror attack on the United States in 2000.

Some evidence also points to the ability of democratic states to cooperate and contain or deter threats from powerful undemocratic states. Although no one can ever say never, democracies have almost ever gone to war against each other, as empirically shown by proponents of democratic liberalism; however, democratic realism is even more compelling because of its emphasis on democratic leadership. Both Japan and South Korea are two most stable democracies in East Asia and their relations are from ideal because of past Japanese colonialism and aggression, but neither side has started a war. As junior allies of the United States, Japan and South Korea have been at peace. Historically, none of the wars the United States has started was against a stable democracy. *The Coming War with Japan* by Friedman and Lebard (1991) has not yet erupted. In fact, they have now built closer-than-ever-before military ties to counter China.

Relations between India and the United States — the world's two most populated democracies — present a harder case for democratic realism because of their mutual distrust during the Cold War. During this period, India admired the Soviet Union and has since relied on the supply of Soviet/Russian arms. But the Soviet Union was then useful as a major balancer to China, India's geopolitical rival. Now that Russia has become a power weaker than China and more dependent on the latter for support in the Russian war against Ukraine, India is likely to deepen its ties with the United States. In more recent years, India (a member of the QUAD) has been more closely aligned with the United States because of their shared position on the China threat. According to the Council on Foreign Relations (2023), "Russia remains the largest supplier of Indian matériel in mid-2023, but sales slow as India seeks to avoid violating US sanctions." Overall, the United States as a dominant power and a democratic leader matter significantly.

Conclusion

Why the region will grow unstable but will not be at war is based on several important

reasons overlooked by both those who view China's rise as peaceful and those who reject this premise. The limits of overall Chinese power and the preponderance of collective democratic power are the dominant factors that make a Chinese invasion of Taiwan difficult to ponder. Although one can never say never, because of state leaders' irrational behaviour or potential miscalculations or suicidal mission, the probability of a major war breaking out in the region is low. Arguably that states are rational actors. A more probable cause of a war can be identified by posing this question: Would the democratic states really defend Taiwan when push comes to shove? This is a harder question to answer, but evidence suggests that the democratic states will have no choice but to defend Taiwan if invaded. They may still have to show a more credible political will to do so by ensuring effective collective action and the best strategy would be one to *prevent* an attack on Taiwan, *not to end* it and clean up the messes after.

Any attempts to provoke China would be unwise either. Although it has served its useful purposes, nuclear deterrence is too provocative. Offensive containment similar to the Western approach to Russia is too risky. At the very least, democratic states must not forcefully seek regime change in powerful undemocratic states but must enhance democratic cooperation to build a fortress among themselves not only on the military front but also in the social and economic arenas. Defensive containment, which remains to be further conceptualized and developed, is arguably a better strategy to peacefully keep China in check. This defensive form of containment as part of the DR framework is not about sowing the seed of division between democratic and undemocratic states. Conflict between states that belong to these different political regimes is a historical and contemporary reality. In the long term, DR offers a real note of optimism: a democratic China will be able to help provide leadership in the process of building a regional security community whose members develop dependable expectations for peaceful change (Peou 2022a).

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