While East Asia has stood out in recent history for its exceptional 70-year period of peace, it would be wrong to assume that policymakers in the region aren’t worried about, or aren’t gearing up for, future conflict.

Numerous potential flash points exist, from the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the East and South China Seas, and South Asia. Those worries are fueling Asia’s push to modernize their military forces, thus risking an arms race.
GLOBAL ASIA Cover Story Asia’s Arms Race: Where the Region’s Military Modernization Is Heading

Introduction: A Path to Peace Or a Looming Peril? By David Plott

DESPITE DECADES of durable peace in Asia, the region is peppered with potential flashpoints and persistent historical grievances that could erupt into armed conflict through miscalculation of intentions, overzealous ambitions or even mismanagement of the potent forces of nationalism simmering in countries throughout the Asia-Pacific. Moreover, the region is at the center of the emerging rivalry between China and the United States for global influence in the 21st century. That contest is setting in motion a complex drama for countries in Asia seeking to benefit from both sides, without having to side with either — at least not explicitly. Even America’s allies are feeling the force of that vise as they prosper from their rapidly growing economic relations with China while depending on the security guarantees of the US.

It is no wonder, then, that nations in Asia, flush with the fruits of strong economic growth for years, are pouring resources into modernizing their militaries, as they calculate their security needs in a changing geopolitical environment that could pose threats in the future.

The series of articles in this cover package of Global Asia looks in detail at the patterns of military build-up and modernization in the region, the motives behind such moves, the threat perceptions driving decisions, shifting military strategies, weapons acquisitions, and bilateral and regional consequences. The relentless rise of China — which is led by a president who only this month was invested with the right to rule without term limits — figures large in these matters.

Beijing under the leadership of President Xi Jinping is making enormous strides in modernizing China’s military and transforming it into one that is increasingly capable of contesting US power in its neighborhood. That has triggered a more concerted effort by Japan to revise constitutional limits on its own military, and not only expand its already considerable capabilities but integrate them more closely with those of the US.

South Korea sits astride one of the most volatile flashpoints in Northeast Asia, and is determined — despite the US commitment to defend the country — to deepen its own ability to deal with a possible armed conflict with North Korea, even as it pushes hard to engage with Pyongyang following the dramatic diplomatic overtures surounding the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang. But as it is finding out, some decisions it has taken, such as allowing the deployment of an advanced US anti-missile system on its soil, have exposed it to unusually harsh treatment by China.

Meanwhile, the US, long the sole hegemon in the region, has seen its iconic Seventh Fleet embarrassed by a series of mishaps, some fatal, that could weaken perceptions of the country’s ability to sustain its military role in Asia.

But it is not only Northeast Asia that is engaged in military modernization. Russia is steadily expanding its force structure in its Far Eastern Territories, becoming once again a potential player — perhaps in concert with China — in a part of the world that its military largely neglected after the fall of the Soviet Union. India, feeling the pressure of China’s growing presence in Central and South Asia, is gearing up its military capabilities to ensure its continued influence over the Indian Ocean region and its ability to work with the militaries of other democracies such as the US, Japan and Australia. In the meantime, Australia, long a vital player in America’s security calculations in Asia, is deepening its dependence on and value to its US ally. Even Southeast Asian nations are actively modernizing their forces.

This ramping up of military strength will require wisdom and co-operation to avoid becoming perilous. We can only hope the arms build-up in Asia will be a force for ensuring peace and not a basis for conflict in the years ahead.

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Military Spending* by Selected Asian countries, 2002-16

*Measured in constant 2015 US dollars
*Cumulative figure for all 10 ASEAN member states

Asia's 2016 military spending as percentage of world total:

- China (27%)
- India
- Japan
- Russia
- South Korea
- ASEAN‡

Increase on 2015 spending:

- China (4.6%)
- India
- Japan
- Russia
- South Korea
- ASEAN‡

Asia's total military spending in 2016:

- World's Largest 15 Arms Importers 2012-17

Figures are SIPRI Trend Indicator Values (TIVs), expressed in millions, to represent the relative value of conventional weapon transfers into each country from other nations.

- India (22,444)
- Saudi Arabia (15,838)
- China (7,473)
- UAE (7,458)
- Egypt (6,854)
- Australia (6,435)
- Algeria (6,221)
- Iraq (5,404)
- Pakistan (5,126)
- Turkey (5,040)
- Vietnam (4,778)
- S Korea (4,317)
- Indonesia (4,227)
- US (4,126)
- Taiwan (3,270)

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database