The Cold War as a Guide to the Risk of War in East Asia

By Øystein Tunsjø

During the long Cold War in Europe, the bipolar world defined by the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union posed an existential risk to countries on both sides because of the threat of invasion and use of nuclear weapons.

With the emergence of a new bipolar world in Asia shaped by relations between China and the US, an existential threat of invasion and nuclear war isn’t the greatest risk, but maritime disputes and other sources of friction could more easily spark a conflict between Beijing and Washington than was ever the case between Washington and Moscow, writes Øystein Tunsjø.

IN THE AFTERMATH of Sino-US rapprochement in the 1970s, a security order emerged in East Asia that saw China dominate mainland East Asia, while the United States maintained maritime superiority. The balance of power was consolidated during the post-Cold War unipolar system dominated by the US, and East Asia became the most peaceful region in the world. Since China was still relatively weak and its rise required a benign security environment, it was constrained and reluctant to seek regional hegemony. Instead, Beijing sought to bide its time and to rise peacefully within the existing US international order.

Today, as US unipolarity wanes and US-China bipolarity emerges, the “geography of peace” in East Asia is increasingly challenged. Growing capabilities now allow China to assert its interests in the US sphere of influence in maritime East Asia more forcefully. Much of this is due to China’s economic growth. Between 1991 and today, for example, the ratio of US gross domestic product (GDP) to Chinese GDP has narrowed from 15:1 to 2:1. China’s economic growth has facilitated the build-up of “anti-access/area denial” military capabilities that allow the naval forces of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to challenge the US Navy in coastal waters and the near seas. China has developed advanced submarine capabilities and its fleet has become more modern and capable of patrolling blue water seas. This allows China to promote its claimed sovereignty in East Asian waters. With increased capabilities, the PLA Navy now operates in closer proximity to US carrier battle groups, harassing US Navy ships and planes. It has also begun to resist US surveillance activities within its exclusive economic zone.

China has also channeled increased resources into coast guard and maritime surveillance agencies that can better safeguard its interests and enforce its interpretation of the international law of the sea. US defense expenditures remain roughly three
times those of China, but this contrasts sharply with 2000, when they were 10 times higher, and the early 1990s, when they were more than 20 times higher. While other factors contribute to explaining China’s growing assertiveness in recent years, systemic shifts in the distribution of capabilities and the transition to a US-China bipolar international system are the major factors accounting for increased tension and conflict in maritime East Asia.

It is difficult to predict whether these developments will lead to war. The origins of the Cold War in Europe were driven by fear of the Soviet Union’s land power and its ambitions to establish spheres of influence and regional hegemony. Contemporary China remains a dominating land power, but the emerging US-China security dynamics are driven by China’s sea power ambitions and its emphasis on establishing a sphere of influence in maritime East Asia, not by the fear of a land invasion by China’s army. A major war between two great powers possessing nuclear weapons remains unlikely. Nonetheless, it is more likely that there will be war in East Asia than was the case in Europe during the previous bipolar system. The land-sea regional geopolitics of East Asia are more dynamic and unstable than the static European geopolitical relations of the Cold War. If the militaries of either the Warsaw Pact countries or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had crossed the East-West divide in Europe during the Cold War, this would likely have triggered a major war, posed an existential threat, and risked a nuclear war.

Proven to Instability

After Germany was divided following the Second World War and NATO and the Warsaw Pact were established, Europe split into two blocs. By the 1950s, a Third World War was seen as likely if either side invaded the other. The stakes were so high that it effectively stabilized the continent.

The geography of peace in East Asia emerged in the 1970s at a time when the PLA could only mount a coastal defense and the US withdrew from Indochina and refrained from intervening militarily on the East Asian mainland. Now, however, the balance of power is gradually being undermined, as China is able to assert its interests at sea. In contrast to continental Europe, where the US and the Soviet Union refrained from destabilizing military operations, maritime East Asia allows China to operate militarily within the US sphere of influence. Increased Chinese military activity in East Asian waters creates friction and instability. Geopolitically, when a land power seeks sea power, it has traditionally fueled tension, conflict, and war.1

Simultaneously, large bodies of water in East Asia cause significant power-projection problems for attacking armies.2 The stopping power of water makes China, the US and US allies in East Asia less vulnerable to a first strike.2 Under such conditions, decision-makers might risk a war over maritime disputes in East Asia or a first strike against an opponent’s navy, calculating that the possibility of a full-scale invasion or major war is

In contrast, the contested areas in East Asia today are in the maritime domain, where a battle at sea could largely be confined to East Asian waters and not pose a direct existential threat in the form of a land invasion.
less likely when the great powers are not located on the same landmass. Thus, geographical factors that might contain a potential war in East Asian waters foster instability. A maritime conflict in East Asia would be very dangerous, and there is a great risk of escalation. It might be difficult to contain a short, sharp war to a sea battle, especially since China will rely on its land-based platforms, such as missiles and aircraft, which would be likely targets for US military operations. Moreover, China might retaliate against an attack on its navy or the mainland with strikes on its land-based platforms, such as missiles and aircraft, which would be likely targets for US military operations. Nonetheless, this does not pose the same level of threat that an invasion of Western Europe by the Soviet Army would have had — that threat NATO could only deter with nuclear weapons. It is possible that China would use nuclear weapons if it were invaded and Beijing occupied, but it is much less likely, almost inconceivable, that China would risk an existential threat.

Unlike Cold War Europe, there is no clear divide in East Asian waters. Instead, China and the US are pulled into conflicts over various regional disputes and flashpoints, which heightens the risk of conflict. Geographical conditions and additional economic, military, technological, ideological and political differences compel each side sometimes to intervene in the respective sphere of influence of the other. This suggests that at times “geography trumps structure.”6 and supports the argument that the international relations theory of structural realism is largely Eurocentric.

Additionally, the US is risking entrapment over insignificant rocks and islets in the South and East China Seas. To be sure, the US faced the danger of entrapment in Europe during the Cold War, but the risks are higher today. Again, geography can explain why. The vast Pacific Ocean poses more challenges for the US in projecting power than the Atlantic, and there is virtually nowhere on the East Asian continent where the US can station its troops to balance or contain China’s rising power. The American bridgehead on the Korean Peninsula does not offer what West Germany provided during the Cold War. In contrast to Europe, where the US had to close down its bases in France during the 1960s, but could rely on its bases elsewhere, the US presence in East Asia would be considerably undermined if Japan took similar steps and closed down all US bases, even though it remained a treaty ally, as was France. Credibility was an important driver of US policy in Europe during the Cold War, and it remains vital in contemporary East Asia, both for potential adversaries and allies. Nonetheless, since China already dominates the mainland and there is no “Western Europe” in East Asia, the US is more dependent on its maritime allies. It is not as easy to replace bases in Japan elsewhere, and this increases the chances that the US will support Japan over sovereignty disputes with China. Although the incentives are not as strong, similar dynamics could pull the US into conflict with China in the South China Sea.

The predicament for the US is that its maritime alliances in East Asia might be recklessly in disputes with China because they perceive that they are protected by the stopping power of water and because the US depends on them for its forward military presence in the region. Again, this makes a bipolar system concentrated on East Asia inherently more unstable than was Europe during the Cold War. Most of the US allies in Europe during the Cold War were so afraid of Soviet land power that they avoided brinkmanship and sought opportunities to engage the Soviet Union. France’s fear of being dragged into a major war was an important factor in its withdrawal from NATO during the 1960s. German Ostpolitik in the 1970s was similarly driven by accommodation and engagement with the Eastern bloc. In contrast, US maritime allies in East Asia are more likely to pursue confrontational strategies toward China, since they fear military invasion to a much lesser extent than European states did during the Cold War.

Risk of Conflict
Not only do geographical factors make East Asia more unstable now than was continental Europe during the previous bipolar system, the risk of conflict is higher. The regional flashpoints include island sovereignty disputes, struggles over natural resources, control over sea lanes, the question of Taiwan and the role of nationalism and divergent interpretations of history.7 Undoubtedly, similar issues fuelled tensions and security dynamics in Europe during the Berlin Blockade of 1948-49, the uprising in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. However, Cold War conflicts were largely contained and deterred by Soviet land power. NATO was forced to watch as the Red Army crushed any opposition within its sphere of influence. Tension increased during these crises, but stability was maintained.

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Balancing Postponed
With few geographical barriers, there was a strong fear that the Soviet Union would overrun Western Europe. At the same time, earlier land invasions from the West reminded Soviet leaders that strong land power and a buffer zone in East Europe would be essential to Soviet security interests. These geographical conditions fuelled the formation of formal military alliances and an arms race in the early Cold War years, including nuclear arms, which reflected the US response to Soviet conventional superiority. The military buildup of the PLA has not stimulated similar balancing behavior in East Asia. Water barriers constrain the PLA from expanding into maritime East Asia and potentially invading Japan or the Philippines.

Cold War-style balancing is more likely to occur when China achieves greater power parity with the US than the Soviet Union achieved. The PLA pushed back the US military on the Korean Peninsula in early 1950 and the Soviet Red Army on China’s borders in the 1960s, and it is today as dominant a land power as the Soviet Red Army was. However, the PLA is less feared in comparison because of the stopping power of water and due to the differences between a relatively flat continental Europe and the jungles, mountains, deserts and permafrost that constrain Chinese military expansion to the South, Southwest, West and Northeast on the East Asian mainland. With growing power parity between China and the US in the years ahead, it is likely that China will continue its objective to increase both its land and sea power. Such ambitions are most likely to be balanced in some form by the US, as the historical record of other land powers that have sought sea power show.

The systemic effects of bipolar systems, then, are not similar. We are not witnessing the same security dynamics in East Asia that were seen in Europe at the onset of the Cold War. Some may argue that this is simply because a new bipolar system is not emerging while others contend that current developments are being shaped by distinct factors. Water barriers are postponing contemporary balancing in East Asia and geography is shaping the timing of balancing behavior. Balancing will also differ between regions, even though there are roughly similar bipolar distributions of capabilities between today’s international system and the power distribution in 1950. However, the lack of Cold War-type balancing does not make East Asia more stable. Instead, the same geographical conditions that defer balancing increase instability and the likelihood of conflict and war in maritime East Asia.

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**Notes:**
9 “The Geography of Peace.”
10 Despite the maintenance of the Cold War-era alliance, the US is more dependent on its maritime allies. It is not as easy to replace bases in Japan elsewhere, and this increases the chances that the US will support Japan over sovereignty disputes with China. Although the incentives are not as strong, similar