The East Asian Peace

How It Came About and What Threats Lie Ahead

It is now 35 years since more than a century of bloody wars came to an end in East Asia. But what are the deep reasons for this remarkable lasting peace, and how fragile is it amid a new set of regional challenges?

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Source: PRIO Data 1946-2008 (best + low estimate); UCDP data 2009-2013 (best estimate).
Forgetting Undermines the East Asian Peace
By Holly L. Guthrey

Despite the remarkable peace that has prevailed in East Asia since 1979, the region is haunted by past armed conflicts and human rights violations. The grievances from the past remain a potent threat to sustainable peace, writes Holly L. Guthrey. She argues that credible mechanisms to acknowledge past actions and openly deal with them is essential to ensure a deep and lasting peace.

FORGETTING THE PAST is undermines the present East Asian Peace. The tendency in the region to avoid reconciling past conflicts and human rights abuses through the kind of justice or truth commissions that have been used elsewhere allows wounds to fester. In East Asia, the preference is to use amnesties, try to forget the past or engage in “history struggles” with demands for apologies that never come to fruition.

This is unfortunate because it is widely recognized that past human rights abuses need to be dealt with in order for societies to move toward sustainable peace. In the words of Richard Solomon, president of the United States Institute for Peace, sustainable peace “requires that long-time antagonists not merely lay down their arms but that they achieve profound reconciliation that will endure because it is sustained by a society-wide network of relationships and mechanisms that promote justice and address the root causes of enmity before they can regenerate destabilizing tensions” (as cited in Lederach 1997, ix).

Several mechanisms of transitional justice, particularly truth commissions, are considered to be valuable for helping to acknowledge and address the root causes of violence in the wake of mass atrocities (Grovier, 2003; Minow, 1998; Quinn, 2011). Acknowledgement is more than just knowing something occurred, because it implies that previous incidences, i.e. human rights violations, are true and publicly “spelled out,” which is followed by actions taken to rectify the consequences of those events (Grovier, 2003). The opposite of acknowledgement is denial, which may be “compromised” or “partial” and suggests that action will not be taken to appropriately recognize the harm done in the past. When acknowledgement is lacking, perceived victimization can intensify, thus impeding recovery and potentially contributing to desires for extra-judicial revenge (Vollhardt, Mazur, and Lemahieu, 2014). Indirect as well as direct victims can experience these consequences, which compromises intergroup relationships and reconciliation. Given the widespread consequences of mass violence that must be tended to in its aftermath, not addressing the problem through acknowledging its existence means that attempts to foment lasting peace will stall. Amnesty, a word that has roots in the Greek word amnestia, “forgetting” (Chigara, 2002), is a transitional justice mechanism that can be seen to run contrary to acknowledgment. While amnesties following periods of mass violence can be beneficial in the short term for securing peace or consolidating democracy, I argue that amnesties only temporarily cover up the wounds of conflict and hence do not serve to prevent its repetition. Over time, avoidance of addressing the past can cause the simmering grievances of those affected by conflict to re-ignite. Acknowledgment on the individual level can help to deter the exacting of extrajudicial revenge, while acknowledgment on the state or social level can help to promote faith in the rule of law or national institutions, both of which increase the trust and security that are necessary for deep peace.

East Asia has clearly preferred amnesties to acknowledgment. The countries that have seen the greatest resurgence of violence since 1979 — Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines — have also issued the most amnesties over time.¹ South Korea has also issued a high number of amnesties, but the possible reasons why the country has not seen conflict re-emerge will be theorized on later in this article.

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acknowledgment. Indeed, most of the greatest atrocities committed in the region have not been addressed through any means; instead, the consequences of these crimes have been left to fester.

**TRAGIC HISTORY**

East Asia’s 20th century history does not just include some of the world’s worst wars (see Stein Tønnesson’s article in this cover package), but also massacres, attempted genocide, man-made catastrophes and numerous crimes against humanity. Although not exhaustive, Table 1 above illustrates some of the most striking examples.

The scale of such tragic events has been remarkably lower in the more peaceful decades since 1979. Yet East Asia’s relative peace in the last few decades has not been used to open up processes for dealing with the region’s tragic history. Indeed, very few of these incidents have been followed up with officially sanctioned vehicles to acknowledge the extent of past wrongdoing. Instead, tragic incidents have either largely been “forgotten” or dealt with through amnesties.

Because little effort has been made to officially acknowledge the past, I argue that peace in the region is teetering on the brink of renewed violence due to continued grievances and mistrust.

Questions of how to address the wounds of the past continue to be discussed, even for crimes against humanity dating as far back as the mid-20th century. A news article from May 5, 2015, highlighted how Koreans were angry over insincere comments of “remorse” made by the Japanese prime minister over the issue of comfort women during World War II, 1937-45.

Chiang Kai-shek’s destruction of the dikes, 1938

The bombing of Tokyo and atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 1945

The French bombing of Haiphong, 1946

The Taiwan massacre, 1947

**Systematic killings perpetrated by the two Korean governments during before and during the Korean War, 1948-53**

The Chinese Great Leap Forward, 1958-61

The anti-communist massacre in Indonesia, 1965

The widespread violence in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-76

Man’s Inhumanity

A non-exhaustive list of various crimes against humanity committed in 20th-century East Asia:

**The Nanjing massacre, 1937**

The Japanese use of “comfort women” during World War II, 1937-45

**Chiang Kai-shek’s destruction of the dikes, 1938**

The bombing of Tokyo and atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 1945

**The French bombing of Haiphong, 1946**

The Taiwan massacre, 1947

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The Chinese Great Leap Forward, 1958-61

The anti-communist massacre in Indonesia, 1965

**The widespread violence in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-76**

**US carpet bombing of North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia during the Vietnam War (pictured)**

The US use of “Agent Orange” in areas controlled by the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam

**The summary executions undertaken by communist troops in Hue, February 1968**


**The American massacre at My Lai, March 1968**

The Gwangju massacre in South Korea, 1980

The prison camps in North Korea (still existing)

The Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-78

The Bangkok massacre in 1976

The chilling absence of prisoners-of-war after the Sino-Vietnamese war despite massive fatalities, 1979

The killings in Yangon, 1988 and 2007, and the widespread use of rape, torture and killings by the Myanmar Army against ethnic and political opposition movements over a long period

The systematic violence orchestrated by the Indonesian military in Timor-Leste, 1975-99, and in Aceh, 1976-2005

The Tiananmen massacre in Beijing, 1989

The massacres in Lhasa, 2008 and Urumqi, 2009

The North Korean famine, 1995-98.
be a desire to cover up and ignore a problem that continues to affect victims and relationships with neighboring countries. I argue that failure to address the past is detrimental to peace on the ground. Amnesties have been continually used as an endpoint for conflict in East Asia, but appear to be doing little to actually assist in the transformation between laying down arms and securing deep and lasting peace.

**TRUTH COMMISSIONS VERSUS AMNESTIES**

Truth commissions have been touted for their capacity to develop a full picture of the past. They are the only way to prosecute, are almost the polar opposite of amnesty and healing for victims and society following periods of mass violence (Guthrey 2015; Hamber 2009; Minow 1998; Hayner 2011). Many have also called attention to their adeptness at uncovering and addressing the root causes of violence. The achievement of these two goals has been linked to the creating environments for sustainable peace. However, one must also consider the quality of these mechanisms in achieving these goals. It is crucial that they are under­taken in good faith, meaning that they actually intend to facilitate acknowledgement through engaging with stakeholders at all levels, including state leaders, civil society, victims and perpetrators, as well as aiming at a reckoning with previous wrongdoing. Research is still unclear about the true impact of these mechanisms; however, given the potential ability of truth commissions to promote acknowledgement, and hence, increase trust and security, it stands to reason that such strategies may be valuable steps on the path to achieving deep peace.

On the other hand, amnesties, either in the form of official pardons for people who have been convicted of offences or a promise not to prosecute, are almost the polar opposite of acknowledgment. The most dubious kind of amnesty is the latter, since it means that no investigation is conducted at all. Amnesties have proven to be useful as a way to encourage parties engaged in mass violence to lay down their weapons, but this should be a means to an end, not the final stop in promoting lasting peace. This type of strategy does not come to terms with the harm done during conflict, but instead acts as a type of Band-Aid to stop conflict in the short-term, and hence likely has a negative effect on lasting peace in the long-run.

Table 1, above, shows where truth commissions have been created and the total number of amnesties issued since 1947 in East Asia. Amnesties clearly outnumber truth commissions — the highest number have been issued in the Philippines (33), South Korea (21), Myanmar (19) and Thailand (11). Each of these countries, except for South Korea, have been the outliers of the East Asian Peace, because they are the only places where violent conflict continues to surge (see Ten nenson’s article in this cover package).

Of these countries, Myanmar is the only one that issued amnesties without a truth commission or commission of inquiry, and has also had comparatively high levels of violence in the recent past. The Philippines created a commission of inquiry, the Presidential Commission on Human Rights, to investigate human rights violations under the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand Marcos from 1972-86 (Hayner 2011). The mandate was, however, severely limited. It was only empowered to examine violations perpetrated by “government officers or their agents, or by persons acting in their stead or under their orders,” because it was believed that abuses committed by guerrilla forces could be handled by the court system as “common crimes” (Hayner 2011, 244). From the onset, the commission was also hobbled by a lack of adequate staff or funding, and thus could not deal with the large number of complaints they received about past violence. It was, in essence, doomed from the start, because it did not have the capacity to develop a full picture of the past.

Thailand has had two commissions of inquiry, but their efficacy is doubtful. The National Reconciliation Commission, created in Thailand in 2005 to heal the wounds left by the 2001 coup that ousted Thaksin Shinawatra, was set up to resemble a “royal” inquiry as opposed to a conventional truth commission and did not engage “broadly and directly with the affected population,” which is a key component of a quality truth commission because it indicates an engagement with various stakeholders at multiple levels (Hayner 2011).

Thailand’s second commission of inquiry, the Truth for Reconciliation Commission of Thailand that began its work in 2010, only investigated a limited episode of human rights violations during a two-month period the same year when anti-government protests ended in bloodshed. This brief time frame also suggests a limited scope of acknowledgment, given the vast number of abuses that were perpetrated outside of this time period. The International Center for Transitional Justice also notes that this commission faced “obstacles to finding the truth, such as lack of co-operation from the military and police.” This implies that there was little intention to truly address past violence by those who were most involved.

While there were also a large number of amnesties issued in South Korea, there were two official truth commissions. The first, the Presidential Truth Commission on Suspicous Deaths (PTCSD), operated from 2000-2004. It was tasked with resolving specific deaths occurring during the authoritarian period from 1961 to the 1990s, and was not mandated to review widespread patterns and causes of abuse. There was also a very short window provided for victims and their families to submit claims, and relatively few cases were actually investigated by the commission (85 out of several hundred). The second, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRCK), undertook its work from 2005-10 and was mandated to “investigate human rights violations in Korea from 1910-87.” It was aimed at “reconciling the past for the sake of national unity” and honoring victims of past abuse, including those incurred as a result of Japanese colonialism and during authoritarian rule in the country (Dong-Choon 2012). The comprehensiveness of this mandate, including the time period and range of abuses to be examined, illustrates a stronger intent to achieve acknowledgment than the previous commission in South Korea and most others in the region.

Timor-Leste also issued several amnesties (although far fewer than the above examples) and two truth commissions were developed in relation to the country’s occupation by the Indonesian military. The first was the Commission for Recep-
tion, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR, its Portuguese acronym), which undertook its work from 2002-05. The second was the Commission on Truth and Friendship (CTF) which operated from 2005-08 and was created jointly by Timor-Leste and Indonesia. The first had a much more comprehensive mandate to investigate crimes that were committed during the Indonesian occupation from 1974-99, and also incorporated a Community Reconciliation Process (CRP), which was based on traditional conflict resolution practices that aimed to reintegrate East Timorese ex-combatants back into their communities. Although not without pitfalls, the CRPs have been largely considered a success at the local level in Timor-Leste, according to various surveys. Similarly, the CAVR has also come under criticism, but some victims recognized the benefit of contributing largely by the occupation forces can scarcely be regarded as acknowledgment.

QUALITY OF PEACE
In considering not only the absence of armed conflict but also the “quality” of peace on the ground, it is instructive to look at the Political Integrity Rights (PIR) index, the Political Terror Scale (PTS) and the Social Violence Scale (SVS). These measures go further than determining the presence or absence of armed conflict set forth in the UCDP data, because they illustrate patterns that show whether people are essentially safe from harm (which may not necessarily result in loss of life) permitted by their government or opposition groups. Table 2 above compares the most recently available scores from each of these scales for the countries that have issued the greatest number of amnesties alongside those that have also created truth commissions. South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines and Myanmar have issued the greatest number of amnesties in the region, and the latter three score the worst on these scales. Indeed, South Korea and Timor-Leste boast the highest scores in the above table. This trend may be an indication that amnesties are not effective at securing long-term, deep peace unless they are coupled with a high-quality mechanism for acknowledgment (which may come in the form of a truth commission) that aims to address the root causes of violence through a thorough investigation of the past and engagement with conflict-affected parties at all levels.

As mentioned, forgetting and/or denying the occurrence of previous human rights abuses may be detrimental to individuals and societies. It can also contribute to strained relationships between countries that have yet to resolve their past through some form of acknowledgment for the suffering of victims and acceptance of responsibility. Aside from the Commission for Truth and Friendship (which, as mentioned, was largely ineffective at dealing with the past conflict) involving Indonesia and Timor-Leste, there have been no official attempts to pursue reconciliation between countries in East Asia. Given that China and South Korea still harbor grievances about Japan’s actions during the Second World War, not least on the issue of “comfort women,” it appears that just ignoring the past and avoiding responsibility for it is not leading to deep and lasting peace.

Acknowledgment helps to build trust and security. Without trust, individuals or states will continue to feel vulnerable when tensions arise. This may happen because of social problems (including lack of access to economic opportunities) or even because of territorial disputes. When one is uncertain of the way in which another will act, an environment of insecurity is perpetuated (Staub 2000). Security concerns are often at the heart of the initiation and escalation of conflict. Although truth commissions are not the only way to facilitate acknowledgment, in East Asia, quality truth commissions that have engaged broadly with those affected by past violence and demonstrated an intention to promote reconciliation and recovery appear to have had some positive impact. On the other hand, in those countries that have only issued amnesties for past crimes, or amnesties followed by ineffective truth commissions, deep peace appears to be lacking. Hence, without acknowledging the wounds resulting from past wrongdoings, strained relationships and grievances will likely continue to exist, which jeopardizes deep and sustainable peace in East Asia.

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