Conclusion: Understanding the East Asian Peace

The absence of security organisations or other formalised conflict management mechanisms has not hindered the East Asian region’s ability to prevent regional tensions and disputes from escalating into war, or to move towards a more stable peace. Instead, a number of interlinked informal processes have worked together to prevent conflict and build peace. Together, the different informal processes have moved – and continue to move – the East Asian region towards a durable peace. They have acted as a two track approach to peace. On the one hand, despite the lack of serious attempts to resolve the existing conflicts, a negative peace has been ensured through the practice of conflict avoidance and the role of the USA as a stabilising force. At the same time, a longer-term peace-building process has over time transformed relations in East Asia, moving the region further and further away from the risk of war. It might not be a quick process, nor the most efficient way forward. But it works.

More specifically, it has been found that the relative peace is the result of the combined forces of regionalisation, that is, economic integration and interdependence, multilateralism and institutionalisation, functional cooperation, the US presence, and elite interactions. Regionalisation has, together with the US presence, constrained and influenced the behaviour of actors in East Asia, working as respectively long-term and short-term frameworks for how international relations are conducted in the region. Regionalisation has promoted conditions conducive to peace, thereby being crucial for longer-term peace building. Guided by the pan-regional goal of economic growth and prosperity, regionalisation has been the driving force in the proliferation of, and transformation towards, positive relations. The USA has worked as a crisis management and short-term conflict-prevention mechanism by
creating a framework for acceptable behaviour among regional actors, safeguarding against conflict escalation into or beyond (temporary) crisis. Elite interactions have been essential for trust and confidence building, which is of great importance in a region where these two factors are not only key features of the accepted diplomatic norm but also deeply embedded in the regional culture(s). They have also been a prerequisite for Chinese engagement in multilateral settings and for back-channel negotiations, which have both been important for successful conflict management in East Asia.

The above conclusion has been reached through a five-step process. First, the findings from the three embedded case studies are compiled and analysed in order to answer the research questions posed in Chapter 1. The range of processes identified as important for peace in the three embedded case studies are drawn together to develop an understanding of the case of East Asia. The processes are categorised before their respective peace impact and related conflict-prevention and peace-building mechanisms are analysed. Then the way in which the different processes are linked and how they influence each other is analysed. The focus then moves to how the identified conflict-prevention and peace-building mechanisms (CPPBM) have created conditions for a relative peace in East Asia. Next a schematic model of the East Asian peace is presented, which compiles the findings of the previous sections. Finally, I place the empirical findings within a theoretical framework and discuss the broader theoretical implications of the findings, policy implications, and areas for future research.

Processes behind the relative peace

Virtually all of the processes and mechanisms identified as important for peace were informal rather than formal. That is to say, on the formal–informal continuum they are located somewhere between the two extreme ends, but leaning towards the informal side. A number of them have been institutionalised, despite showing a lack of formalisation. The institutionalisation of some of these processes has made them even more important for peace, especially from a long-term perspective, since they function as structures that influence and constrain actors. Some processes have been identified as important for peace in all three cases, while others only in one case. The cases also show similar versions of the same type of process, but they manifest differently. A type of process can be manifested in different ways, and be of varying importance, in the three cases. Nevertheless, as a type of process, they have created a