

Predicting East Asian Security Competition in the 21st Century: A Regional Approach (Chelsea Thorpe)

In the past 600 years, only one war has occurred between China, Japan, and Korea (Imjin War, 1592-1598). Yet contemporary foreign policy conversations emphasize China's threat to the West without proper consideration for the region's security architecture and balance of power. Analysts predict Sino-American and Sino-European relations based on 19th century neorealist theories that derive from Western conflicts, failing to contextualize China's role in its own regional security context and the power of competition between the three East Asian powers. Within the East Asian security complex, the political choice to engage – or not engage – will determine wars, as seen by the region's approach to security competition in the past. This paper argues that East Asia is not a sub-section of the global security architecture, but rather demonstrates unique security dynamics. Consequently, when analysing, we must consider regional security complex theory in predicting great power competition that would integrate non-kinetic statecraft, such as cyber and nuclear capabilities. I challenge explanations of conflict that privilege structural explanations and instead explore how several aspects of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean foreign and security policy—their security interests and motivations, force projection capabilities, and willingness to balance against China—will define broader dynamics of competition and conflict both amongst these regional actors and between the US and China. By teasing out the regional drivers of competition, I highlight the multiple avenues through which competition can manifest that are overlooked in more structuralist theories of great power war.