December 9, 2024

EXPERTS TAKE

# Challenging Western Views: Understanding Power and Stability in East Asia

## *An Interview with*
## DAVID C. KANG

***Dr. David C. Kang*** *is Maria Crutcher Professor of International Relations at the University of Southern California. A leading expert in East Asian security, international relations, and political economy, Dr. Kang's work bridges history, theory, and policy disciplines. His latest book, "Beyond Power Transitions: The Lessons of East Asian History and the Future of US-China Relations", co-authored with Xinru Ma and published by Columbia University Press (2024), examines the historical patterns of East Asian order and their implications for contemporary U.S.-China relations. In addition to his academic research, Dr. Kang frequently engages with policymakers and the broader public, providing insights into the dynamics of regional cooperation, security, and development.*

*Dr. Kang discusses how East Asia's unique historical dynamics challenge Western theories of power transitions and balancing. He examines the region's stability, shaped by historical hierarchies and pragmatic coexistence, and highlights South Korea's role as a middle power balancing U.S. and China ties. The interview, conducted by Marta Chiusi with assistance from Léna Fargier and Alexander Droop, also explores soft power, economic diplomacy, and multilateralism in maintaining regional stability.*

***Marta Chiusi:*** David, you've explored how East Asia's unique power dynamics differ from Western-centric perspectives, particularly in challenging traditional ideas about power transitions. And you've noted that if international relation theory had originated from East Asian history instead of European history, we might not even have come up with a theory of power transition war. Could you explain what makes East Asian stability distinct and why it doesn't align with Western views of power balancing?

***David Kang:*** My work focuses on evaluating European perspectives by examining them through the lens of East Asian realities. Often, we assume these European-derived models are universal because they seem so intuitive—rising powers are threatening, declining powers retaliate, and wars ensue. This framework appears plausible, even self-evident, but it's based on a specific historical experience: Europe.

Europe's system historically consisted of similarly sized states—or, earlier, political units—competing fiercely for survival and advantage in a geographically constrained region. This dynamic shaped theories about power transitions and balance.

East Asia, however, offers a completely different historical model. For over 2,000 years, it was a hegemonic system dominated by China, the region's clearly largest and most powerful entity. Unlike Europe, where states were vying for incremental advantages, East Asia's dynamics centered on how smaller states coexisted with China's dominance. These states had no realistic chance of overtaking China, nor did China face the same existential threats as European states in their multipolar system. As a result, the region's order operated on entirely different principles.

While China experienced periods of internal turmoil and decline, its neighbors generally refrained from exploiting these vulnerabilities. Instead, their focus was on managing relations with China, understanding that they would need to coexist with it once stability returned. This hierarchical system, rather than the multipolar competition seen in Europe, defined East Asia's historical dynamics.

Even today, the contrasts remain striking. Europe continues to be composed of nations of relatively similar size—France, Italy, and the UK, for example, all have populations between 60 and 80 million. In East Asia, China's population exceeds a billion, with the next largest country, Indonesia, at roughly 200 million. These disparities underscore why it's puzzling to apply European models of power balancing to East Asia, which more closely resembles its own historical patterns than Europe's.

East Asia's long-standing hegemonic and hierarchical system demands its own frameworks for understanding regional stability, ones that reflect its unique history and enduring dynamics.

***Chiusi:*** On that note, you've suggested that East Asian stability is more vulnerable to power vacuums and internal declines than external threats or power transitions. In this context, how do you see middle powers like South Korea contributing to

**East Asia's long-standing hegemonic and hierarchical system demands its own frameworks for understanding regional stability, ones that reflect its unique history and enduring dynamics.**

regional stability, particularly in the U.S.-China relationship? Could South Korea's approach reshape East Asia's hierarchical security dynamics?

***Kang:*** That's a great question. The world today isn't just China and everyone else like it was centuries ago—the United States plays a major role now. Still, if we look historically, almost every East Asian power transition happened because of internal decline, not external threats. Over 1,500 years of history, dynasties in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan—like the Song, Ming, Goryeo, and Chosun—collapsed from within. True external conquests were rare, with the Mongol invasion being one of the only examples.

This holds lessons for today. Great powers tend to "die by suicide, not murder." Internal challenges are often more significant than external threats. For instance, internal issues will likely affect the US or China more than an outright conflict between them.

As for middle powers like South Korea, their behavior defies Western realist theories, which predict smaller states should balance against larger powers like China. Yet, we don't see that happening. Despite longstanding Western assumptions, countries like South Korea aren't arming against China. Instead, they're maintaining strong ties with both the U.S. and China—not hedging cautiously, but actively crafting good relations with both sides.

South Korea is a prime example. If any country should fear China, it's Korea—they share a border, and China is a much larger power. Yet, South Korea remains deeply allied with the U.S. (mainly due to North Korea) while also fostering ties with China. This dual strategy is common across the region and contributes to regional stability in ways Western theories don't anticipate.

***Chiusi:*** Talking about U.S.-China tensions, how should we understand South Korea's alignment choices? Do you foresee a stronger alignment with the U.S., or could South Korea take on a more autonomous, regionally focused role that mirrors Asia's historical engagement patterns?

***Kang:*** I think South Korea's alignment shows clear limits. While there is pressure from the U.S., particularly on high-tech industries, to decouple from China, it's not realistic for South Korea—or even the U.S.—to fully separate economically from China. The South Korean and Chinese economies are deeply intertwined, making decoupling nearly impossible.

Even under a conservative president like Yoon Suk Yeol, South Korea balances its strong U.S. alliance with careful engagement with China. For example, despite rhetorical support for the U.S., South Korea made it clear last year that it would not allow its bases to be used in the event of a Taiwan conflict. South Korea views Taiwan not as a democracy-versus-authoritarianism issue, but as a Chinese problem, one rooted in historical Sino-centric dynamics.

South Korea's stance reflects a broader regional pattern. After Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, South Korea avoided overt support for her trip, contrasting with other countries like the Philippines or ASEAN, which reaffirmed the one-China policy. These countries do not see the Taiwan issue as their fight, nor as a democracy versus communism battle. Instead, they treat it as an internal Chinese matter, prioritizing regional stability over alignment with U.S. framing of the issue.

In short, South Korea—and the region—demonstrates a pragmatic, autonomous approach, crafting relationships with both the U.S. and China while avoiding direct confrontation. If conflict were to arise, it's unlikely there would be broad regional support for a U.S.-led anti-China coalition.

***Chiusi:*** In the context of South Korea balancing its trade relations with China and its alliance with the U.S., how do you view the role of soft power

and economic diplomacy in managing these competing priorities?

**Kang:** Soft power includes non-military relations like economics, tourism, immigration, education, and cultural exports such as K-pop. For leaders in the region, these issues are often more pressing than military concerns. Instead of focusing on potential conflicts, leaders prioritize challenges like climate change, trade, investment, and education.

The region today is highly integrated—more so than 20 or even 50 years ago. People are studying, traveling, trading, and investing across borders, making these non-military components central to daily life and governance. For instance, Korea's trade with China isn't purely transactional; it involves deeper exchanges through tourism, education, and personal connections.

This integration highlights the importance of soft power in maintaining regional balance. However, while soft power plays a crucial role, it's not always something that can be deliberately controlled or directed. For countries like South Korea, it reflects the natural priorities and interactions shaping the region rather than a strategy that can be tightly managed.

***Chiusi:*** In your latest book, you discuss the concept of "common conjecture," referring to shared expectations and beliefs that sustain regional stability. Do South Korea's multilateral engagements, such as with ASEAN+, APEC, or RCEP, reflect an intention to contribute to this common conjecture? How effective can South Korea and other middle powers be in promoting stability in East Asia through such frameworks rather than rivalry?

***Kang:*** The concept of a "common conjecture" emerged from examining how, after disruptions, countries often return to a shared understanding of roles and behaviors, creating stability. In hierarchical systems, these roles are unequal but well-defined, fostering cooperation when expectations are clear. For example, Korea's historical interactions with China reflected this dynamic. Koreans expected China, as the imperial power, to act responsibly and not bully smaller nations, while maintaining their autonomy. This understanding reinforced stability in their relationship.

In today's Westphalian world, where countries are formally equal—each with a flag, a diplomat, and a UN seat—the dynamic becomes more complex. Formally, Bolivia is equal to the United States, but in practice, their power is vastly different. Conversely, historical hierarchies were formally unequal but often allowed significant autonomy. The challenge now is how countries navigate these relationships when formal equality obscures obvious disparities, especially in East Asia.

Regional initiatives like RCEP or ASEAN-led frameworks aim to foster a shared understanding of norms and conduct, which is central to this idea of a "common conjecture." These initiatives, often driven by smaller players like ASEAN, Japan,

> **"If any country should fear China, it's Korea—they share a border, and China is a much larger power. Yet, South Korea remains deeply allied with the U.S. (mainly due to North Korea) while also fostering ties with China. This dual strategy is common across the region and contributes to regional stability in ways Western theories don't anticipate.**

or Vietnam, encourage larger powers like China to engage within a cooperative framework. For instance, in the South China Sea, when ASEAN nations present a united stance, China tends to cooperate. However, when they are divided, China acts unilaterally, leading to instability.

This highlights the importance of smaller countries aligning their expectations and presenting a cohesive approach. Efforts to knit the region together through shared norms and frameworks create opportunities for stability and mutual understanding, even in a context where power dynamics remain unequal.

***Chiusi:*** In light of what we have discussed so far, how can South Korea draw lessons from its history to contribute to a more stable regional order, especially given China's growing influence and the potential decline of American influence in East Asia? Could South Korea play a unique role in fostering stability, and what internal strategies might leverage its historical legacy?

***Kang:*** One of the key challenges for South Korea is the division of the peninsula, which makes North Korea its overwhelming national security focus. Until this issue is resolved, South Korea cannot fully concentrate on other matters. What's particularly intriguing about this situation is that South Korea and the United States have often relied on China to play the mediator role with North Korea. However, this creates a unique dynamic, as China is simultaneously being criticized by the U.S. and others, yet it remains crucial in addressing the North Korea issue because of its good relations with both North and South Korea.

China's position as a mediator aligns with its traditional role in the region. Historically, China has maintained relations with nearly every country in East Asia, and it continues to do so today. China is seen as more capable of helping to resolve the North Korea issue than other powers like the U.S., Russia, or Japan. This dynamic reflects a more traditional Northeast Asian order, where China acts as the central stabilizing force. For example, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un interacts with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in a manner consistent with traditional hierarchical relationships, keeping ties with China very close. Both North and South Korea understand that they need to maintain positive relations with China to navigate their respective challenges.

This dynamic is unique to Northeast Asia, where the relationships revolve heavily around China's centrality. Unlike other regions, such as the Middle East, which may have neutral mediators, East Asia lacks comparable "honest brokers." In most cases, managing relations with China directly becomes the key to addressing regional issues. Even when the U.S. seeks to resolve issues like North Korea, it often relies on China's influence, highlighting the region's reliance on traditional patterns of interaction.

***Chiusi:*** Considering the incoming Trump administration and upheavals in EU policies, how do you think the U.S. and Europe can influence stability in the Indo-Pacific? Are there specific strategies that could support a resilient regional order without disrupting East Asia's traditional dynamics?

***Kang:*** I've long argued that the Indo-Pacific region is more stable than it appears. Countries know how to manage relations with China, crafting economic ties while avoiding deeper conflicts. However, Trump is a wildcard, making it difficult to predict a consistent U.S. policy. His decisions often depend on his personal instincts, such as his unconventional approach to North Korea, and his respect for strong leaders like Xi Jinping adds to the unpredictability.

Europe, meanwhile, is likely to remain focused on its own challenges, such as NATO, defense spending, and Ukraine, with its relations with China being primarily trade-based. Europe's economic ties to China, like reliance on Chinese parts for industries such as automotive manufacturing, make

a cohesive policy toward China difficult to imagine.

Globally, the trend toward tariffs and economic protectionism—exemplified by both the Trump and Biden administrations—is a significant shift from traditional free-trade principles. This "lurch to the right" and economic nationalism complicates efforts to foster a stable regional order in East Asia. While these dynamics present challenges, the region itself remains relatively stable due to its long-standing practices of managing relations with China.

***Chiusi:*** Can the traditional Chinese approach to East Asian stability, based on a hegemonic system, re-emerge as a common framework?

***Kang:*** In some ways, it has always been there, but the question now is how much of that traditional understanding still remains. Today, every country operates within a Westphalian framework—nation-states with flags, passports, and formal equality. These are European concepts that have become global, shaping how all countries, including East Asian ones, interact.

However, remnants of the past persist. Countries still expect China to play an important role in the region, though it no longer commands the same legitimacy it once did. Historically, China was the source of civilization in East Asia—leading in science, technology, literature, and art. Aspiring to Chinese sophistication was common, but that's no longer the case.

Today, China is seen as powerful, but it lacks the moral authority or cultural soft power it once held. Countries no longer look to China as a model for progress or as a source of inspiration. While China remains central, its role is no longer tied to being the region's cultural and civilizational leader.

***Alexander Droop:*** You claim that we don't see balancing or hedging in the region, but many would argue the opposite. For example, looking at the Philippines or Japan, you can observe both internal and external balancing. Why do so many countries seek military ties, particularly with the U.S.? If this isn't hedging, how do you interpret these behaviors, especially since these countries don't seek similar military ties with China?

***Kang:*** They do—countries like Japan and the Philippines are also forming military ties with China. This is often overlooked because attention disproportionately focuses on U.S. activities. For example, joint military exercises involving China have significantly increased. In 2018, all eight ASEAN countries participated in exercises with China, including warships and coordinated patrols, but these events received little coverage compared to U.S. naval visits.

Defense spending trends also challenge the narrative of balancing. In East Asia, defense spending as a percentage of GDP has declined since the Cold War, dropping below 2 percent in most countries. Even in cases like Japan, where increases are announced, much of this is performative, such as relabeling existing expenditures as defense-related or delaying actual implementation.

> **"The Indo-Pacific region is more stable than it appears. Countries know how to manage relations with China, crafting economic ties while avoiding deeper conflicts. However, Trump is a wildcard, making it difficult to predict a consistent U.S. policy. His decisions often depend on his personal instincts.**

The misperception comes from focusing on activities aligned with Western expectations, such as U.S.-led alliances, while ignoring regional dynamics that include growing military interactions with China. Countries in the region are not behaving as predicted by traditional balancing theories—they are managing relationships with both major powers rather than aligning exclusively with one.

***Chiusi:*** Since East Asia is more vulnerable to internal threats rather than external ones, how do you see shifting perceptions of major powers like the U.S. and China shaping regional alignments and security, especially in the context of global events like Ukraine and Gaza? What role do you think these dynamics play in influencing stability across East Asia?

***Kang:*** A recent survey by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies shows shifting perceptions among East Asian elites. Historically, preferences leaned toward the U.S., but now many view China as an increasingly honest broker in the region. This trend is influenced by global issues like Gaza and Ukraine, where the U.S. has taken clear sides, while countries in the Global South, including Muslim-majority nations like Indonesia and Malaysia, take a different view.

***Droop:*** But isn't it also true that many elites say they would prioritize the U.S. if it were a more reliable partner?

***Kang:*** Absolutely. U.S. unpredictability, such as during the Trump administration, has hurt its standing in the region. While the U.S. views itself as a beacon of values and leadership, many countries perceive a gap between American ideals and actions. For example, during a talk I gave in Australia, officials expressed support for the US but also noted that America isn't the leader it believes itself to be. If the US lived up to its stated values, it would likely regain stronger support in the region.

***Droop:*** If a Western policymaker—whether from Germany, the U.S., or the UK—asked for advice on engaging Southeast or East Asia effectively, what would you recommend?

***Kang:*** This is an easy one. For the U.S., unlike Europe, we often lead with our chin, focusing on military solutions like freedom of navigation and displays of strength. But the region is about diplomacy and business, and we've largely abandoned that. A lasting solution to issues like the South China Sea won't be military; it will be diplomatic.

We're also retreating from economic engagement while the region grows more interconnected through trade and investment. The U.S. isn't part of RCEP or TPP, and there's no trade expansion initiative under the Biden administration, nor was there under Trump. This leaves us with little more than military presence, which isn't good for the U.S. or the region in the long run. These policies also counter global economic trends, as Southeast Asia rises while the West declines.