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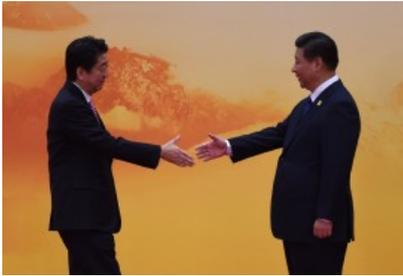
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East Asia will avoid war in 2015. Here's why.

Kishore Mahbubani Dec 30 2014 05:00 Comment



Japan's Shinzo Abe (L) shakes hands with China's Xi Jinping in November © Greg Baker/AFP/Getty

Few years in recent decades dawned with as much of a sense of pessimism as 2014. One consistent theme in the predictions for the year was that 2014 looked eerily similar to 1914. Most pundits predicted doom and gloom, especially in east Asia. Yet, while there were many horrific events — from the downing of flight MH17 over Ukraine, to the abduction of hundreds of schoolgirls in Nigeria and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant — we have avoided outright world war. Now that the year is closed, with no repetition of 1914, it may be wise to investigate why the pundits were wrong, particularly on their ideas around the potential for conflict in Asia.

These were no lightweight pundits. The eminent historian Margaret MacMillan, in an essay for Brookings in December 2013, said, “We are witnessing, as much as the world of 1914, shifts in the international power structure, with emerging powers challenging the established ones.”

She added, “the same is happening between the US and China now, and also between China and Japan”, and also said that “there is potential for conflict between China and two of its other neighbours — Vietnam and Malaysia — as well.”

Graham Allison, the famous Harvard professor, also warned that east Asia was headed towards the “Thucydides Trap”, adding: “When a rapidly rising power rivals an established ruling power, trouble ensues.” In early 2013, the then prime minister of Luxembourg, Jean-Claude Juncker, warned that 2013 was looking dangerously like 1913. The Economist also warned at the end of 2013, “A century on, there are uncomfortable parallels with the era that led to the outbreak of the first world war.”

I experienced this pessimism personally in Davos in January 2014. Several leading western intellectuals asked me whether war would break out between China and Japan. I was so confident that there would be no war in east Asia that I offered to take bets with ten-to-one odds against myself with eminent western journalists. Two took up my bets. And I will be collecting on these bets when I return to Davos in January.

Why was I so confident that there would be no war in east Asia, either in the East China Sea or the South China Sea? The simple answer is that I know the Asian dynamic. While many Asian neighbours will make angry nationalist statements (and they have to do so to manage popular nationalist sentiments), they are also careful and pragmatic in their deeds.

For over two decades I have been writing about the rise of Asia and the dynamic driving it. There is an extraordinary consensus among east Asian leaders that Asia needs to use this window of opportunity to focus on economic development and growth. War is the biggest obstacle to development. If Asians were truly stupid, they would engage in such wars and derail their enormous development promise. Most Asian leaders, barring North Korea, understand well the dangers of war. Hence, while there will be tensions and rivalries in the region, there will be no wars in the region, in 2014 or in 2015. As 2015 unfolds, I would like to encourage all western pundits to understand the underlying Asian dynamic on its own terms, and not on the basis of western preconceptions.

Tags: China, East Asia Sea, Japan, Shinzo Abe, South China Sea, Xi Jinping
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