

# ***The Differentiated Roles of Mega-events in Reshaping International Relations in East Asia: A Recent Decade Review***

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**Abstract:** In the past fifteen years, mega-events in East Asia have experienced a significant shift in their nature and impact on international relations. Historically seen as positive platforms for cultural exchange and regional stability, these events have increasingly become sources of conflict and geopolitical tension. This paper provides a comprehensive review and typology of mega-events, categorizing them into five types: geopolitical conflicts, crises under the Sino-American framework, ideological and propaganda issues, territorial disputes, and environmental issues. The study reveals how these events now exacerbate regional tensions and highlights the need for more nuanced and detailed research to understand their evolving roles. By examining these trends, this paper contributes to the understanding of mega-events' multifaceted impacts on the socio-political landscape of East Asia, offering insights for policymakers and scholars to navigate future regional dynamics.

**Keywords:** Mega-events, East Asia, International relations, Typology, Literature review.

## **1. Introduction**

East Asian societies, as an important grouping of world civilizations, have a rich history of interaction and exchange since ancient times. A series of conflicts and crises in recent years, however, have collectively shaped the contemporary political reality of this culturally similar region, which is relatively stable yet turbulent. Mega events have always exerted influence, to varying types of nature and degrees of impact, on the governance and stability of East Asian countries, as well as on international relations and geopolitics among East Asian countries. In the last decade, in particular, the trend of mega events in East Asia is undergoing a continuous and significant impact on the international relations in the region and beyond. And the connotation and practical roles of mega events have shifted substantially along with the macro- and systematic-level dynamics of global geopolitical strategies. The study on the positive roles of mega events in regional development and international political advancement is gradually decreasing, while negative and destructive events are becoming more influential and frequent in (re)shaping the patterns of global political economies and international relations. In a nutshell, this shift has been shaped by both internal and external factors, relating to long term historical unsettled disputes and newly emerging context-sensitive conflicts in East Asia. The U.S. return strategy to the Asia-Pacific since 2014, as well as the U.S-China trade war from 2018, have significantly increased tensions between China and U.S. allies in

East Asia. The frequent resurgence of a series of territorial disputes, such as those over Dokdo and Diaoyutai, which have been unresolved since World War II, has also made East Asia one of the international hotspots. Together with the complex historical and practical interactions and contradictions among East Asian countries, the geopolitical environment in East Asia is gradually becoming complex and volatile.

Mega Event is a broad concept. It involves activities in various political, economic, and cultural dimensions. The implementation of any major regional event can have some impact on the stability and development of the whole region in the above dimensions. After the acceptance of the Cold War and in the first half of the 2010s, most studies have focused on mega events involving cultural exchanges, sports events, national image, and city branding, etc. This category of mega events with cooperation as the main axis has generally had a relatively positive impact on regional stability and development [1-2]. In the recent decade, however, shifting focus from cooperation-oriented events to conflict-mainstreamed events is increasingly playing a role in affecting and reshaping international relations within and over east Asia. Whereas in the past, international tensions were mainly concentrated in hot war-prone regions such as the Middle East and Africa, in recent years, with the military and economic rise of China and the shifting of the U.S. strategic center of gravity, the geopolitical environment in east Asia has fundamentally changed. In recent years, with the military and economic rise of China and the shift in the U.S. strategic center of gravity, the geopolitical environment in East Asia has changed radically. The relatively stable status quo of the geopolitical environment in East Asia is also being gradually undermined and altered.

As mentioned earlier, the Asia-Pacific region, particularly East Asia, is emerging as an emerging hotspot of international conflicts as the region's geopolitical environment changes negatively as well as regional tensions rise significantly. This is mainly reflected by the increasing frequency, density, and typology of major events in East Asia. First, in the past decade, the frequency and density of conflicts between East Asian countries have increased significantly. For instance, the Diaoyu Islands issue, the Dokdo dispute, and the SAD missile incident have continued to have a negative impact on regional stability and international relations. Secondly, the types of mega events have also become more diverse and complex compared to the past. In addition to the sports, urban cooperation, and political disputes mentioned earlier, many events hold more geopolitical meanings, such as the protests in Taiwan and Hong Kong SAR, and the Fukushima nuclear wastewater discharge incident in Japan [3-5]. These types of mega events have brought mass movements, environmental and nuclear safety issues, and other once lesser-visited mega-events together. It could be inferred that, in the face of more complex and diversified contemporary events, relevant research should also be up to date in all aspects to meet the needs of the new era and practice.

As mentioned earlier, existing literature on this topic is falling behind the political and social realities, and it lacks in-depth reviews as well as more systematic analyses and interpretations. Furthermore, little research has been conducted on the typology of roles played by newly emerging mega-events in international relations in East Asia. Given these gaps, more refined, differentiated, and in-depth studies are of great significance. Considering the increasingly negative and tense trends in the analysis of major events in East Asia, a more profound and systematic investigation is warranted.

This paper addresses the subject of Mega events within East Asia, focusing specifically on a comprehensive literature review of research spanning various aspects of politics, economics, culture, environment, and security in East Asia. It proposes a basic typology of differentiated mega events and examines their roles in reshaping international relations in East Asia over the past decade. Cold War legacy politics, geographic conflicts, and Sino-American structural conflicts. The study identifies five main types of mega events: Cold War legacy politics; Sino-American structural conflicts and their outreach; ideological and propaganda rivalries; post-colonial territorial disputes

and environmental issues and their politicization. It also outlines five key impacts: deterioration of the geopolitical environment in the context of nuclear security issues; shocks to the international marketplace in the context of trade disputes; exacerbation of regional security crises in the context of great power conflicts; and intensification of global societies due to clashes of political discourse and ideology. It also outlines five key impacts: the deterioration of the geopolitical environment under nuclear security issues; international market shocks under trade disputes; intensification of regional security crises in great power conflicts; tearing of global public opinion due to political discourse and ideological conflicts; national sentiments and extremism exacerbated by territorial disputes; and country-specific tensions due to environmental issues. This research contributes to the existing body of literature by providing a more systematic explanation and analysis of the influence of mega events on the relationships between East Asian countries and regions. In response to the evolving international dynamics in East Asia, this study challenges traditional structuralist interpretations of mega events and offers new perspectives and conceptual insights for a critical and constructive analysis of the socio-economic and relational impacts of mega events on East Asian countries.

## 2. Literature Review

As previously mentioned, mega events globally possess a wide range of multifaceted roles in transition. These events are characterized by both positive and negative aspects.

In recent years, there has been an abundance of research on the positive roles of mega events, particularly in terms of their contributions to regional cooperation and stability, as well as fostering beneficial international interactions. Such mega events are largely regarded as generally advantageous. For instance, studies on the 2008 Beijing Olympics, such as those by Baim et al, have highlighted how the preparatory and operational phases of the Olympics effectively promoted sustainable urban development and renewal in Chinese cities [1].

Moreover, a series of cultural and entertainment international events, such as the Cannes Film Festival, not only provide significant platforms for international cultural and artistic exchanges but also lay a cultural foundation for deeper national cooperation. Collectively, these studies explore the impacts of positive mega events from various angles, systematically analyzing how these events have led to further societal, economic, and cultural cooperation and progress among nations and regions [6].

Besides, various international cooperative activities and summits have also played positive roles. Since 1998, the G8 Summit has been instrumental in enhancing international trade order and fostering cooperation in combating international crime and judicial collaboration [7]. Additionally, significant bilateral leadership meetings, such as the encounter between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou in Singapore, as well as the inter-Korean summit talks between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un at Panmunjom, have been considered exemplary in promoting regional stability and peaceful development [8-9].

However, mega events entail impacts that are not solely positive. Particularly in recent years, a series of wars, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks have increasingly become undeniable in their global impacts. The impacts of the Gaza War, for instance, extend to public opinion, culture, and even ethnic and religious issues, with the international media battle surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict exacerbating global divisions and polarizations. For recent localized conflicts, such as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict which escalated after nearly a decade of tension, have not only ignited tensions across Eastern Europe but also deteriorated the international security landscape and even the financial market environment [10].

In a similar vein, research on the September 11 attacks reveals that this and other acts of international terrorism have triggered global security anxieties and a series of transnational counter-terrorism actions. Furthermore, territorial disputes in some countries have led to regional security

crises, such as the complex territorial disputes in the South China Sea, involving multiple sovereign political entities and causing ongoing tensions in Northeast Asia and Indochina [11].

Nuclear safety issues also significantly negatively impact the international security situation. The war risks associated with the Iranian nuclear issue and the tensions in Northeast Asia triggered by North Korean nuclear tests have severely exacerbated international security tensions [12-13]. Moreover, environmental issues and natural disasters have broadly been explored for their negative impacts. The international political and social uproar caused by Japan's Fukushima nuclear wastewater discharge highlights an ongoing environmental crisis [14]. The butterfly effect triggered by the 2010 Haiti earthquake exposed underlying issues with military governance and a comprehensive humanitarian crisis involving the survival of women and children, drawing extensive global attention [15-16].

This array of mega events and their consequent negative impacts not only brings various degrees of crises to nations' social, political, cultural, and security realms but also contributes to a reconfiguration of contemporary international circumstances. These types of mega events accompany, witness, and even contribute to the deterioration of the international situation across various dimensions. Indeed, mega events are significant influencers and present specific opportunities in today's global society. From the array of studies covering various domains concerning mega events, several research characteristics and trends can be summarized.

Mega events themselves have also undergone intrinsic changes over the past decade. The nature and impacts of mega events in the last fifteen to twenty years have shown an increasingly negative overall trend. As previously mentioned, past mega events primarily involved cultural, sporting, and entertainment spectacles along with national cooperative exchanges, generally yielding positive impacts. This was facilitated by a flourishing development and improvement in the international political-economic and geopolitical environment following the end of the Cold War. The political, economic, and cultural cooperation brought about by globalization created more win-win opportunities. The series of mega events during this period are the best testament to this positive trend, and likewise, these positive mega events reciprocally improved international situations, aiding the development of globalization and multilateralism in a benign interaction. However, as illustrated in the negative aspects, this trend has undergone structural changes in the past decade with the rise of trade protectionism, populism, and intensifying national political and military conflicts. Currently, mega events are more likely to have negative impacts on international cooperation and security, closely related to the deterioration of the global geopolitical environment and intensified great power games [6]. An era filled with uncertainties and conflicts is emerging, and correspondingly, the mega events and their associated research responding to this era's themes are naturally focused on more negative topics, bringing increasingly negative and adverse impacts.

Overall, the impact of mega events on international relations has become increasingly evident in recent years. These events primarily manifest through potential military conflicts, arms security issues, localized hot wars, territorial disputes, and diplomatic incidents. They exert their negative influence primarily by directly increasing tensions between states or regions or by escalating the risk of conflict through political or military means.

Current research on mega events and their impact on international relations predominantly operates within the framework of structuralism, analyzing the power dynamics of the international system, the normalization of state behavior, and the economic and social structures of countries. It considers the effects of mega events on international relations from the perspectives of regional and global governance and order. Admittedly, this empirically-based structuralist viewpoint provides a template for analyzing the impacts of mega events to a certain extent. However, this framework may harbor inherent risks and deficiencies. It seems better suited for analyzing positive events compared

to negative events, which have become the trend for the future. Moreover, overly formulaic models can become rigid and empiricist when analyzing incidents of a contingent or emergent nature.

As illustrated, over recent decades, various mega events in different regions have had a sustained impact on international relations and regional tensions. However, one trend merits particular attention as it reflects the overall trajectory of how mega events influence international relations.

The core hotspots of international conflicts are showing a shift from the East to the West; from other regions to East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. In recent years, accompanied by China's rise and the United States' "Pivot to Asia" rebalancing strategy, coupled with Asia's inherently complex ethnic historical issues and territorial disputes, multiple potentially exacerbating flashpoints have emerged in East Asian societies. Although no active warfare has erupted as of now, it can be inferred that East Asia has ostensibly become the new "powder keg" of international politics.

### **3. Towards a Typology of Megaevents on Reshaping International Relations in East Asia**

This paper systematically analyzes various types of mega events that have occurred in this hotspot over the past fifteen years from a typological perspective. Clearly, this series of mega events has profoundly impacted the regional situation in recent years from multiple dimensions. To do so, it draws on a wide range of sources, including academic literature, news reports, and policy papers. It then categorizes the mega events that have occurred in East Asia in recent years and have directly or indirectly negatively impacted international dynamics and geopolitical landscapes into the following aspects

#### **3.1. The Escalation of Cold War Legacy Issues in Specific Geopolitical Contexts: The Case of the North Korean Nuclear Issue**

Political and major events in East Asia largely stem from lingering Cold War issues. The ongoing North Korean nuclear crisis and escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula are prime examples. The crisis has deep roots in World War II, the Cold War, and the U.S.-Soviet rivalry that divided Korea. Persistent military confrontation and ideological opposition between South Korea and North Korea have driven North Korea's nuclear ambitions, exacerbated by security concerns and weak trust.

Since 2013, inter-Korean relations have mostly deteriorated, except briefly during Moon Jae-in's early presidency, accelerating North Korea's nuclear development to operational deployment. External powers also play critical roles. The U.S., particularly since the Trump administration, has intensified sanctions and prioritized the issue. The UN Security Council's focus has led North Korea to escalate its nuclear activities in response to sanctions.

Tensions among major powers in the Six-Party Talks, especially China, the U.S., and Russia, have hindered cooperation, causing negotiations to stall. The North Korean nuclear issue involves broader geopolitical dynamics and rivalries, reflecting changes in the relationships among these key nations. Regimes with Cold War legacies often resolve conflicts through confrontation due to historical burdens and weak trust, impacting regional security and stability, and potentially influencing global dynamics unpredictably.

#### **3.2. Crises Under the Sino-American Geopolitical Conflict Framework**

Conflicts between major powers significantly impact regional stability. Since the 2010s, Sino-American conflicts have led to more regional events in East Asia. The U.S.-China trade war and COVID-19 pandemic have intensified pro-American regimes' antagonism toward China, reflecting the broader geopolitical competition.

The U.S. has prioritized its Asia-Pacific strategy, increasing the strategic importance of the first island chain. South Korea's acceptance of the U.S. THAAD missile system, covering Chinese

territory, triggered severe backlash from China. Taiwan, under President Tsai Ing-wen, has increased arms purchases and diplomatic efforts, escalating tensions with mainland China. U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's 2022 visit to Taiwan further heightened Sino-American tensions. Japan has also increasingly challenged China on sovereignty issues.

First island chain countries' stance, influenced by the U.S., has become clearer. Under Xi Jinping, China has adopted a more assertive approach, abandoning low-profile policies. Nationalist propaganda and "wolf warrior" diplomacy have decreased China's tolerance for security provocations. As China's strength grows, so does its assertiveness. Initiatives like the Belt and Road challenge the U.S.-led world order, prompting tougher responses from the U.S. and its allies, increasing regional tensions. Unlike the North Korean nuclear issue, these confrontations are less urgent and involve fewer complex rivalries. They are often used strategically to contain China. South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan have had both antagonistic and cooperative periods with China, but recent confrontations are significantly influenced by the United States and align with its Asia-Pacific strategy.

### **3.3. Ideological and Propaganda Issues: Political Discourse and Social Movements**

Great power competition has intensified ideological clashes in East Asia, triggering tensions and impacting regional stability. Political movements and protests have disrupted national stability and regional dynamics, fueled by the Sino-American conflict. In East Asia, China and the United States engage in fierce propaganda battles, with nationalist narratives clashing with democratic values.

In Chinese-speaking societies, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, unique historical and political contexts make them focal points of this ideological struggle. The Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan (2014) and Hong Kong protests (2014-2019) exemplify these conflicts. Media propaganda has spurred concerns about China's authoritarianism and a desire for democratic freedoms, leading to street protests against pro-China governments. These movements have deepened divisions within Taiwanese and Hong Kong societies, decreasing identification with Chinese identity and influencing their political realities.

Since 2016, Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party, which supports independence, has governed amid distrust of China. In response to the 2019 Hong Kong protests, China reduced the region's autonomy, violating the "One Country, Two Systems" policy. Even within mainland China, large-scale protests against the Zero Covid policy in 2022 highlighted public discontent. These social protests, driven by ideological opposition, reflect protesters' political demands and doubts about China's political system and regional stability amid great power confrontation.

### **3.4. Territorial Disputes in the Post-colonial Era**

In post-colonial East Asia, unresolved territorial disputes remain potential sources of conflict, rooted in a long history of wars among China, Japan, and Korea since the 19th century. After World War II, Japan's defeat and the division of Korea and China exacerbated these disputes. Both North and South Korea claim sovereignty over Dokdo. China and Taiwan both claim the Diaoyu Islands, which Japan also considers its territory. Japan and Russia dispute the Northern Territories, while Southeast Asian countries, led by the Philippines and Vietnam, contest China's claims over the South China Sea islands. The South China Sea Arbitration worsened tensions between China and Southeast Asian countries, affecting regional peace.

These disputes often involve complex interactions between multiple countries, with many territories claimed by several governments. Most disputed areas are islands tied to post-World War II territorial divisions. These issues act as powder kegs threatening East Asian stability. While political understanding has kept risks manageable during times of cooperation, significant changes in regional or international dynamics could escalate these conflicts.

### 3.5. Environmental Issue and Public Health Event and Its Politicalization

In addition to political, economic, and cultural mega events, environmental issues have also become factors that trigger regional conflicts and negatively impact the stability and order in East Asia in recent years. The 2022 incident involving the Japanese government's discharge of Fukushima nuclear wastewater caused regional tensions and was strongly opposed by a series of countries, including China and South Korea. International public opinion also engaged in heated debates around this issue.

Incidents in East Asia have become highly politicized, adding to the region's tension. The COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan in 2020 triggered significant political fallout beyond public health. In East Asia, it increased resentment towards China, with Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party leveraging the "China Virus" narrative to win the 2020 election. The pandemic also dampened the Hong Kong protests, allowing more government control.

Outside of Asia, the pandemic sparked a wave of anti-Asian crimes and racial discrimination, causing a severe survival and security crisis for East Asians in Europe and North America. This crisis brought attention to the harsh realities faced by Asians and contributed to the rise of the Stop Asian Hate movement, although stigmatizing labels still persist in many people's stereotypical views of East Asia in the populist 2020s.

## 4. Conclusions

Mega events have undergone a significant transformation in their roles and impacts over the past fifteen years, particularly in East Asia. Originally perceived as platforms for positive engagement, fostering cultural exchange, and promoting regional stability, the nature of these events has shifted towards more negative and conflict-oriented outcomes. This transition reflects broader geopolitical changes and increasing tensions within the region. Our comprehensive review categorizes mega events into five distinct types: geopolitical conflicts, crises under the Sino-American framework, ideological and propaganda issues, territorial disputes, and environmental issues. These categories illustrate the multifaceted and increasingly complex nature of mega events, which now often exacerbate rather than alleviate regional tensions.

Geopolitical conflicts such as the North Korean nuclear crisis exemplify how lingering Cold War issues continue to shape contemporary geopolitics. The escalation of North Korea's nuclear capabilities and the resulting international tensions highlight the enduring impact of unresolved historical conflicts. The U.S.-China trade war and strategic confrontations have intensified regional tensions. Events like the deployment of the THAAD missile system in South Korea and the Taiwan arms purchases reflect the broader geopolitical struggle between these two superpowers, affecting regional stability. Political movements and protests, particularly in Hong Kong and Taiwan, underscore the ideological battles within East Asia. These events, driven by nationalist and democratic sentiments, have deepened societal divisions and impacted the political landscape. Long-standing disputes over territories like the Diaoyu Islands and Dokdo continue to provoke regional tensions. These conflicts, rooted in historical grievances, remain potent flashpoints that could escalate into broader confrontations. Incidents like the Fukushima nuclear wastewater discharge have added a new dimension to regional conflicts. Environmental mega events, now heavily politicized, highlight the intersection of ecological concerns and geopolitical rivalries.

Looking ahead, the study of mega events in East Asia must adapt to the increasingly sensitive and volatile nature of these occurrences. Research should delve deeper into specific issues like the Korean Peninsula, cross-strait relations between China and Taiwan, and territorial disputes, which represent potential flashpoints for future conflicts. As these events become more diverse and their impacts more far-reaching, scholars must expand their analytical frameworks to encompass a broader range of mega events, including military exercises, technological blockades, and intelligence crises. This

diversification in research will help better understand and anticipate the evolving landscape of international relations in East Asia.

Moreover, the typology of mega events may itself evolve, with new categories emerging as geopolitical dynamics shift. Potential future mega events could include large-scale military exercises, maritime disputes, technology-related conflicts, and intelligence crises, each carrying the potential to significantly alter regional and global stability. By broadening the scope of research and maintaining a flexible analytical approach, scholars can better capture the complexities and nuances of mega events in East Asia, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of their role in reshaping international relations. In summary, the transformation of mega events from predominantly positive to increasingly negative impacts underscores the need for more nuanced and detailed studies. As East Asia continues to be a hotspot for international conflicts, understanding the typology and impacts of mega events will be crucial for policymakers, scholars, and stakeholders aiming to navigate and mitigate regional tensions.

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