

GLOBAL ASIA:

TURNING POINTS IN MODERN ASIAN HISTORY

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Turning Points in East Asia 1900–2016

Perhaps no region of the world experienced more turbulent change than did East Asia from 1900 to 2016. China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan now rank as the world's second-, third-, 14th-, and 21st-largest economies, respectively. All have made transitions from predominantly rural societies to urban ones. All have highly capable militaries, and two — China and North Korea — have nuclear weapons.

Over the last 100 or so years, many dramatic events have shaped each of these societies; there are many turning points. Picking the five most important is hard,

and others might choose some other occurrences. But the following five are arguably the most significant.

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 marked the first time a modernizing Asian state defeated a great European power. This war signified Japan's own emergence as the leading nation in Asia. Japan expanded its interests on continental Asia and colonized Korea five years later. For the next 40 years, Japan's military might in Asia was the dominant geopolitical fact of life on that continent. Japan's claims to lead Asia out of western colonial rule (by force of arms) resulted in wars with China, the United States, England and the Netherlands.

Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941, brought World War II to the United States. Japan followed up that attack by conquering the Philippines and British and Dutch colonial possessions in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, though Japan was defeated in 1945. Japan's occupations of Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia and elsewhere, however, decisively weakened western imperialism's hold on Asia and contributed to communist insurgencies and civil wars in Asia. The United States later replaced Japan as the leading power in Asia.

The Korean War of 1950–1953 brought the Cold War to Asia. The newly established People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union enabled North Korea to attack South Korea, with the hope of uniting all of Korea under communist rule. The United States and the United Nations came to South Korea's defense. When the United States pressed to completely defeat North Korea and unify the country under the control of the South, the PRC intervened, leading ultimately to a bloody stalemate. North and South Korea remain divided to this day. As part of the Korean War, the United States ensured that Taiwan, where the losing side in the Chinese Civil War had fled in 1949, would not be invaded by the PRC. The Korean War contributed to the United States' setting up a string of alliances in Asia, most of which exist today. The war also turned the United States and China into bitter

enemies for 20 years, putting Cold War dividing lines in place in East Asia.

The onset of economic reform in China in late 1978 began when Deng Xiaoping consolidated power in the PRC and initiated a series of policy reforms. These changes broke with his late predecessor, Mao Zedong, the founding leader of the PRC, who had died in 1976. Deng reversed many ideologically driven and destructive economic policies with ones that relied much more on market mechanisms. He and his allies also promoted a much greater economic involvement with the outside world. China's position in the global economy was fundamentally transformed as these reforms (and their follow-ups) worked their way through the system. But Deng did not want — and resisted demands — to democratize the political system, leading to the bloody crackdown on peaceful demonstrators on June 4, 1989.

Taiwan and South Korea's transitions to democracy started in the 1980s. Taiwan began a gradual conversion to democracy in 1986, culminating in direct elections of its president in 1996; South Korea made a more abrupt shift to democracy in 1987. Taiwan and South Korea had been US allies during the height of the Cold War (South Korea remains so today), but the United States broke relations with Taiwan to establish ties with China. Taiwan and South Korea had periods of extraordinarily rapid economic growth beginning in the 1960s under authoritarian systems, and both were quite prosperous by the mid-1980s. Their transformations to democratic rule demonstrated that democracy was not an alien idea forced on Asia, as the PRC and some Asian state leaders claimed. The United States had imposed democracy on Japan in the aftermath of World War II, but Taiwan and South Korea's transitions marked the first time in East Asian history that democracy began to take root from within. Their democracies also put subtle pressure on China and North Korea to change, and these recently democratic nations suggest what the alternative to communist rule might look like.



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