

A Study of Security Cooperation Dilemmas and Pathways in Sino-Japanese Relations from A Constructivist Perspective

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Abstract. Regional integration in East Asia has become one of the focal points of international politics since the end of the Cold War. Discussions on East Asian regional integration has predominantly centered around rationalist perspectives, emphasizing the maximization of national interests, which may not be conducive to achieving integration in the region. Given the complex historical issues such as national sentiments intertwined in East Asia, emphasizing the construction of shared ideas and identity through constructivist theories aligns more with the practical requirements of regional integration. Therefore, this paper takes cooperation in the security domain between China and Japan as an example to discuss and analyze the reasons for the dilemmas facing East Asian regional integration. These dilemmas primarily include Japan's uncertainty regarding collective identity, inevitable competition between China and Japan, and the disruptive influence of external great power intervention on collective identity. The paper proposes a three-phase approach for the future: strengthening Japan's East Asian identity, actively constructing cooperation between China and Japan, and resisting external interference. This approach aims to progressively build collective identity in the East Asian region and promote the smooth advancement of East Asian regional integration.

Keywords: Sino-Japanese relations, regional integration, constructivist perspective.

1. Introduction

The term "region" refers to an area with distinct characteristics that can be distinguished from other geographic areas. "Regional integration" refers to the process of integration undertaken by countries within a region to enhance their collective strength. After World War II, European countries, in pursuit of peace and economic development, established the European Economic Cooperation Organization under the guidance of European integration principles. They gradually moved toward political union, ceding sovereignty to create supranational institutions such as the European Union, thus strengthening the overall power of the European region. Similarly, in Southeast Asia after World War II, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia jointly issued the Declaration of the Establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, forming ASEAN and enhancing the region's capacity to withstand interference from external major powers.

In comparison to the gradual easing of relations among core countries and the expanding process of integration from economics to politics in Europe and Southeast Asia, the process of regional integration in Northeast Asia appears to be particularly complex and slow. In today's profoundly changing international landscape, the urgency of strengthening regional integration to achieve regional peace and stability becomes increasingly evident. Therefore, it is necessary and valuable to explore the reasons behind the difficulties faced by East Asian regional integration after the Cold War and to identify pathways for its smooth advancement.

To address this research question, this paper will begin with a literature review of relevant theories of regional integration. Using the cooperation issues between China and Japan in the security domain as an example, it will explore the reasons for the challenges faced by East Asian regional integration from a constructivist identity perspective. The paper aims to propose feasible recommendations for the pathway to East Asian regional integration based on identity theory, providing theoretical insights for research in this field.

2. Literature review

Prior academic research has extensively examined issues related to East Asian regional integration. These research efforts have largely focused on two main aspects: firstly, examining the reasons behind the slow progress of East Asian regional integration from a rationalist perspective, and secondly, analyzing identity construction issues of specific countries within the region from a constructivist perspective.

2.1. Rationalism and East Asian regional integration

The "rational actor" assumption posits that actors have various preferences, and beneath these preferences, they calculate the costs and benefits of their actions to maximize their utility [1]. According to the logic of "rational actors," neorealism in international relations theory suggests that states have assigned intentions and interests, always pursuing the maximization of their interests. This often leads to arms races in a state of anarchy, with relations between states governed by the law of the jungle. Neoliberal institutionalism also acknowledges that states follow the "rational actor" assumption and emphasizes the importance of institutions in constraining free-riding and defection behaviors among states to achieve international cooperation. Scholars like Kai Tian and Chi Zhang have, from a rationalist perspective, attributed the slow progress of East Asian regional integration to competition among major powers for regional hegemony and regional institutions [2,3]. Scholars like Rongjiu Ma argue that the most crucial aspect of ensuring cooperation between China and Japan, as well as regional security in East Asia, is the construction of a regional institutional framework, highlighting the significance of regional organizations and mechanisms [4].

However, research guided by rationalism has revealed certain limitations, mainly by largely neglecting the impact of intentions, identity, and cultural factors on major power relations. It also overlooks the role of changes in these factors in driving continuous progress in the international community. States do not always choose actions that are most favorable to their material conditions, and in most cases, they cannot achieve utility maximization. For instance, after World War II, China's economy and national industries were severely affected by Japanese aggression, requiring substantial financial assistance for economic recovery. Yet, considering the need to build its own international image and foster a sense of identity to promote improved relations with Japan, China did not demand war reparations from Japan. Although this contributed to a period of cooperation between China and Japan, it did not maximize China's own development interests.

Additionally, major powers in East Asia, guided by their national interests, exhibit different preferences for the development path of regional integration, advocating their own regionalism and ideologies. This includes China's promotion of "open regionalism," Japan's advocacy of New East Asian Regionalism, and the ASEAN's push for a regionalism model based on the ASEAN model. This has led to a tendency of "competitive regionalism" in East Asia, hindering regional integration. Therefore, under the guidance of rationalism, states always pursue the maximization of their interests, making it difficult to change the balance of power, security dilemmas, and the state of anarchy, all of which are not conducive to improving the competitive dynamics in the East Asian international community. Hence, promoting East Asian regional integration from a rationalist perspective is not feasible.

2.2. Constructivism and East Asian regional integration

Constructivist theory emphasizes that material power can only have a meaningful impact on actors' behavior through the construction of ideas, and the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed through these shared ideas. Given the long-standing historical grievances among various ethnicities in East Asia, the process of integration in the region initially requires a change in the construction of identities among states. Therefore, applying constructivist theory to study East Asian regional integration can effectively address the shortcomings of the rationalist perspective, which primarily focuses on material power.

However, the current research under the constructivist perspective on East Asian regional integration has largely concentrated on analyzing the issues of identity construction of specific countries within the region, while neglecting the crucial role of collective identity construction among major powers in the region. For example, scholars like Chuanjian Wang have analyzed the reshaping of Japan's national image after World War II from a constructivist perspective and put forward suggestions for China's path of external cooperation development [5]. Wang Xiangyuan, from China's perspective, believes that over the past three decades, China's awareness of the East Asian region has been consciously strengthened by Confucian scholars, political scholars, and economists [6].

The historical and political disputes between China and Japan have long been a major obstacle to the process of East Asian regional integration. However, previous studies have lacked discussions on this issue. Therefore, this paper will use the constructivist perspective of identity theory to explore the factors hindering the construction of collective identity between China and Japan in security cooperation and to propose pathways for the smooth advancement of East Asian regional integration, thus addressing the challenges faced by the region's development.

3. Constructivist identity theory and the formation of regional integration

3.1. Overview of constructivist theory

3.1.1 The evolution of constructivist theory

In 1989, Nicholas first introduced the concept of constructivism, emphasizing the role of ideas, norms, and culture in shaping state behavior and interests. Subsequently, moderate constructivists, represented by Alexander Wendt, introduced constructivist international relations theory, bringing constructivism back into mainstream international relations theory from postmodern theoretical systems. This theory gradually established itself alongside realism and liberalism as one of the three major approaches to international relations. Constructivism has various theoretical branches, such as Nicholas G. Onuf's emphasis on rule construction through language and practice, Peter J. Katzenstein proposed that norms influence behavior through practical reasoning, which developed norm constructivism, and Katzenstein's regionalism theory, focusing on comparing European and Asian regionalism, as well as Adler's research on security communities.

With the changing international landscape, regional integration has gradually become the primary choice for countries within regions to achieve economic and political growth. The construction of collective identity among major powers within the region has become a key factor in achieving regional integration. Hence, this paper tends to examine the process of East Asian regional integration from the perspective of identity theory, focusing on the construction of collective identity among major countries in the region.

3.1.2 Core concepts of identity theory

In 1992, Alexander Wendt argued in his article "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics" those human relations, whether individual, collective, or national, are socially constructed and dynamic, which is quite different from the static and unchanging principles of rationalism [7]. Based on this constructivist theory, it is evident that the structure of human relations is not determined by material power but by the construction of shared ideas. In the constructivist perspective of identity theory, the logic follows that "identity shapes interests, and interests shape behavior."

The core of identity theory in the context of regional security cooperation is mainly reflected in three points: first, regionalization should start with the construction of collective identity. Second, inter-state security cooperation is a social process, and states can reconstruct security communities through interactions. Third, in international politics, the role of subjective factors such as ideas, culture, and identity are greater than that of material power.

3.2. Analyzing the feasibility of East Asian integration in the security domain using identity theory

In contrast to the research path taken by rationalism regarding regional integration, constructivist identity theory views regional integration as a process of socializing collective identity among states within the region. Identity includes individual and collective identity, while at the regional level, it is manifested as national identity and transnational community identity. Alexander Wendt argued that collective identity plays a crucial role in forming communities and ultimately achieving integration [8].

The smooth transition from economic to political aspects in advancing regional integration requires the establishment of corresponding supranational institutions. This process involves conflicts of core interests among different countries, such as sovereignty and territory. Therefore, the main contradiction in the promotion of regional integration lies in the conflict between national identity and transnational community identity. Resolving this conflict hinges on exploring the factors that hinder the construction of collective identity in the region and the construction pathways.

Unlike other regions, the development of major power relations in East Asia is deeply affected by historical ethnic conflicts. With the presence of the world's second-largest economy, China, East Asia attracts considerable attention from the United States as an external major power. Furthermore, due to Japan's status as a non-nuclear-armed state, the U.S.-Japan alliance is more difficult to disrupt in comparison to other military alliances. Therefore, security studies in East Asia should not be limited to material power alone but should also aim to transform the mutual fear among states in a state of anarchy into effective collective identity, thus promoting security cooperation among regional major powers and fostering regional stability and development. Therefore, emphasizing the transformation of ideas and the construction of collective identity, as advocated by identity theory, aligns with the analytical needs of East Asian regional integration.

4. Challenges of East Asian regional integration in the security domain from an identity perspective

4.1. Uncertainty in Japan's collective identity

Since the late Tokugawa period when Japan faced the "Western Impact," its identity has exhibited an uncertain oscillation between Eastern and Western civilizations. Compared to Asian nations, Japan has a sense of superiority as an advanced Western country, yet within the context of European nations, it occupies a peripheral position. Furthermore, during World War II, most countries in East Asia were victims of Japan's aggression. China, for instance, suffered from Japanese invasion for 14 years, starting from the Mukden Incident in 1931.

During the war, Chinese infrastructure and national industries were destroyed, resources were plundered, and the people suffered mass killings. Although the war has ended, some Japanese individuals continue to ignore historical facts, repeatedly deny or even romanticize the aggression, causing strong resentment among the Chinese people. For example, in April 2023, Fumio Kishida offered a "masakaki" offering at the Yasukuni Shrine, which enshrines 14 Class-A war criminals from World War II, including Hideki Tojo. Japan conducts annual visits to the shrine, casting a long-lasting shadow over Sino-Japanese relations.

Countries victimized by the East Asian conflict find it difficult to fully forgive Japan, leading to Japan's lack of a sense of belonging in Asia, coupled with its status as a "non-nuclear-armed abnormal state" in the international community, which further confuses Japan's self-identity definition. This sense of insecurity and uncertainty in identity has compelled Japan to constantly redefine its regional identity and continuously change its regional strategies. Consequently, it intensifies other countries' vigilance against Japan and hampers the efforts of regional countries to establish collective identity.

4.2. Inevitable competition between China and Japan

Starting in the 1940s, Japan proposed the idea of constructing the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere," revealing its ambition to seek dominance in East Asia. After Japan's defeat in World War II and its economic recovery, it once again showed its aspiration to pursue regional dominance. For example, in 2002, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi officially proposed the concept of an "East Asian Community" based on the principle of "acting together, moving together."

Today, while Japan relies on the United States for its military security, it continues to display ambitions to assert dominance in the East Asian region. On May 21, 2023, the Group of Seven (G7) leaders' summit concluded in Hiroshima, Japan, where Japan hosted the event. Japan specially invited the leaders of eight countries, including South Korea and India, which are not within the G7 framework and have economic and territorial disputes with China. This move indicates Japan's urgent desire to shed its identity as a defeated nation since World War II and to compete with China for dominance in East Asia.

Meanwhile, with the rise of China's national strength, China's diplomacy has become more resolute in defending national interests, and China's political influence on the international stage continues to expand. Public opinions within both countries are increasingly focused on each other's attempts to secure regional dominance. This has led to heightened mutual fears within both nations, strengthening the construction of an adversarial identity between China and Japan. It also determines that the two countries' pursuit of maximizing their interests and reconciling the conflicts between national identity and transnational community identity becomes increasingly difficult. The competition for regional dominance escalates.

4.3. Disruptive intervention of external major powers on collective identity

According to identity theory, countries with similar political systems tend to have a strong sense of identity with each other, resulting in relatively close cooperation, while differences in political systems may lead to alienation and suspicion among nations. Since the end of the Cold War, Western countries, led by the United States, have vigorously promoted capitalist systems and democratic political values. Under the influence of the United States, Japan and other East Asian countries have established political systems different from that of China, which has led to a sense of alienation between them and China. This has become a significant obstacle to East Asian regional integration.

As China's power continues to rise, the United States has redefined China's identity, vigorously propagating the "China threat theory." In the realm of security, the United States and Japan have formed a military alliance, making Japan an assistant in the U.S. efforts to contain China, thus establishing a shared perception of China as a common adversary between the U.S. and Japan. However, China ranks as the world's second-largest economy and is Japan's largest trading partner. Objectively, Japan needs to strengthen cooperation with China to ensure its own economic stability. Additionally, Japan is geographically located in close proximity to China, and maintaining a peaceful and friendly regional environment is crucial for Japan's economic development, political stability, and military security.

Furthermore, to safeguard its vested interests and prevent the emergence of a hegemonic power in East Asia that could threaten U.S. interests, the United States has implemented a strategy of balancing, regardless of whether it concerns China or its partners in containing China. These factors necessitate Japan to enhance its identity as a friend with China. Consequently, Japan finds itself in a situation where it needs to strengthen its ties with China, but at the same time, it cannot entirely disengage from its role as a U.S. partner in containing China. Coupled with the U.S.'s policy of maintaining balance in its approach to Japan, this ambiguity in Japan's identity towards China has led to confusion in the collective identity of major regional countries, hindering the progress of East Asian regional integration.

5. Identity perspective on the path of East Asian regional integration in the security field

Based on the analysis, the main reasons for the difficulties in East Asian regional integration include the uncertainty in Japan's collective identity, the unavoidable competition between China and Japan, and the interference of external major powers in collective identity. Next, this paper will propose an effective path for the promotion of East Asian regional integration based on the constructivist identity theory.

5.1. Embracing cultural commonalities to strengthen identity

Confucian culture, originating in China, has had a profound and lasting impact on neighboring countries. In Japan, from the era of Prince Shotoku, the Taika Reforms, the feudal era, the Meiji Restoration, and up to modern times, Confucian culture has deeply influenced Japan's social development. Chinese characters and the civilization of agriculture and sericulture have long served as the intellectual foundation of Japanese civilization. The amalgamation of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhist thought with indigenous Japanese culture has played a crucial role in shaping the moral and educational outlook of the Japanese people. Therefore, there exists a deep cultural commonality between China and Japan, and the spiritual values of Confucianism, such as "benevolence," can inspire trust, reduce friction, and mitigate misunderstandings between China and Japan. Regardless of how both countries have constructed each other as formidable adversaries throughout their historical development, the cultural ties formed over centuries of interaction provide a solid foundation for friendly cooperation between the two countries.

In the future, Japan needs to fully recognize the importance of East Asian regional integration, search for cultural commonalities with other East Asian countries, stabilize its sense of Asian identity, mitigate conflicts between national identity and transnational community identity, and play a more constructive role in the process of East Asian regional integration. Meanwhile, China and other East Asian countries should be prepared to address Japan's identity uncertainty and counteract the negative effects it may have.

5.2. Constructing cooperation between China and Japan

There are many factors influencing collective identity, and public opinion and government propaganda play significant guiding roles in shaping collective identity. Sino-Japanese relations are the most critical bilateral relationship in East Asia, and building a good Sino-Japanese relationship can effectively promote the progress of East Asian regional integration. It is challenging to alter the entrenched identity construction between China and Japan through official channels alone. Thus, it is beneficial to actively promote second-track diplomacy under government leadership, such as conducting academic exchange activities between think tanks and research centers in both countries. This approach provides a platform for discussing sensitive issues, cultivating a sense of cooperation, and fostering strategic mutual trust, thus facilitating official communication and cooperation.

At the same time, both countries' governments must continue their efforts to promote the development of bilateral relations. President Xi Jinping emphasized at the China-Japan Friendly Exchange Conference that the theme of peace and friendship has been the mainstay in the hearts of the Chinese and Japanese people for over two thousand years. China highly values the development of Sino-Japanese relations, and its fundamental policy towards Japan will not change. China is willing to work with Japan to advance friendly cooperation [9]. These friendly signals from China need to be accurately conveyed to the people of Japan. Therefore, the government can invite Japanese scholars and policymakers to engage in reinterpretation work for leaders' speeches at important meetings, ensuring that the ideas of both countries are correctly transmitted. This helps build trust, reduce strategic suspicion, and effectively engage in collective identity construction.

5.3. Strengthening collective identity to resist external interference

While the U.S. containment of China has been a hindrance to Sino-Japanese relations and regional security cooperation in East Asia, as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi pointed out at the opening ceremony of the 2023 China-Japan-South Korea International Cooperation Forum, East Asian countries need to actively practice genuine multilateralism and regionalism, rather than introducing regional conflicts and group confrontations into the region [10]. Both China and Japan should correctly recognize each other's core interests and give reasonable concerns. Japan needs to acknowledge China's rising political and economic influence in the region, while China also needs to address Japan's legitimate security concerns. Both countries need to consider the overall political and economic interests of the East Asian region.

Simultaneously, China and Japan should establish a regional conflict management mechanism in the security field to avoid strategic misjudgments, limit disputes within reasonable bounds, and prevent the region from becoming a tool for external major powers to pursue their global objectives. China and Japan share close geographical proximity and are inseparable neighbors. Only by respecting each other's core interests can they seek to expand their common interests further and lay the foundation for collective identity and resistance to external interference.

6. Conclusion

Compared to Europe and Southeast Asia, the process of major power security cooperation in Northeast Asia has been very slow. To date, the region has not yet formed a stable international relationship framework. In order to facilitate the smooth progression of integration from Southeast Asia to Northeast Asia, resist external interference, and promote regional peace, stability, and economic prosperity, it is crucial to conduct research on the factors leading to the difficulties in East Asian regional integration and the development paths. This paper, using the constructivist identity theory perspective and focusing on the most important bilateral relationship in East Asia—Sino-Japanese relations, identifies the main reasons for the challenges facing East Asian integration as the uncertainty in Japan's collective identity, the unavoidable competition between China and Japan, and the interference of external major powers in collective identity.

In the future, the construction of collective identity should proceed in three stages: strengthening Japan's East Asian identity, actively constructing cooperation between China and Japan, and resisting external interference. This approach will help facilitate the smooth progression of East Asian regional integration. To ensure the research is targeted, this paper has not analyzed the factors leading to the challenges in East Asian regional integration in other domains. It also lacks exploration of identity construction issues among other medium and small countries within the region, which play a crucial role in East Asian regional integration. Future research can delve deeper into these areas to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and potential solutions in East Asian regional integration.

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