

Final Paper:

**Japanese Political Relationships and War Memory: A Comparative Study of Southeast and
Northeast Asia**

Casey McCollum

San Francisco State University

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I. Introduction: The Long Shadow of War

Although imperial Japan (1868-1947) invaded and was responsible for millions of deaths in both Northeast (NE) and Southeast (SE) Asia during World War II (WWII), perceptions of modern-day Japan are starkly different in the two regions. A 2025 report found that 66.8% of respondents surveyed within ASEAN member states trusted Japan, and only 7.1% of respondents who distrusted Japan cited military concerns as a reason for their distrust¹. In comparison, two 2024 surveys found that 87.7% of Chinese surveyed had a poor perception of Japan², and that 42.7% of South Koreans had an unfavorable perception of Japan, the majority of South Koreans citing Japan's colonial past as the main driver behind this perception³. Japan enjoys a fruitful relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), but tense bilateral relationships with China and South Korea (SK), in no small part due to disputes over the memory of imperial Japan's colonization of the region. This begs the question: Why does Japan have a more stable relationship with and better popular perception in ASEAN than it does with China or SK (this proposal will focus primarily on China), given that its WWII history in SE Asia shares many similarities to its history in NE Asia? This research will contribute to existing international relations (IR) literature on constructivism as it examines the impact of historical memory on state relationships, as well as emphasizing the normative power of practices like cultural exchange in shaping broader politics. It questions liberal IR theory as it seeks to explain

¹ Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report* (Singapore: ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, April 3, 2025), 64-65, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-State-of-SEA-2025-1.pdf>.

² The Genron NPO, *The mutually-beneficial strategic relationship between Japan and China has begun to lose its foundation of trust* (Tokyo: The Genron NPO, 2024), 11, https://www.genron-npo.net/en/opinion_polls/docs/Japan-China%20Joint%20Public%20Opinion%20Survey%202024.pdf.

³ East Asia Institute, *2024 EAI Public Opinion Poll on East Asia: Japan and the ROK-Japan Relations* (Seoul: East Asia Institute, 2024), https://www.eai.or.kr/new/en/project/view.asp?code=104&intSeq=22741&board=eng_issuebriefing&keyword_option=&keyword=&more=.

why Japan's diplomatic ties in SE and NE Asia are so different despite high Japanese economic interconnectedness in both regions. Finally, this research will shed light on what policies may promote peace and stability by highlighting variables central to trust-building between states with a history of war, using Japan-ASEAN as a case study.

II. Literature Review: The Fukuda Doctrine & Divergent SE and NE Asian Relationships

As Japan began investing in other regions post-WWII, it was viewed in SE Asia as an “economic animal”—an actor only interested in the region insofar as it could exploit its resources⁴, an impression bolstered by not-so-distant memories of war. This distrust came to a head when anti-Japanese riots took place in Thailand and Indonesia as Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei (1972-1974) visited the region in 1974⁵. These tensions are reflective of more recent events NE Asia—for example, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to Japan's Yasukuni Shrine (the resting place of Class-A war criminals⁶) triggered demonstrations in Beijing as well as massive online campaigns against Japan⁷ in 2005. Much of the literature highlights the important role the Fukuda Doctrine, articulated by Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda (1976-1978) in a speech in August 1977, played in changing the political relationship between Japan and SE Asia through building Japan's image as a trusted partner to ASEAN.

Beeson (2014) first examines how Japan's role in East Asia evolved immediately after WWII, focusing on its investment in SE Asia. Japan, bolstered by United States (U.S.)

⁴ William W. Haddad, "Japan, the Fukuda Doctrine, and ASEAN," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 2, no. 1 (June 1980): 13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25797599>.

⁵ Siew Mun Tang, "Japan in the Foreign Relations of the ASEAN States," in *Japan's Relations with Southeast Asia: The Fukuda Doctrine and Beyond*, ed. Lam Peng Er (London: Routledge, 2013), 121.

⁶ Yinan He, "Ripe for Cooperation or Rivalry? Commerce, Realpolitik, and War Memory in Contemporary Sino-Japanese Relations," *Asian Security* 4, no. 2 (2008): 163, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799850802006522>.

⁷ He, "Ripe for Cooperation or Rivalry?," 180.

assistance⁸, pursued an export-led industrialization model that left it deeply interconnected with SE Asia as the region became “highly dependent on Japan for capital goods”⁹. Beeson notes ambivalence toward this investment, highlighting that postwar economic integration was at least a non-factor in terms of improving Japan’s political relationships or its perception among the populace of the regions it was investing in. Beeson suggests this ambivalence lingers today¹⁰—this may be true of Japanese investment in China, but as will be emphasized, perception of Japanese investment in SE Asia does appear to have shifted in a positive direction as a result of its diplomatic efforts.

Haddad (1980) highlights the three pillars of the Fukuda Doctrine just years after Fukuda’s speech—Japan’s continued renunciation of its role as a military power, its focus on building “mutual trust” in the region through “heart-to-heart” relationships, and its acceptance of Asian states as “equal partners” (a marked shift from imperial Japan, which envisioned itself as the leader of a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere”¹¹). Haddad notes the doctrine seemed “aimed at breaking ... psychological barriers” lingering from WWII¹². At the outset of the doctrine, however, Japan’s priority was not necessarily image rehabilitation but providing economic support for the capitalist ASEAN member states. Haddad argues reasonably that ASEAN, a “non-communist alliance”, was motivated to align with Japan politically as a result of its fears over the “export of communism” after the reunification of Vietnam under North Vietnamese leadership¹³. Japan was redefining its economic investment in the region as

⁸ Mark Beeson, "East Asia and the Global Economy," in *Regionalism and Globalization in East Asia: Politics, Security and Economic Development*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 168.

⁹ Beeson, "East Asia and the Global Economy," 171.

¹⁰ Beeson, "East Asia and the Global Economy," 170.

¹¹ Everett Munez, "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: Japanese Colonial Order," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed May 21, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greater-East-Asia-Co-prosperity-Sphere>.

¹² Haddad, "Japan, the Fukuda Doctrine, and ASEAN," 10.

¹³ Haddad, "Japan, the Fukuda Doctrine, and ASEAN," 17.

fundamentally security-oriented, as it aligned with the capitalist ASEAN states¹⁴. With this in mind, Haddad argues that the doctrine had “basically political goals”, identifying the goals as the “strengthening of the non-communist states in Asia.”¹⁵ Haddad’s emphasis on the security dimension of the doctrine may highlight why Japan charted an ambitious new path in SE Asia while neglecting to do so in NE Asia. However, only focusing on the short-term realist drivers of the doctrine’s implementation, Haddad expresses pessimism about the future of the alliance¹⁶. With the benefit of hindsight, this initiative was more successful than Haddad anticipated, as the doctrine’s secondary aim to break psychological barriers proved to be the more significant long-term consequence.

This is emphasized by Tang (2013), who names the Fukuda Doctrine “as one of Japan’s most successful Asian initiatives.”¹⁷ He argues convincingly that today, although “war memories remain a salient issue in Southeast Asia”, anti-Japanese sentiment based on that issue is “not representative of Southeast Asians’ general attitude toward Japan.”¹⁸ Tang highlights the outsized role that Japanese cultural exports play in the perception of Japan, noting the popularity of Japanese food, particularly sushi, J-pop (Japanese music), manga, and anime in the region¹⁹. The Fukuda Doctrine’s focus on heart-to-heart, and as Tang emphasizes, “people-to-people”²⁰ relationships, has played a major role in increasing Japan’s soft power—he highlights various top-down initiatives by the Japanese government undertaken in conjunction with ASEAN to promote cultural understanding, including the 2003 “J-ASEAN Pops Concert” which drew an audience of 14,000²¹. He explains that in contrast to the period preceding the Fukuda Doctrine, a

¹⁴ Haddad, "Japan, the Fukuda Doctrine, and ASEAN," 13.

¹⁵ Haddad, "Japan, the Fukuda Doctrine, and ASEAN," 23-24.

¹⁶ Haddad, "Japan, the Fukuda Doctrine, and ASEAN," 28.

¹⁷ Tang, "Japan in the Foreign Relations of the ASEAN States," 142.

¹⁸ Tang, "Japan in the Foreign Relations of the ASEAN States," 129.

¹⁹ Tang, "Japan in the Foreign Relations of the ASEAN States," 130.

²⁰ Tang, "Japan in the Foreign Relations of the ASEAN States," 127.

²¹ Tang, "Japan in the Foreign Relations of the ASEAN States," 131.

time where deep distrust of Japan (similar to the distrust still observed in China and SK) was the prevailing sentiment, SE Asians today “increasingly form their impression of Japan based on the relevance and attractiveness of Japanese soft power.”²² This positive perception of Japan has extended to its economic investment in the region, too. Tang cites survey data from six ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) where over 80% of those surveyed in each country saw Japanese investment as helpful²³. What is particularly interesting about Tang’s analysis is its emphasis on the potency of Japanese soft power in shaping public perception.

Sudo (1988) offers a look at the early evolution of the doctrine’s implementation across three Japanese Prime Ministers—Fukuda, Zenkō Suzuki, and Yasuhiro Nakasone, with the latter two reinforcing and strengthening the doctrine outlined by Fukuda²⁴. Sudo highlights the tension that existed at the beginning of the Japan-ASEAN relationship, as ASEAN was underwhelmed by Japan’s initial contribution²⁵—echoing Haddad’s concerns about the relationship. As the strategy played out, however, Sudo concludes that “Japan’s contacts with ASEAN have developed tremendously”, as Japanese policy in the region had “become more multilateral” and was trending towards cooperative decision-making²⁶. This highlights the effectiveness of the third pillar of the doctrine, the equality of Japan and its SE Asian neighbors. Increased cultural exchange initiatives, as Tang highlights the importance of, began to take root in these early years as well. In 1983, Nakosone advocated for 150 ASEAN youths to visit Japan every year, and promoted scientific and technological cooperation between Japan and ASEAN²⁷, a form of

²² Tang, "Japan in the Foreign Relations of the ASEAN States," 133.

²³ Tang, "Japan in the Foreign Relations of the ASEAN States," 136.

²⁴ Sueo Sudo, "Japan-ASEAN Relations: New Dimensions in Japanese Foreign Policy," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 5 (May 1988): 521, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2644640>.

²⁵ Sudo, "Japan-ASEAN Relations," 517.

²⁶ Sudo, "Japan-ASEAN Relations," 523.

²⁷ Sudo, "Japan-ASEAN Relations," 518.

cultural exchange, as an early, if somewhat underdeveloped, beginning towards true heart-to-heart understanding. What Sudo's reading, written over a decade after the outset of the doctrine, makes clear is that the road toward reconciliation requires constant reassurance and reinforcement of one's commitments.

The opposite of this trend can be observed in Japan's diplomatic relations in NE Asia, particularly China. He (2008) makes the point that the antagonistic China-Japan relationship is due to several factors. First is the Japanese government's inconsistency when it comes to its handling of the subject of war memory. Going back to the Koizumi example, instead of working to reassure China of Japan's good intentions, Koizumi continued to visit the Yasukuni Shrine despite China's protests, and his successor, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, expressed an "ambiguous attitude" on the subject of history²⁸. Next is the role of the Chinese state itself in utilizing anti-Japanese messaging to promote Chinese nationalism. He convincingly argues that Deng Xiaoping's deliberate pursuit of national mythmaking after the Mao Zedong era sought to "demonize"²⁹ Japan, in that it cast a blanket judgement over the country. China's national campaigns, combined with Japanese inability to send consistent messages to China, may well have resulted in a vicious cycle of antagonism as He highlights another trend that speaks to the power of mass communications technology—that the widespread dislike of Japan by Chinese citizens expressed through demonstrations and internet petitions may influence Chinese government attitudes³⁰.

Since 1977, much has changed in the broader strategic landscape in Asia as China has grown in relative influence, and ASEAN is more ideologically diverse. Koga (2017) gives a valuable perspective on the enduring importance of strategic incentives in the Japan-ASEAN

²⁸ He, "Ripe for Cooperation or Rivalry?," 163.

²⁹ He, "Ripe for Cooperation or Rivalry?," 176.

³⁰ He, "Ripe for Cooperation or Rivalry?," 180.

relationship. He explains this in the context of the development of the East Asian Summit (EAS) in 2004-05 as China was growing. Japan, seeking to contain “China’s ambition to increase its political influence in East Asia”, successfully used “selective inducement”³¹ by mobilizing its bilateral relationship with Indonesia to drive a wedge into negotiations led by China and Malaysia,³² and placing ASEAN centrality at the core of their strategy to convince Malaysia the initial plan (limiting EAS membership to ASEAN+3) would not benefit SE Asia³³. Koga’s analysis is important in that it illustrates the realist incentives still very much at play in the Japan-ASEAN relationship, as Japan is strategically incentivized to support ASEAN centrality in any way it can to balance against an increasingly powerful China.

This paper seeks to integrate the perspectives from these scholars in a way that explains the existing disparity in Japanese strategic outcomes in SE and NE Asia. The view of Japan in SE Asia pre-Fukuda Doctrine was highly negative, but nearly 50 years after the doctrine’s outset, this view has changed. Though Japan-ASEAN alignment was initially driven by strategic imperatives during the Cold War, what becomes clear through the literature is that it has proven to be more resilient than observers anticipated it would be at its outset. This proposal suggests that the normative power of the Fukuda Doctrine, specifically its focus on heart-to-heart understanding and cultural engagement and exchange, has been a major factor in this outcome.

III. Argument: The Normative Power of Heart-to-Heart Diplomacy

This research proposal suggests that the Fukuda Doctrine represents a pivot point that improved Japan’s perception among the SE Asian public. This proposal is largely situated in the

³¹ Kei Koga, "Wedge Strategies, Japan-ASEAN Cooperation, and the Making of the EAS: Implications for Indo-Pacific Institutionalization," in *The Courteous Power: Japan and Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific Era*, ed. John D. Ciorciari and Kiyoteru Tsutsui (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 81.

³² Koga, "Wedge Strategies, Japan-ASEAN Cooperation," 88-89.

³³ Koga, "Wedge Strategies, Japan-ASEAN Cooperation," 91.

constructivist school of IR theory, as it highlights the role of evolving norms in shaping state relationships and emphasizes the normative power of cultural exchange. To expand on this point, it will specifically argue the popularity of Japanese cultural exports in the region and growing cultural exchange between Japan and SE Asia is a result of the doctrine's emphasis on "heart-to-heart" relationships, and has proven to be a meaningful variable that has shifted perception of Japan in SE Asia positively. Japanese economic investment in SE Asia is perceived positively by most SE Asians today, but it is not the causal variable. Two examples highlight why this is the case: first, Japanese investment in SE Asia preceded the Fukuda Doctrine, and perceptions of Japan in SE Asia between 1945-1977 were largely negative. Second, Japanese investment in NE Asia has also been substantial, yet public perception of Japan in China and SK remains negative. A salient realist counter-argument is that this exchange would not be possible in the first place if Japan and the original ASEAN member nations had not aligned on matters of security, not to mention that Japan-ASEAN political engagement today is still broadly based on political alignment and security incentives, as Koga highlights in his piece on wedge strategies and the EAS. This proposal suggests the realist doctrine has merit but is incomplete by highlighting the crucial role that the Fukuda Doctrine has played in reshaping norms through cultural exchange. Initially, Japan and ASEAN were an odd couple. Given the widespread animosity toward Japan in SE Asia around the time of the Fukuda Doctrine, the decision for the two actors to work together was steeped in Cold War logic—it was an alliance of convenience. Because of this, scholars at the time, like Haddad, saw it as unlikely to last. This proposal argues that the reason why Japan is *still* politically aligned with many ASEAN member states is the genuine heart-to-heart understanding and cultural exchange that the Fukuda Doctrine promoted. This created a virtuous cycle, wherein improving public opinion toward Japan provides little

reason for political friction and enables easy political alignment. The converse can be observed in China, where widespread animosity against Japan amongst the public can influence the Chinese government's stance against Japan. This argument contests the traditional liberal argument that increased free trade and economic interdependence between two states reduce the amount of political tension between them. As highlighted in the literature, early Japanese investment in SE Asia may have even exacerbated political tensions, as the former imperial power was perceived as an "economic animal." This highlights the normative importance of war memory in state relationships as well—the reason why increased economic interconnectedness was perceived negatively was because of Japan's past in the region. This is an important variable that liberal IR theory is largely unconcerned with, but which was only able to start being mitigated as Japan began its effort via the Fukuda Doctrine to build trust through heart-to-heart engagement.

IV. Research Design

The focus of this research project will be the development of Japan's political relationships and perception in SE and NE Asia from 1977 to the present. Insofar as public perception of Japan is concerned, quantitative data from primary sources (surveys and government documentation) will be the measurement. This will include survey data on public opinion of Japan as it relates to its economic investment, its cultural products, and its role as a military power in the region. This section will also include data on Japanese government-led cultural exchange initiatives, aid packages, and investment expenditures. As outlined in the argument of this proposal, this project hypothesizes that cultural exchange—people-to-people relationships—is the significant driver of goodwill, not economic investment, but all the data

must be collected to test this theory and see where the two may interact. Combined with information on public perception, information on government policy will illuminate why the Fukuda Doctrine has produced positive outcomes in SE Asia. The evolution of Japan's high-level political relationships, on the other hand, will be analyzed through qualitative sources, using a combination of primary and secondary sources—this project will focus on stated Japanese policy, as well as communication between Japan and ASEAN, Japan and its neighbors in SE Asia, Japan and China, and Japan and SK. This data is the most representative of high-level Japanese policy and indicates the general direction of government initiative in the two broad regions. Primary sources—such as meeting transcripts and government documentation—will be relied upon, while secondary sources—such as officials or parties with close knowledge of Japanese decision-making summarizing a particular meeting—will be included to supplement any gaps in the record of primary sources.

V. Conclusion

Preliminary findings suggest that the Japan-SE Asia case from 1977-present shows that wartime memory does not present an insurmountable hurdle towards reconciliation, while simultaneously highlighting that any attempt to overcome deep distrust between nations based on historical misgivings must be rooted in a comprehensive and consistent approach which seeks to reassure the aggrieved party tangibly through a variety of channels—this proposal highlighting cultural exchange as a primary variable in improving goodwill. Equally interesting is the impact that high-level policy (like Japanese government-led cultural initiatives) can have on public perception, and vice versa—how public perception can shape government attitudes (as exemplified through the Japan-China example). Though analyzing Japan's policy approach to SE

Asia is useful for a comparative approach, this research may be limited in that it does not focus on the specific historical misgivings of each aggrieved party. A more wide-ranging study that evaluates Japan's specific histories in NE Asia may find that the issue of war memory is more difficult to resolve via a pathway like the Fukuda doctrine in NE Asia. One important question to develop further on this front is what differentiates China and SK on this issue. This proposal, insofar as it is focused on NE Asia, focuses mostly on the China-Japan relationship while noting that negative perception is also widespread in Korea SK—but in future research, including more detailed information about SK may help deepen our understanding of the NE Asian region, especially since public opinion against Japan is beginning to soften in SK. To further strengthen this argument, it may also be prudent to integrate more realist literature on the China-Japan bilateral relationship. As highlighted in the introduction to this paper, China's perception of Japan continues to deteriorate, and the relationship has changed over time as China has risen in economic and military might and Japan has been reduced to a middle power, producing an asymmetric relationship between two powerful states. From a realist perspective, negative feelings between China and Japan may be rooted in material or security concerns, with disputes over historical memory justifying animosity.

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