National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

Powers and Perceptions in the Asia-Pacific Region:

Realist Constructivism and the Geopolitical Struggles of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China

PhD Thesis

Scientific Coordinator: University Professor ADRIAN POP, PhD

PhD Candidate: SADOVSCHI ARMAND

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Introduction

Powers and Perceptions in the Asia-Pacific Region examines how China's rise is reshaping relationships and strategic dynamics across East and Southeast Asia. This PhD argues that neither traditional realism nor pure constructivism can fully explain the interplay of material power and cultural-ideational forces. It adopts a realist-constructivist framework[1] that combines realism's focus on power, security, and the logic of tribalism, with constructivism's attention to rules, norms, institutions, and the logic of appropriateness. This power–culture nexus shows that in the Asia-Pacific, material power transitions are inseparable from intersubjective perceptions and identity narratives, making the management of historical and cultural perceptions as important to stability as the management of military capabilities.

The theoretical chapter of this PhD thesis synthesizes the ontological dimension of classical realism with a constructivist methodology for analyzing discourse and identity. This approach incorporates non-state actors and ideational forces such as nationalist movements, protestors, and collective memory into the analysis of international outcomes while retaining attention to material power asymmetries.[2] A central theme is path dependence, where historically rooted structures and narratives create enduring legacies that channel present policy choices.[3] Perceptions of past injustice, such as Japan's colonialism in Korea or China's "Century of Humiliation," are not peripheral but constitutive of national identities and threat perceptions today. These perceptions can sustain a cycle of violence in which identity-driven mistrust and power competition reinforce one another.

Against this theoretical backdrop, we present three detailed case studies.[4] Each begins with the key questions and literature, traces the historical narrative of identity formation and trauma, analyzes how China's rise has influenced the actors' strategies, and concludes by linking the

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[1] J. Samuel Barkin. 2003. "Realist Constructivism." *International Studies Review,* Volume 5, Issue 3: 325–342.

[2] J. Samuel Barkin, Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, Daniel H Nexon, Jennifer Sterling-Folker, Janice Bially Mattern, and Richard Ned Lebow. 2004. "Bridging the gap: Toward a realist-constructivist dialogue." *International Studies Review,* Volume 6, Issue 2: 337–352.

[3] Georg Schreyögg and Jörg Sydow. 2010. "Understanding Institutional and Organizational Path Dependencies." In Jörg Sydow and Georg Schreyögg (Eds.), *The Hidden Dynamics of Path Dependence*, 3–12. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

[4] (ed) J. Samuel Barkin. 2020. *The Social Construction of State Power. Applying Realist Constructivism*, Bristol: Bristol University Press.

findings to broader Asia-Pacific dynamics. The case studies reveal the geopolitical implications of China's ascent: the strained Japan–South Korea relationship, Taiwan's contested status, and postcolonial Hong Kong's upheavals. Each is examined in the context of China's growing influence and the evolving U.S.–China rivalry. These cases show how China's rise pressures regional actors to adjust their foreign policies and alliances, while historical grievances and identity narratives shape their responses. By connecting local dynamics to broader Asia-Pacific power shifts, we argue that these flashpoints form the central pillar for understanding where and why a potential conflict involving China and the United States might erupt. From Northeast Asian disputes to the Taiwan Strait and Hong Kong's fate, the analysis demonstrates that strategic behavior, alliance choices, and diplomatic tensions in the region are driven by both power calculations and contested understandings of history, sovereignty, and legitimacy.

Realist Constructivism, Path Dependence, and Methods as Affordances

Origins and Theoretical Positioning of Realist Constructivism

Realist constructivism synthesizes core insights from classical realism and constructivism. First articulated by J. Samuel Barkin, it argues that realism and constructivism, often portrayed as opposites, are compatible and complementary when properly understood.[5] In this view, realism is the study of power in international politics and constructivism is the study of ideas. This challenges the conventional wisdom that realism is purely materialist and rationalist while constructivism is idealist and intersubjective. Barkin shows that classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau never denied the role of ideas and norms and that Morgenthau originally defined International Relations as the study of power. Familiar add ons to realism, such as anarchy, state egoism, or rational actor assumptions, are later simplifications facilitated by the behavioral revolution in political science rather than defining principles. Constructivism likewise need not be a standalone paradigm about

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[5] J. Samuel Barkin. 2010. *Realist Constructivism. Rethinking International Relations Theory.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

how politics works, and can be approached as an analytical stance or epistemology focused on how social reality is constructed.

We treat realism as the study of power while clarifying that power is instrumental, the capacity to coerce or persuade, with both material and ideational elements. We integrate Nye's distinctions among hard, soft, and smart power[6] and link morality to power, since agency is socially formed and bounded; actors can act, yet not choose what they want. Political behavior emerges from intersubjective interactions between identity and material and nonmaterial constraints; without this, power becomes a passive tool appended to reductionist accounts of national interest. We examine both instrumental and distributive dimensions of power, in relative and absolute terms, and treat instrumental and relational understandings as compatible.

Relational analysis reveals patterned authority in families and patriarchal orders, the influence of multinational corporations over states, and civic mobilization that reshapes identity and meanings of sovereignty. Power is socially constructed and context dependent, yet not only that: even military capabilities are interpreted and often symbolic or deterrent, and their effectiveness remains uncertain; the abstract concept mediates social interaction while its manifestations vary by context. Outcomes are not determined by brute force alone, but all interactions are structured by power relations that often operate beneath awareness and have biological and behavioral analogues. We argue that realist constructivism therefore shares with liberal constructivism an interest in social construction while insisting more strongly on the enduring, frequently coercive dimensions of power on a sober view of human nature.

Epistemological and Ontological Foundations

The chapter positions realist constructivism between Patrick Thaddeus Jackson's analyticism and reflexivity.[7] It adopts a mind-world monist ontology together with a phenomenalist epistemology. This rejects a strict separation between the knowing subject and the social world and prioritizes

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[6] Joseph S. Nye. 2015. *Is the American Century Over?* Cambridge: Polity.
[7] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson. 2011. *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics*. New York: Routledge.

observable social meanings over unobservable depths. Realist constructivism is not neopositivist. Rather, it aligns with analyticism, inspired by Max Weber and hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophy, which prizes logical coherence and conceptual clarity. Concepts such as power, nationalism, national interest, civilization, entrenched social structures, or group identity function as ideal types that organize understanding rather than immutable essences.

At the same time the approach incorporates reflexivity (specific to Critical Theory in IR). Scholars and political actors are part of the world they study, and knowledge is shaped by perspective and context. The chapter rejects both naive objectivism, which treats facts as wholly independent of interpretation, and radical relativism, which treats them as nothing but constructions. Facts in international politics are socially interpreted yet have real consequences and require serious empirical analysis. Knowledge is understood as successive, partial interpretations rather than a linear accumulation of final truths. This stance echoes pragmatic arguments that theories are valuable because they organize experience in useful ways rather than because they reveal absolute truth.[8]

Between Neopositivism, Critical Realism, and Interpretivism

Realist constructivism occupies a pragmatic alternative between three major metatheoretical traditions. From neopositivism, it shares the commitment to systematic inquiry and empirical grounding, but it rejects the search for timeless, law-like generalizations, the need of falsifiability, or the privileging of forecast as the hallmark of scientific validity. From critical realism, it borrows an interest in abstract causal explanation, yet it departs from the assumption of a separate, underlying reality knowable only through posited causal mechanisms, focusing instead on patterns and meanings accessible through historical and social analysis. From interpretivism, it draws the sensitivity to identity, culture, and reflexivity, while resisting the reduction of material events to discourse alone.

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[8] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson. 2024. *Facts and Explanations in International Studies...and Beyond*. London: Routledge.

Realist constructivism treats theory as a tool for producing historically situated, culturally aware explanations that remain empirically accountable. This results in an approach that is interpretively open yet methodologically disciplined, aiming to generate coherent accounts that integrate meaning with the concrete realities of international politics.

Methodological Pluralism and Methods as Affordances

A central contribution is methodological pluralism and the decoupling of theory from method. The chapter criticizes the conventional pairing of particular methods with particular schools as an artificial constraint. Ontological or normative commitments do not mechanically dictate method choice. Following Barkin, it introduces the notion of affordances, meaning the range of questions a theory or method can address, the kinds of evidence it can mobilize, and the explanations it can generate, together with its limits.[9] A single theory can have multiple affordances, and researchers can combine tools across traditions if the combination is logically consistent and suited to the question.[10] For example, a realist lens on power can be coherently paired with discourse analysis when the aim is to examine how power and ideas interact in rhetoric.

This pluralism accompanies a critique of paradigm thinking in IR. It notes that theoretical change in IR is gradual, cultural, historical, and sociological and that scholars often adjust auxiliary assumptions rather than abandon cores.[11] Seeing traditions as ideal types supports a post paradigmatic, toolbox approach in which methods are selected for their affordances rather than for allegiance to a camp.

The study triangulates secondary histories with a broad corpus of primary sources, including treaties, military plans, declassified diplomatic transcripts, interviews with Korean comfort women, and official economic and demographic statistics. Media analysis balances leading Western outlets

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[9] J. Samuel Barkin and Laura Sjoberg. 2019. *International Relations' Last Synthesis?: Decoupling Constructivist and Critical Approaches.* New York: Oxford University Press.

[10] J. Samuel Barkin and Laura Sjoberg. 2017. *Interpretive Quantification: Methodological Explorations for Critical and Constructivist IR.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

[11] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon. 2009. "Paradigmatic Faults in International-Relations Theory." *International Studies Quarterly,* Volume 53, Issue 4: 907-930.

with non-Western sources and employs constructivist discourse analysis to trace how identical events are framed differently across contexts. Domestic politics are examined without forcing a single model, using realist constructivism to link institutional design and informal practices to foreign policy, supported by qualitative case work on scandals and policies and by indices such as Human Security, Human Development, Corruption, Quality of Life, and Democracy. Perceptions are assessed through opinion polls, official documents, social media forums, and cultural artifacts, with attention to speech acts by state and non-state actors.

Soft power is evaluated via Nye's concepts, the Soft Power 3.0 Index, survey data, cultural reach, tourism and student exchanges, and patterns of investment and trade. Military capability is treated as both aggregate capacity and theater-specific effectiveness, using The Composite Index of National Capability, State Power and influence indices, Global Firepower, war-gaming studies, and doctrinal and logistical factors. Economic analysis takes a central place through long-run, GDP related indicators, economic growth, inflation-adjusted indicators of output, inequality of capital and income, human capital, education related statistics, sectoral structure, trade dependence, supply chains, and debt, drawing on major international databases. The analysis uses constructivist text methods to trace how states have drawn lessons from the war in Ukraine, formed threat perceptions, identified enemies and potential allies, projected future power distributions, and devised responses to existential risks. War-gaming studies of a hypothetical China–U.S. conflict, together with official documents and leaders' speech acts, clarify views on military balances, logistics, and the policy–strategy link. These findings are contextualized with historical narrative and economic indicators to assess the rationale for arms races and the costs and benefits of military engagement.

The overarching conclusion is methodological pragmatism: realist constructivism is best operationalized through mixed methods that connect material and ideational power to shifting perceptions.

Distinctiveness and Contributions of Realist Constructivism

Theoretically, realist constructivism integrates realism's concern with power and security with constructivism's focus on ideas and norms, yielding a richer ontology in which behavior reflects the interplay of material capabilities and social meaning. It rejects paradigm silos and demonstrates the gains from cross fertilizing traditions rather than segregating them.

Methodologically, the language of methods as affordances reframes methods as adaptable instruments rather than proprietary techniques. It enables coherent multi method and multi theory designs grounded in clear philosophical commitments and tailored to specific questions. This shifts debate from abstract paradigm contests to practical research design focused on explanatory payoff.

Guided by the link between perception and behavior, we can analyze how political actors imagine and project futures, not to predict outcomes but to explain strategic reasoning under uncertainty. Such projections feed directly into present policy; for example, scenarios of a Taiwan contingency shape the defense postures of China, the United States, Taiwan, and Japan. The approach resembles game theory yet incorporates the constitutive roles of perception, historical context, and iterative adaptation, seeking to reconstruct the strategic landscape as actors themselves conceive it. Read as a counterfactual inquiry in the analyticist tradition, it uses contemporaneous future-oriented assessments to illuminate past behavior, as when U.S. policymakers adopted the pivot to Asia in the early 2010s partly in response to 2030–2040 forecasts of China's rise despite then-limited Chinese capabilities.

Its originality lies in a reflexive and analytically rigorous recombination of existing theories and methods. It invites scholars to scrutinize assumptions while producing clear explanations, to pursue rigor without requiring prediction, and to be critical without abandoning empirics. Positioned between the extremes of neopositivism and poststructuralism, realist constructivism offers a pragmatic and philosophically grounded path for understanding world politics. At the same time, it creates a bridge toward a more pluralistic theory of International Relations and enables a richer understanding of regions such as the Asia Pacific, one that does not merely reapply rigid Western concepts to culturally diverse and historically distinct societies.

I - Japan-South Korea relations in the context of the rise of China

Japan and South Korea, both liberal democracies and U.S. allies in Northeast Asia, face a common strategic challenge from China's growing power and North Korea's threats. At first glance, these shared concerns might be expected to foster close cooperation in a united front with the United States in the Asia-Pacific. Washington has repeatedly urged trilateral coordination between Tokyo and Seoul to counterbalance Beijing's assertiveness. Yet, as this analysis shows, despite deep economic interdependence and shared cultural values, cooperation between Japan and South Korea has often proved elusive and has even regressed in recent years. The underlying cause lies in enduring historical antagonisms and identity-based grievances that have outweighed purely strategic considerations.

The legacy of Japan's colonial rule over Korea (1910–1945) remains at the heart of this tension. South Korea's national identity was partly forged in opposition to Japanese imperialism, and historical memory is actively maintained through education, commemorations, and public discourse. Disputes over the treatment of Korean forced laborers and "comfort women" during the colonial period, as well as disagreements over wartime apologies and reparations, continue to inflame political relations. In Seoul's prevailing narrative, Korea is a victim-turned-victor over Japanese oppression, and any sign of Japanese remilitarization or historical revisionism is perceived as a direct challenge to national dignity. Japan, for its part, has cultivated a postwar identity as a pacifist nation, yet elements within its conservative leadership have sought to normalize the country's military posture and have occasionally appeared ambiguous in addressing Imperial Japan's wrongdoings. The result is a set of mutually exclusive historical narratives that function as entrenched "intersubjective truths," deeply embedded in public opinion and elite discourse, constraining political flexibility and making compromise politically costly. This antagonism manifests in recurring diplomatic disputes, retaliatory trade measures, and lapses in security cooperation even in the face of shared external threats.

China has skillfully leveraged this rift. As its power has grown, Beijing has occasionally exploited divisions between Tokyo and Seoul through a strategy of selective engagement and pressure. It has cultivated strong economic ties with South Korea while urging it to distance itself from Japan and U.S.-led missile defense plans. The 2016–2017 dispute over the deployment of the U.S.

THAAD anti-missile system to South Korea illustrates this dynamic. Viewing THAAD as a threat to its own security, China responded with economic sanctions against Seoul. In turn, the Moon Jae-in administration adopted the "Three Noes" policy: no additional THAAD deployments, no participation in a U.S.-led regional missile defense network, and no trilateral military alliance with the U.S. and Japan. This episode highlights how Seoul's foreign policy involved careful hedging, balancing its U.S. security commitments with efforts to ease Chinese concerns. While these concessions reduced tensions with Beijing in the short term, they also exposed the limits of South Korea's willingness to deepen formal security integration with Japan, frustrating Washington's strategic goals.

Japan has responded to China's military rise, including its naval expansion into the East China Sea, by moving in the opposite direction: toward a more assertive defense posture and stronger reliance on the United States. While these moves are rational from a realist perspective, in Seoul they often fuel suspicions of revived militarism. Diplomatic tensions between Japan and South Korea peaked between 2019 and 2023, marked by a trade war, the near-collapse of an intelligence-sharing pact, and heightened public hostility, despite simultaneous North Korean missile tests and Chinese assertiveness.

Recent political shifts have brought tentative openings. Since 2022, President Yoon Suk-yeol has made unprecedented efforts to repair relations with Japan and align more closely with the United States. His administration has proposed solutions to historic disputes, such as creating a fund to compensate forced labor victims without direct Japanese payments, aiming to break the cycle of animosity and consolidate a trilateral security front. These initiatives, however, have provoked strong domestic opposition in South Korea, where many view them as undermining historical justice. This illustrates a recurring theme of this research: domestic identity politics often constrain foreign policy choices, even when strategic conditions favor closer cooperation.

These historical grievances play out in domestic political arenas, where they become powerful tools in partisan competition. In South Korea, progressive and conservative parties have long used Japan policy to mobilize their respective bases, with progressives often stressing historical justice and reconciliation with North Korea, and conservatives emphasizing cooperation with Japan while also showing a greater inclination toward economic engagement with China. In Japan,

conservative leaders have at times leveraged nationalist sentiment to justify defense normalization, while progressive forces caution against moves that could be seen as militaristic. This domestic politicization makes compromise fragile: leaders risk backlash at home if they appear to yield on matters tied to national memory.

After World War II, the United States sought stability in East Asia by working through existing power structures rather than dismantling them. In both Japan and South Korea, this meant rehabilitating or retaining segments of the pre-war elites. In Japan, conservative political networks with roots in the prewar order were preserved, enabling the emergence of a dominant-party system under the Liberal Democratic Party that has shaped politics for most of the postwar era. In South Korea, U.S. support for leaders with strong anti-communist credentials facilitated the emergence of a concentrated economic and political elite. Most of these leaders had been raised in Imperial Japan and were socialized within that context. Over time, this evolved into a plutocratic system anchored in the chaebol conglomerates, whose leadership often traced personal or familial ties to those who had collaborated with colonial Japan. While both systems operated within democratic systems, these entrenched elites maintained disproportionate influence over policy and economic development, reinforcing hierarchical structures and, in South Korea's case, feeding public perceptions that the postwar order preserved colonial-era inequalities. This legacy complicates Japan–South Korea relations, as historical grievances are not only directed at the wartime past but also at the elites seen as its beneficiaries.

Shinzo Abe played a central role in redefining Japan's foreign policy in the 21st century, pushing it beyond its postwar pacifist constraints toward a more proactive regional and global posture. Building on his "Abe Doctrine," he promoted the concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" as a strategic structure to counterbalance China's rise and to deepen Japan's security and economic engagement with like-minded democracies. Abe was a key architect in revitalizing the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the United States, Australia, and India, seeing it as both a platform for strategic coordination and a symbol of shared commitment to maritime security, rule of law, and freedom of navigation.

He also played a decisive role in rescuing the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) after the U.S. withdrawal in 2017, leading negotiations that produced the Comprehensive and Progressive

Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), ensuring Japan's leadership in setting high-standard trade rules in the Asia-Pacific. His economic diplomacy extended to the EU, culminating in the EU–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement and the EU–Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement, which together deepened transcontinental trade, political cooperation, and shared commitment to multilateralism. Abe even expanded Japan's security dialogue with NATO, framing Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific stability as interconnected, and engaging European partners in joint naval exercises and defense technology cooperation.

Under his leadership, Japan expanded defense budgets, relaxed constitutional interpretations to allow for collective self-defense, and pursued high-profile infrastructure and connectivity projects in Southeast Asia and beyond as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, Abe's legacy was complicated by unresolved historical disputes and his personal lineage: as the grandson of former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, a wartime cabinet member later rehabilitated under U.S. occupation, Abe was often portrayed in South Korea and China as a political heir to Japan's pre-1945 imperial elite. This perception, combined with his visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and perceived revisionist statements, reinforced suspicions that his strategic activism masked nationalist ambitions. As a result, while Abe elevated Japan's profile as a regional and global leader, he also deepened mistrust in Beijing and Seoul, complicating trilateral cooperation under the U.S. alliance.

Post-Abe politics in Japan may have brought some stylistic changes in leadership, but the core elements of his foreign and security policy have endured. Japan has accelerated the militarization of the Nansei (Okinawa) island chain, deploying missile units and enhancing surveillance capabilities to deter Chinese advances in the East China Sea and around the Senkaku Islands. Most notably, Japan has shifted its military doctrine from an exclusively defensive stance to one that includes the capability for preemptive strikes against missile launch sites, aiming to make any war with China prohibitively costly for Beijing. This evolution is accompanied by expanded cooperation with Taiwan, the Philippines, and Australia, ranging from high-level political signaling to contingency planning and joint exercises with partners, reinforcing Japan's role as a frontline state in any potential Taiwan crisis.

Strategically, the divergence in security perceptions further complicates reconciliation. Japan has intensified its diplomatic outreach, expanded military capabilities, and strengthened alignment

with the United States, framing the China–Russia–North Korea nexus as an encirclement threat requiring a robust and forward-leaning posture. South Korea, while concerned about these same actors, continues to prioritize the North Korean threat above broader geopolitical encirclement, making its strategic calculus more selective and ambivalent toward full alignment with Japan's regional vision. This gap in prioritization reinforces mistrust, as each side perceives the other as insufficiently attuned to its core security concerns.

In the broader Asia-Pacific context, the Japan–South Korea impasse represents a critical weak point in U.S. regional strategy. The inability of these two key allies to reconcile limits the formation of a cohesive democratic coalition to counter China's influence. Washington has acted as a mediator, yet results have been modest. Beijing benefits from the absence of a unified bloc, engaging with Tokyo and Seoul separately to maximize its leverage. Unless Japan and South Korea can overcome historical mistrust and build sustainable trust, efforts to integrate them fully into U.S.-led initiatives such as the "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy or the Quad will remain constrained. This case study ultimately demonstrates how deeply embedded perceptions of history, identity, and otherness can obstruct pragmatic security cooperation, even in the face of shared strategic threats.

II - State identity, sovereignty, and rising democracies. The case of Taiwan

Taiwan is arguably the most volatile flashpoint in the Asia-Pacific, sitting at the intersection of sovereignty disputes, democratic self-determination, and great-power rivalry. This case study is framed around two central questions: why unification remains a non-negotiable strategic objective for the People's Republic of China, and how Taiwan's identity and political trajectory have evolved in response to China's rise. The analysis combines a historical account of identity formation with an assessment of shifting regional power dynamics and Taiwan's growing geopolitical significance.

From Beijing's perspective, Taiwan is inseparable from Chinese national identity and the legitimacy of the Communist Party. The unresolved status of the island is cast as a remnant of the "Century of Humiliation" when the Western powers and Japan carved away Chinese territory.

Ceded to Japan in 1895, Taiwan's return is portrayed as an historic mission to restore China's unity and erase the last vestiges of colonial-era shame. Under Xi Jinping, this narrative has been amplified through a nationalism that prioritizes restoring China's greatness and rejecting any foreign interference. Beijing has never renounced the use of force to achieve unification, framing the matter as an internal sovereignty issue. Taiwan's democratization, distinct political identity, alternative Chineseness, are perceived as direct challenges to this narrative, and as examples of separatism aided by U.S. and Japanese interference. Strategically, Taiwan's location in the first island chain makes it a critical asset: its capture would allow China to project power deep into the Pacific, while its alignment with the U.S. functions as a barrier to Chinese naval expansion.

Before the competing narratives of Communist and Nationalist China took shape, a historical myth had already been cultivated that Taiwan was always an inseparable part of China. In reality, the island's incorporation into Chinese imperial rule was limited and intermittent, with significant periods of autonomy and foreign control. However, both the late Qing dynasty and later Chinese regimes retrospectively projected an unbroken historical claim to strengthen sovereignty arguments.

Taiwan's contemporary identity was shaped not only by its own democratization and local cultural revival but also by the competing nation-building projects of Communist China and Nationalist China. After 1949, the Kuomintang government transplanted to Taiwan sought to legitimize its rule by claiming to be the sole representative of all China, promoting a pan-Chinese identity rooted in anti-Communism and the eventual goal of "recovering the mainland." This narrative, reinforced through education, propaganda, and symbols such as the national flag and anthem, coexisted uneasily with local traditions and memories of Japanese colonial rule.

The divide between Waishengren (post-1945 mainland Chinese migrants and their descendants) and Benshengren (pre-1945 native Taiwanese populations) further shaped how these historical experiences were remembered and interpreted. Japan's colonial rule (1895–1945) left a complex legacy in Taiwan, shaping its infrastructure, education, and modernization, and fostering among many Benshengren a relatively favorable historical memory that contrasted with later Kuomintang policies. This legacy is also reflected in the mutual affinity between Taiwan and Japan today, as well as in a sense of moral responsibility on Japan's part to support its former colony.

Across the Taiwan Strait, the People's Republic of China constructed its own narrative in which Taiwan was an inseparable part of the Chinese homeland, lost due to civil war and foreign interference. For Beijing, this claim became central to national rejuvenation and the legitimacy of the Communist Party. Over time, the dissonance between these two state-driven identities and the lived experience of Taiwanese society created a political space in which a distinctly Taiwanese identity could emerge, ultimately challenging both the Nationalist and Communist visions of the island's place in the Chinese nation.

The island transitioned to a vibrant democracy by the 1990s, fostering a growing sense of distinct Taiwanese identity, especially among younger generations with no direct ties to the mainland. Path-dependent developments were central to this shift: the lifting of martial law in the 1980s, President Lee Teng-hui's (himself a determined pro-Japanese figure) promotion of local history, and the rise of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) advocating self-determination. The 2014 Sunflower Movement, in which students and activists blocked a trade deal with China, marked a turning point. It energized civil society, heightened skepticism toward Beijing, and clarified Taiwan's political spectrum between those pushing for formal independence and those supporting indefinite de facto autonomy. While some moderates historically envisioned eventual accommodation with Beijing, this position has eroded sharply in recent years.

After the Sunflower Movement, Taiwan's identity consolidated around a civic and democratic core that is increasingly distinct from a China-centered narrative. Two orientations structure the debate. Taidu favors de jure independence and an explicitly Taiwanese national identity, treats the Republic of China framework as a provisional legacy of colonial rule, and seeks formal international recognition when costs are acceptable. Huadu accepts the Republic of China on Taiwan as a sovereign political community, affirms democratic self government and the status quo, and prioritizes security and international space without a formal independence declaration. Both positions reject Beijing's formula for unification, both place democracy and de facto sovereignty at the center of legitimacy, and both have been reinforced by the erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy and by rising threat perceptions. The practical effect is a broad societal consensus to defend Taiwan's separate political order while differing over timing, symbolism, and the legal pathway to statehood.

This raises the question of who disrupted the previous balance. From Taipei's perspective, the status quo, defined as peaceful coexistence without formal independence or unification, was undermined primarily by Beijing's growing military pressure, diplomatic isolation campaigns, and the dismantling of Hong Kong's autonomy, which invalidated China's promised narrative for peaceful integration. From Beijing's view, it was Taiwan, especially under DPP leadership, that abandoned the spirit of the 1992 Consensus and moved steadily toward a separate national identity, aided by U.S. arms sales and high-level visits. Washington's increasingly open support for Taiwan, including congressional delegations and expanded military cooperation, further convinced Beijing that the United States was hollowing out the One China policy. In reality, both sides progressively shifted their positions: Beijing tightened coercion while Taipei deepened informal sovereignty, each claiming to be responding defensively to the other's provocations. This mutual attribution of blame hardened mistrust and reduced the space for diplomatic ambiguity.

This study situates the breakdown of the Taiwan status quo within a longer historical continuum of balance management in U.S.–China relations. The earlier rapprochement under Nixon and Kissinger in the 1970s was built on a delicate strategic ambiguity: the United States acknowledged Beijing's One China position while maintaining unofficial ties with Taipei, a compromise designed to align against the Soviet Union without foreclosing Taiwan's autonomy. Although Taiwan was often presented by the U.S. as a secondary matter compared to issues such as the Vietnam War, it was in fact the essential condition of rapprochement, arguably more central to Beijing than any other point on the agenda. Over the decades, Washington, benefiting from its superior power position, gradually adjusted its interpretation of the One China policy in ways that edged away from the original understanding, while still framing these moves as consistent with the earlier accord. That balance, sustained for decades, relied on mutual restraint in both rhetoric and military action. By tracing contemporary tensions back to this diplomatic architecture, the analysis shows how incremental departures from the original terms eroded the equilibrium. Today's contest over Taiwan is therefore not an isolated flashpoint but the unraveling of a carefully engineered Cold War settlement, reshaped by shifting power asymmetries, hardened identities, and a more zero-sum geopolitical environment.

Events beyond Taiwan have reinforced this shift. The erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy following the 2019–2020 protests undermined any belief in Beijing's "One Country, Two Systems" formula.

Likewise, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine heightened fears that authoritarian powers might use force to absorb smaller neighbors. By the early 2020s, public consensus in Taiwan had consolidated around maintaining the status quo of de facto independence, backed by strong defensive preparations, with only a small minority supporting eventual unification.

Taiwan's strategic response has combined deterrence with deepening ties to other democracies. The United States remains its principal security partner, supplying arms and political backing, but Japan, Australia, and several European states have also expanded unofficial cooperation. Taiwan's dominance in advanced semiconductor manufacturing, particularly through TSMC, has become a critical factor in global supply chains, creating what analysts call a "silicon shield." The sector's strategic importance has been magnified by the U.S.–China technology competition, as Washington imposes export controls to limit China's access to cutting-edge chips and Beijing seeks to close the gap. This economic dimension has intertwined with the military one, as the U.S. and its allies bolster their presence in the first island chain. Recent agreements granting the U.S. access to Philippine bases near Taiwan, along with Japan–Philippines joint exercises, are aimed at enhancing readiness for a potential Taiwan crisis. Taiwan's own defense strategy now emphasizes asymmetric capabilities to make any invasion prohibitively costly.

The Taiwan issue also encapsulates a fundamental tension in international norms: the clash between sovereignty and self-determination. China insists that sovereignty demands other states refrain from recognizing or supporting Taiwanese independence. Most countries observe a "One China" policy, yet Taiwan's democratic achievements and public will to determine its future garner widespread sympathy in the democratic world. This produces a deliberately ambiguous status quo in which Taiwan enjoys substantive, though unofficial, support without formal recognition, reflecting the balance between realist caution and liberal ideals.

The chapter concludes that Taiwan's future will hinge not only on hard power calculations, such as whether China can take the island and whether the U.S. and its partners can defend it, but also on perceptions and identity. Beijing's urgency will be influenced by whether it believes time favors unification or whether Taiwan's political trajectory is drifting irreversibly away from Chinese identity. In this sense, Taiwan is neither merely a pawn of great powers nor solely a moral cause.

It is a central arena where material capabilities and identity narratives collide, making it one of the defining tests of stability in the Asia-Pacific.

III - Postcolonial Hong Kong. The birth of a nation

Hong Kong offers a different yet complementary case to Taiwan. It is a city that transitioned from colonial rule to semi-autonomous status under Chinese sovereignty, and in recent years became a frontline in the contest between liberal-democratic values and authoritarian retrenchment. This chapter examines two core questions: why Beijing decided to dismantle Hong Kong's promised autonomy, and how Hong Kong's local identity has evolved through the resulting turmoil. The analysis draws on postcolonial theory and critical perspectives alongside a realist constructivist approach, emphasizing the unique historical context of Hong Kong as a former British colony handed back to China in 1997 under the "One Country, Two Systems" model.

Hong Kong's modern identity was shaped by more than 150 years of British colonial rule. Under the British, the city developed a distinct civic culture marked by rule of law, a capitalist free-market ethos, and partial Westernization, but also entrenched inequality and an apolitical public sphere. When sovereignty transferred to China in 1997, Beijing pledged to preserve Hong Kong's separate system and freedoms for 50 years. However, this transitional identity as a Chinese territory with British-inherited institutions contained inherent contradictions. To Beijing, the handover represented the restoration of sovereignty, so Chinese officials interpreted the Basic Law and governance through a unitary, sovereigntist lens that prioritized order and loyalty to the motherland. Many Hongkongers, by contrast, understood "One Country, Two Systems" through a liberal lens, expecting gradual democratization, protection of civil liberties, and the retention of their way of life in line with universal norms. These divergent interpretations produced misaligned expectations. Beijing grew impatient with what it saw as a lack of patriotic integration, while many Hong Kong residents became increasingly resentful of perceived encroachments on promised autonomy.

In this study, the cooperation between China and Hong Kong's economic elites is interpreted as a path-dependent process that constrained the territory's democratic development after the 1997

handover. Building on colonial-era patterns in which a small business and financial elite mediated governance in exchange for protecting their economic interests, Beijing maintained and deepened this arrangement to secure political stability and align local policies with mainland priorities. This continuity in elite–state relations limited the scope for meaningful democratic reform, as economic power remained concentrated in actors whose interests were closely tied to the preservation of the post-handover political order.

The chapter traces the major flashpoints in this conflict. Protests erupted in the early 2000s and 2010s over national security legislation and democratic reform, but the defining moment was the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Triggered by Beijing's decision to restrict the method for electing Hong Kong's Chief Executive, the protests saw students and activists occupy city streets for 79 days demanding genuine universal suffrage. Although largely peaceful and idealistic, the movement failed to achieve its immediate objectives and Beijing stood firm. However, it fostered a stronger local identity, especially among youth, and planted the seeds of a localist sentiment that some framed as a form of nationhood. Critics on the far left dismissed the protests as elite-led nostalgia for colonial privilege, illustrating the diversity of narratives surrounding the movement. In reality, it combined genuine grassroots demands for democracy and social justice with concerns from elements of the business elite about maintaining stability.

The confrontation escalated dramatically in 2019–2020 with the Anti-Extradition Law protests, which began over a bill that would allow extraditions to mainland courts. These protests expanded into a mass resistance against Beijing's tightening control, at times turning violent. We examine why the movement shifted from peaceful marches to sustained street battles, citing police crackdowns, the failure of moderate methods, and the protesters' sense of existential desperation. Protesters portrayed their actions as self-defense of their freedoms, while Beijing framed the unrest as riots driven by foreign interference. In 2020, Beijing imposed a sweeping National Security Law that effectively ended Hong Kong's autonomy and criminalized most forms of dissent. From a realist perspective, the persistence of a quasi-liberal enclave within China had become a strategic liability. Chinese leaders feared that Hong Kong could serve as a base for foreign influence or inspire separatist sentiment in places like Taiwan or even mainland China, and therefore moved to reassert full control even at the cost of international backlash.

This study examines Hong Kong's national awakening through an analysis of protest dynamics, political discourse, and symbolic expressions of identity. It traces how the use of alternative flags, the singing of protest anthems, and the public rejection of official symbols became acts of resistance that redefined civic belonging. The analysis situates these practices within broader narratives of autonomy, democracy, cultural distinctiveness, and language, highlighting the prominence of Cantonese and English in street slogans, songs, and public discourse as opposed to Mainland Mandarin as the language of state authority. In this frame, linguistic choice functions as a boundary marker of community and a claim to self-rule. Collective action thus evolved from issue-based mobilization into a sustained assertion of a Hong Kong state identity as an alternative to the Westphalian model.

The impact on Hong Kong's identity was profound. After 2020, expressions of a pro-democratic or nationalist identity were largely suppressed through arrests, media closures, and changes to education. Paradoxically, the severity of these measures demonstrated that a distinct Hong Kong identity had indeed solidified during the years of relative freedom. We raise the question of whether this should be seen as failed integration, successful resistance, or a suppressed national awakening. The chapter leans toward the latter interpretation, pointing to the symbolism, cultural production, and polling data before the crackdown showing growing identification as "Hongkongers" rather than "Chinese," especially among youth. While open dissent has been curtailed, the tension between Hong Kong's liberal heritage and Beijing's authoritarian governance persists beneath the surface.

This study situates Beijing's approach to Hong Kong within the broader arc of China's domestic evolution: a period of relative liberalization and social openness in the 1990s, followed by a steady return to authoritarian governance in the 2000s, and, more recently, the emergence of totalitarian features such as pervasive surveillance, ideological enforcement, and the suppression of independent civil society. From this perspective, Hong Kong's liberal institutions, vibrant civil sphere, and culture of political dissent came to represent not merely a governance challenge but an existential threat to the mainland's tightening political order. The more the central leadership moved toward totalitarian control, the less tolerance it could afford for a semi-autonomous city whose freedoms stood as a living counterexample within the People's Republic of China.

China's rapid economic development has been a central pillar of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy, fostering a broad public acceptance of one-party rule. While most Chinese citizens do not actively seek liberal democracy, many desire a more relaxed political environment that would grant greater personal freedoms, allow for genuine local autonomy, and avoid dismantling local cultures in the name of a singular, imposed vision of Chinese unity. This tension between the Party's centralizing impulse and popular expectations for a less intrusive governance model shapes both domestic politics and the perceived threat posed by places like Hong Kong, where such freedoms have historically been more robust.

Hong Kong functions as an ontological threat to China because it embodies an alternative Chinese identity that is ethnically Chinese yet politically liberal and globally integrated, which contradicts the CCP's central narrative of unity under one-party rule. Its existence challenged the Party's claim that Chinese culture is inherently incompatible with liberal democracy or with the borrowing and reinvention of Western values. Left unresolved, this alternative identity risked inspiring similar demands within the mainland and reinforcing resistance in Taiwan. The CCP's decision to dismantle Hong Kong's autonomy thus reflected not only strategic concerns about sovereignty and foreign interference but also the imperative to preserve a singular, uncontested vision of Chinese national identity. More broadly, this reveals the deep interconnection between China's domestic social order and its external posture: stability is defined not merely in terms of territorial control or economic growth but in the ideological and identity conformity of its population. In this sense, the management of dissent and alternative identities inside China is inseparable from its behavior in the Asia-Pacific, making the domestic and foreign policy nexus a core determinant of regional order.

The regional and international consequences have been significant. The United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Japan, and Taiwan condemned Beijing's actions, imposed limited sanctions, and in some cases offered refugee pathways. However, no external power was willing to intervene directly in what China insists is an internal matter. This outcome illustrated the limits of liberal norms when set against the core interests of a major power. It also served as a warning to Taiwan, whose leaders frequently cite Hong Kong's fate as proof that Beijing's promises about preserving autonomy under Chinese rule cannot be trusted.

For the Asia-Pacific, Hong Kong's experience underscores China's determination to consolidate its regional power even at the expense of its international reputation and liberal norms. The case contributed to growing alignment among democracies that criticize Beijing's governance model, yet many Asian neighbors remained muted, prioritizing economic relations over political solidarity. Internally, Hong Kong is being fully integrated into China's political system, becoming a clear example of the CCP's red lines. We argue that Hong Kong's trajectory is critical for understanding China's domestic politics and nationalist narrative. It was a testing ground for how Beijing manages challenges to its sovereignty narrative, and the CCP's perceived success there may embolden its positions on other contested issues. At the same time, the economic and reputational costs of the crackdown, including talent flight and changes in supply chain strategies, show that China's internal political choices have broad ripple effects.

Geopolitical dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region and opportunities for further research

Path Dependence and the Politics of Constraint

Taiwan's sovereignty was performed rather than assumed; Hong Kong's resistance generated symbolic power that survived its immediate defeat; Japan–South Korea relations revealed how revived historical grievances can reshape alliances. These examples show that national strategy and regional order emerge from ongoing negotiation between tangible capabilities and self-perceptions.

Using a path dependence lens, we show how initial conditions and institutional legacies, from postwar treaties to Cold War alignments, lock regional actors into self-reinforcing trajectories. Combining realism, constructivism, and postcolonial insights, we layer multiple causalities rather than rely on single explanations. Power structures and social narratives constrain present choices, making seemingly irrational actions intelligible as identity-anchored, path-dependent strategies. Taiwan's dominance in semiconductors provides deterrent leverage but also vulnerability; Japanese colonialism left Taiwan with a distinct identity from China; U.S. occupation reforms set

Japan on a stable one-party course; South Korea's chaebol system fostered elite fragmentation; and Hong Kong, without formal nationhood, built symbolic and cultural capital.

Such cases reveal that norms like democracy, national interests, or self-determination are constructed and weaponized through historical narratives and power interests. Path dependence continues to shape the region's politics of constraint. These constraints arise less from historical events themselves than from how those events are remembered, reinterpreted, and weaponized for political ends. Political and economic elites recalibrate narratives as circumstances and power balances shift, but not in ways that would endanger their position. Socialization entrenches dominant ideas, making them difficult to overcome. Political institutions, the legal system, economic structures, patriarchal power structures, and unwritten norms governing behavior and aspiration reinforce this path dependence and contribute to a persistent lock in. Popular culture and mass media amplify this effect by providing distraction and identity cues that naturalize prevailing narratives and divert attention from structural reform. Certainly, these can serve as instruments for contesting the dominant order. In some respects there is genuine progress, and the world is undergoing an inevitable transformation; however, this process is not linear and is only rarely revolutionary. As a result, substantive change is often politically prohibitive, and when it might occur it is typically extremely costly. In this way, path dependence is reproduced across generations, even when certain power structures, mentalities, and behaviours undergo significant change.[12]

Human Nature, Emotion, Generational Memory, and Grievance Politics

Viewing the world as socially constructed already gives rise to a process in which agency and institutions are perceived not as they are, but in an intersubjective, emotionally inflected manner. However, we contend that this is not sufficient to explain long cycles of systemic violence, nor to account for why socialization within the nation-state is so effective without grounding in realist ontology based on human nature. Our cases show that emotions, identity, and generational memory

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[12] Alexandra Cirone and Thomas B. Pepinsky. 2022. "Historical Persistence." *Annual Review of Political Science,* Volume 25: 241-259. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-104325.

drive both foreign and domestic politics. Humiliation, pride, fear, justice, revenge, and hope drive behaviors such as Japan and South Korea's populist nationalism, Taiwan's sovereign displays, and Hong Kong's resistance. A realist-constructivist lens attuned to these passions better predicts escalation than material analysis alone.

Across these cases, colonial experience set self-reinforcing trajectories that still shape choices. In China, the 1931–1945 occupation entrenched a narrative of victimization and vigilance, tying regime legitimacy to resisting humiliation and hardening suspicion of Japan while sharpening claims over Taiwan. In Taiwan, Japanese rule left modern infrastructure, bureaucratic practice, and cultural imprints that differentiated identity from the mainland and later interacted with democratization to sustain a status quo preference and selective alignment with Japan. In South Korea, coercive assimilation and exploitation seeded durable grievance politics and vigilant nationalism that constrain rapprochement with Tokyo despite shared security interests, while developmental authoritarianism fused with a chaebol-centered political economy to lock in elite structures. In Hong Kong, British governance institutionalized common law, civic liberties, English and Cantonese public spheres, and a service economy, producing a liberal civic identity and expectations of autonomous rule that clashed with Beijing's unitary sovereignty after 1997. These distinct institutional inheritances and collective memories channel threat perception, alliance behavior, and domestic coalitions, creating a politics of constraint that endures. Further research should examine how diverse colonial legacies have shaped Asian states' contemporary identities and political behavior.

Violence and rivalry arise not only from strategy but also from human psychology and group dynamics (tribalism). National narratives instill loyalty, while collective memories such as Western colonization, Korea's colonization by Japan or China's "Century of Humiliation" justify hardline policies. Reproduced by elites through politics and education, these grievances are constantly reinterpreted, yet their core persists across generations, locking in antagonisms even when cooperation offers material benefits. Without reconciliation or reframing, as in Japan's postwar pacifism, grievance politics fuel cycles of provocation, with each side viewing itself as defensive. Peace and justice remain fragile, requiring moral restraint and prudent leadership. This challenges liberal optimism by adding a realist appreciation of the enduring force of emotion, memory, and identity.

Geopolitics as Narrative Space: Strategy, Timing, and Meaning

Rivalries are waged in museums, textbooks, diplomacy, and popular culture, creating a "cultural-structural" conflict over whose vision of regional order prevails. States promote competing strategic discourses, such as the U.S. and Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and China's "Community of Common Destiny," to gain legitimacy, frame the contest, and attract allies. Middle powers like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are losing autonomy as they are pushed to align with one camp, accelerating polarization. Conventional realism or liberalism cannot fully explain these identity-driven shifts, which require attention to ontological security and elite perception. Alliances persist not only through material threats but through shared narratives of trust and legitimacy. Identity formation and symbolic politics therefore lie at the heart of security behavior, as seen in Japan's evolving military stance, South Korea's internal debates, Taiwan's defense of its democracy, and Hong Kong's protest movement. States respond not just to actions but to their perceived meaning.

Temporal asymmetries are an underappreciated source of tension, with actors operating on divergent historical timelines. Taiwan's young democracy, China's civilizational revival and its demographic problems, Japan's postwar pacifism, and South Korea's rapid modernization each follow different political clocks, making geopolitics a contest of timing as well as power. Strategic ambiguity is losing effectiveness as nationalism and moral absolutism in places like the Taiwan Strait, the Senkaku islands, and Hong Kong force binary choices.

Strategic Leadership Within Historical Structures

Our study shows that leaders matter in international relations, but only within the limits set by historical structures. Statecraft is both science and art: leaders can shape events through strategic choices, yet they remain historically embedded agents constrained by material conditions and entrenched institutions and ideologies. Success depends on accurately reading these structural cues. China's leadership pursues long-standing national goals while navigating Communist Party institutions and nationalist expectations, and Japan's leaders seeking to normalize defense policy must work within legal limits and public sentiment rooted in pacifism. Unlike theories that either

overstate or dismiss leadership influence, our findings show that leaders can alter trajectories but only within the opportunities allowed by history and society. A realist-constructivist perspective thus restores agency without ignoring structural limits, highlighting the leaders who skillfully navigate and subtly adapt the structures around them.

Youth, Corporations, Diasporas: New Agents of Geopolitical Change

We also reveal the rising influence of non-state actors in regional geopolitics, underscoring the need to move beyond state-centrism. Youth movements, diaspora communities, multinational corporations, and digital platforms have emerged as strategic players that can redefine national narratives and policy agendas. In East Asia, grassroots protests (such as Hong Kong's youth-led demonstrations), corporate decisions (like technology supply-chain shifts), and diaspora lobbying efforts have each shaped state behavior and international perceptions. Power and influence are thus more diffused: global order in the region is imagined and contested by a variety of actors, not just state elites. Our findings echo notions of a multiplex[13] or multi-order world[14]: rather than one liberal order simply being supplanted by another, we see overlapping spheres of influence and legitimacy. U.S. security dominance, Chinese economic leadership, and transnational networks of activists and firms all coexist and sometimes compete. The Asia-Pacific is characterized by these overlapping hegemonies operating at different scales. This pluralization of agency means scholars and policymakers must account for the complex interplay between states and non-state forces. For example, how social media movements or corporate alliances can shift the balance of power or alter diplomatic priorities in ways traditional IR models might miss.

Non-Sovereign Sovereignties and Post-Westphalian Nationalism

Our work challenges the Westphalian view of sovereignty as absolute and static. In our cases, sovereignty is performed, contested, and symbolic. Taiwan and Hong Kong do not fit the

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[13] Amitav Acharya. 2018. *The End of American World Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
[14] Trine Flockhart. 2016. "The coming multi-order world." *Contemporary Security Policy,* Volume 37, Issue 1: 3-30.

traditional sovereign-state model yet have built potent political identities and influence. Taiwan's democratic identity and de facto autonomy give it strategic value and pose an ideological challenge to Beijing beyond its limited recognition. Hong Kong's protests, though suppressed, projected symbolic sovereignty and an alternative vision of political order, rallying international sentiment without legal independence. Such cases can be called "non-sovereign sovereignties," communities without full sovereign status that shape norms and great-power strategies beyond their material weight. They represent post-Westphalian nationalism, seeking to preserve autonomy, unique identity, and democratic values within or despite larger state structures. Sovereignty in the 21st century is thus a spectrum where degrees of self-rule and legitimacy can rival formal independence. This sovereign ambiguity is a key arena of conflict and agency. China's absolute sovereignty narrative collides with these movements, weakening its soft power even as it asserts control. Political attitudes in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China also show that modernization does not ensure liberalization; identity and historical memory shape whether prosperity leads to demands for democracy. Sovereignty emerges as a dynamic, contested claim, with actors outside full statehood now pivotal in Asia-Pacific politics.[15]

Global Reverberations, Local Drivers: Rethinking Agency in IR

Despite the global scale of U.S.–China rivalry, many key regional developments are driven by local forces. Globalization amplifies the impact of local events, yet local agency remains primary. Political and economic actors in Asia, from corporations and city governments to grassroots movements, focus on shaping their immediate environment rather than aligning strictly with superpower agendas. Examples include Samsung's positioning during the U.S.–China trade war, guided by corporate interests and domestic imperatives; Hong Kong's protests, driven by demands for autonomy and justice while resonating globally; and Japan's economic reforms, aimed at internal stability yet influencing foreign policy. East Asian states and societies often follow their own objectives, sometimes diverging from U.S.–China competition. Conflicts can emerge from regional disputes or historical grievances rather than as proxies. The information age has intensified local identities, with greater connectivity heightening awareness of distinct narratives

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[15] J. Samuel Barkin. 2021. *The Sovereignty Cartel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

and grievances, fueling new nationalisms. Instead of global convergence, we see plural and particular agendas. IR theory must better account for local and regional agency and avoid reducing events to great-power rivalries. Recognizing the independent role of local actors, interest groups, and middle powers produces a more accurate understanding of international outcomes.

Pluralism in IR Theory: Competing Visions of International Legitimacy

A key contribution of this research is its commitment to theoretical pluralism and reflexivity. We adopt an approach of ethical realism, aiming to understand world politics in its tragic complexity rather than impose a single normative vision. Instead of assuming a universal model of legitimate order, we acknowledge multiple visions shaped by different histories and values.[16] Our realist-constructivist analysis separates normative preferences from analytical conclusions, engaging with non-Western perspectives alongside Western ones and exposing biases in mainstream IR. We compare Western portrayals of China's rise, often framed as a problem to be solved by Western rules,[17] with China's own narratives of restoring national greatness and building a multipolar world.[18] Treating Chinese political thought as a coherent worldview allows a better understanding of its policies on Taiwan and Hong Kong. Similarly, Japan's hedging and balancing is interpreted as a rational adaptation to changing conditions. We find the international order to be inherently pluralistic and contested. The U.S.-led "rules-based order" is not universally accepted, and China's calls for a "democratic" international system resonate with some states. This plurality demands epistemological humility, requiring analysts to recognize cultural biases and engage with diverse concepts of legitimacy and varied civilizational views of Chineseness.[19] Practically, we caution against moralizing rivalries and instead advocate managing power shifts pragmatically, as a great-

[16] Martin Hall and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (Eds.). 2008. *Civilizational Identity: The Production and Reproduction of "Civilizations" in International Relations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
[17] Young Chul Cho and Yih-Jye Hwang. 2020. "Mainstream IR Theoretical Perspectives and Rising China Vis-À-Vis the West: The Logic of Conquest, Conversion and Socialisation." *Journal of Chinese Political Science,* Volume 25: 175-198.
[18] Yan Xuetong. 2011. *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
[19] Chih-yu Shih. 2022. *Post-Chineseness: Cultural Politics and International Relations*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

power war would benefit no one. Our study supports more self-reflection and inclusivity in IR theory and offers a model for incorporating non-Western realities into analyses of global order.[20]

Reframing Foreign Policy Through the Lens of Economic Stratification

We foreground internal social structure, particularly economic stratification, as a key driver of foreign policy. Inequality within and between states acts as a security multiplier, amplifying nationalist narratives, fueling elite performative diplomacy, and adding volatility to alignments. Leaders facing deep wealth gaps often turn to external issues to bolster legitimacy. In China and in Hong Kong's response to unrest, hardline nationalism and external threat narratives diverted attention from socioeconomic grievances. In Taiwan, prominent assertions of democratic sovereignty reinforced internal solidarity amid economic stress.

Inequality also undermines regional cohesion by creating mistrust. Development disparities among Asian states produce divergent threat perceptions and values, limiting collective initiatives such as ASEAN. Entrenched inequality fosters policy inertia. This is a strategic stagnation by stratification, where elites benefiting from existing systems resist changes that could threaten their interests. This helps explain why certain alliances or dependencies persist despite geopolitical shifts.

Severe inequality can also fuel identity-based unrest with international repercussions. In China, pronounced disparities between prosperous coastal regions and poorer inland provinces complicate national cohesion, making appeals to hardline nationalism and external threat narratives an attractive tool for the central leadership. In South Korea, persistent economic inequality, reinforced by the dominance of chaebol conglomerates, feeds public resentment and shapes debates over globalization, trade policy, and relations with Japan. Hong Kong's protests drew not only on political ideals but on anger over economic exclusion, reinforcing a local identity opposed to Beijing. These cases show that social injustice, cultural identity, and nationalism can overlap. Policymakers must account for domestic economic contexts, as actions that seem irrational externally may be strategies to manage instability or redirect discontent. Addressing economic

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[20] Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya. 2021. *Re-imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese, and Islamic Civilizations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

grievances could reduce the appeal of extreme nationalism. Viewing foreign policy through the lens of inequality adds a socio-economic dimension to IR, showing that internal distribution shapes external behavior.[21]

Parallel Orders in Asia-Pacific Trade: Decoupling, Resistance, and the Securitization of Supply Chains

We identify a decisive shift in geoeconomics with the emergence of parallel orders in Asia-Pacific trade, as economic ties are redefined by security rivalry. The assumption that trade interdependence ensures peace is under strain, as dependence on a strategic competitor is now seen as a vulnerability. Selective decoupling is underway in key sectors, with the United States and its allies reducing reliance on China for critical technologies and securitizing supply chains. The push to limit China's access to advanced semiconductors through export controls and the "Chip 4" coalition (the U.S., Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea) aims to preserve a technological edge.

Decoupling faces resistance from decades of trade integration, making supply chain separation slow and uneven. Japan has reshored production and aligned with U.S. tech restrictions at economic cost, while South Korea remains cautious due to its dependence on the Chinese market. The result is a partial bifurcation, with a U.S.-centered high-tech bloc emerging alongside a persistent China-centered trade sphere, leaving many states in between.

Economic policy and strategy are now intertwined. The Quad and AUKUS incorporate technology and supply chain resilience into security agendas, and regional initiatives like Japan's "quality infrastructure" and China's Belt and Road advance competing models of development and legitimacy. Geoeconomics in the Asia-Pacific has become contested space where trade and technology standards are arenas of rivalry. Institutions of the old liberal order are being repurposed or bypassed by new coalitions, marking a shift from an era when growth was pursued apart from geopolitical competition.

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[21] Thomas Piketty. 2017. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Asymmetry and Ambiguity: Military Postures in a Fragmented Region

Our security analysis shows an Asia-Pacific defined by asymmetric capabilities and strategic ambiguity within a fragmenting order. The belief that economic integration ensures stability has faded; stability now requires active political management and negotiated legitimacy. Perceptions of threat often outweigh actual capabilities, leading states to focus on symbolic deterrence and political signaling as much as combat readiness. Taiwan illustrates this trend, relying heavily on visible demonstrations of resolve and diplomatic signaling rather than a fully independent warfighting capacity, a strategy viable mainly due to anticipated U.S. support. This reveals vulnerabilities, as several deterrence strategies lack depth without the U.S. umbrella. Effective balancing depends on integration, logistics, and credible unity among allies as much as on weapons systems.

Maritime and aerial geography heightens ambiguity. In contested spaces, routine patrols can be misinterpreted as aggression partially due to historical grievances, creating a security dilemma in which defensive buildups appear offensive and trigger reciprocal escalation. The resulting arms race is qualitatively asymmetric: Japan invests in offensive air and naval systems, Taiwan in mobile defenses, and China in conventional naval forces, drones, anti-ship missiles (A2/AD), and new domains like cyber and space. These paths reflect distinct threat perceptions and strategic cultures, increasing the risk of misreading intentions in a crisis.

A quieter shift is the militarization of logistics and infrastructure. Civilian facilities such as ports, fishing and trade boats, airfields, and undersea cables are hardened or dual-purposed, while U.S.-led alliances expand interoperability through shared basing and supply arrangements, as in AUKUS. This blurs the line between peace and war and extends competition into previously neutral domains. These factors heighten the risk of miscalculation, especially as 2027 brings a convergence of Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, and U.S. military milestones. War is most likely when power rivalry intersects with deep identity conflicts, as in Taiwan and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, where strategic value and nationalist symbolism converge. Their maritime nature, absence of fixed borders, and high operational tempo further increase the chance that an accident or preemptive move could spark escalation. Without robust confidence-building, communication,

and mutual restraint that address both power realities and historical narratives, the danger of a major conflict will remain high.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this PhD advances a realist-constructivist understanding of the Asia-Pacific in which power shifts are inseparable from the narratives and identities through which they are perceived. It argues that regional order emerges from the constant negotiation between structural constraints and the agency of actors operating within them. The durability of historical memory, the persistence of elite configurations, and the strategic use of identity shape both cooperation and conflict, making stability contingent not just on material balance but on the management of meaning. Across these cases, agency resides not only in great powers but in middle powers, local actors, and societal movements whose actions can redirect regional dynamics. Recognizing that shifts in power are inseparable from shifts in meaning, this work argues for an International Relations scholarship that treats perception, memory, and identity as strategic variables, and for policymaking that understands stability as contingent upon constantly reconciling both the material and the ideational dimensions of order in the Asia-Pacific.

Opportunities for further research

Extending our realist constructivist and path-dependence model, the agenda moves beyond the current cases. North Korea serves as a hard test in which regime survival, recognition seeking, and security guarantees outweigh raw coercive leverage, while outcomes are structured primarily by U.S.–China rivalry. In Southeast Asia, tracing colonial legacies and elite formation can clarify present alignments; Singapore functions as a productive analogue to Hong Kong given its strategic location and technocratic authoritarianism. ASEAN merits reassessment through uneven development and inherited institutions. Myanmar's civil war is read as the reproduction of identities and institutions forged at critical junctures, including the Rohingya genocide and the limited international response. A comparative program on terrorism links religious cleavages, state capacity, and archipelagic geography in Indonesia and the Philippines.

Further lines of inquiry include examining the Belt and Road in Southeast Asia through local perceptions of sovereignty, dependency, and legitimacy, and analyzing the tightening China–Russia partnership in Central Asia and the Arctic where discourse, institutions, and material interests intersect. Normatively, the project advocates a pragmatic and pluralist realism that hat calls out hypocrisy in the instrumental use of ideas without abandoning empirical rigor, prioritizes problem-specific bargaining over existential competition, and treats stability not as teleological progress but as a fragile, continually negotiated achievement requiring historical awareness, cultural sensitivity, and disciplined inquiry.

Diagram 1: K-pop and the Micro-Structures of Power in International Relations

This diagram illustrates how cultural phenomena, often considered marginal in traditional International Relations analysis, can occupy a central role in understanding global dynamics. Through a realist constructivist lens enriched by a Foucauldian approach, the figure maps how K-pop both reflects and shapes power structures by operating at the intersection of artistic subversion, protest movements, state censorship, and capitalist reproduction.

K-pop is simultaneously an instrument of hegemonic reinforcement and subtle resistance. It reproduces the status quo through hyper-commercialism and soft power projection while also providing spaces for symbolic dissent and identity-based activism. These dynamics are situated within broader societal tensions including democratization, historical trauma, the military legacy, social inequality, and the emergence of a new middle class, demonstrating the mutual constitution of power and ideas. The consequences for foreign policy are twofold. On the one hand, consumerism linked to K-pop fosters greater societal compliance with decisions made by state and corporate elites. On the other hand, the subversive potential embedded in the industry has inspired civic engagement and protest movements, revealing how even seemingly apolitical cultural forms can contribute to shaping political consciousness and international behavior.

The blue lines represent historically sedimented structures shaped by path dependence. The red lines reflect ideational contestation, indicating how new discourses and social movements challenge those embedded structures. The green lines capture the synthesis between structure and contestation, resulting in outcomes that have consequences at the level of foreign policy and International Relations. When a line points in only one direction, we interpret the influence as primarily unidirectional. When a line points both ways, it suggests a dialectical relationship of intersubjective mutual co-constitution.

This diagram underscores the impossibility of drawing clear separations between power and ideas, as well as between material and ideational variables. All are deeply intertwined, shaping and reshaping each other across time and space. The aim here is to demonstrate the flexibility of the theoretical design to capture International Relations dynamics ranging from institutional militarism to cultural expression.

Diagram 1: K-pop and the Micro-Structures of Power in International Relations
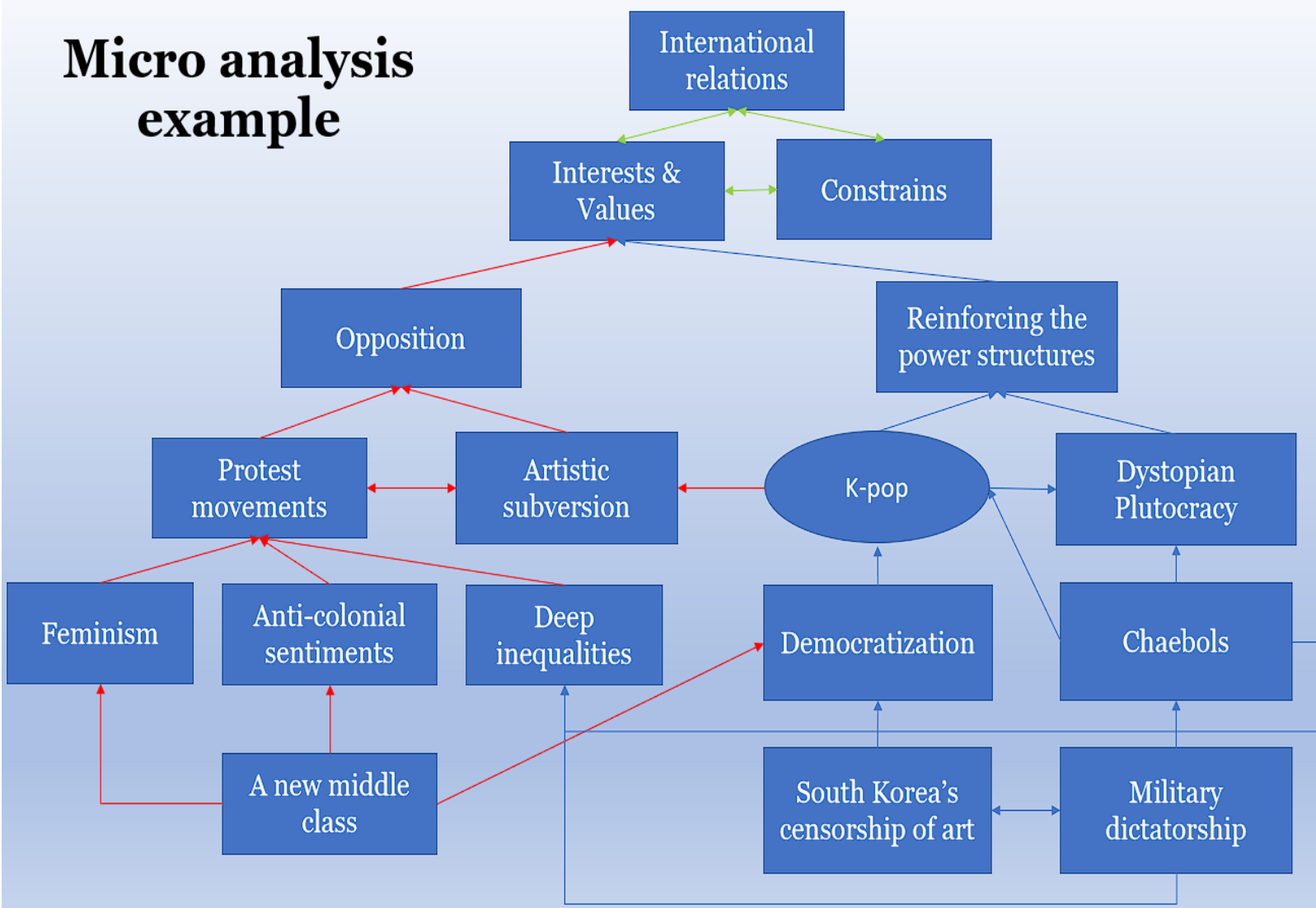
Diagram 2: Japan–South Korea Relations and the Dialectics of History, Identity, and Power

This diagram provides a visual synthesis of the first empirical case study, which examines the historically conditioned and structurally embedded dynamics shaping the relationship between Japan and South Korea within the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Asia-Pacific. It maps the multifaceted interaction between path-dependent legacies, elite continuity, identity politics, and strategic behavior, all operating under the evolving pressures of regional and international power shifts.

The blue lines depict long-term historical and institutional structures shaped by path dependence. These include the enduring legacy of Japanese colonial domination, the reproduction of postwar elites through Japan's Liberal Democratic Party and South Korea's chaebol system, the persistence of legal and educational institutions molded during the occupation, and the embedded psychological legacies of historical trauma, moral hierarchy, and nationalist memory politics.

The red lines illustrate how these entrenched structures interact with and are activated by developments in regional power politics to inform concrete foreign policy behavior. Key moments include Japan's imposition of export controls on South Korea in 2019, South Korea's threatened withdrawal from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), and Japan's efforts to reinterpret its constitution and expand its military role. The diagram also accounts for structural dynamics such as the rise of China, the perceived diplomatic deficit of the United States which encouraged Japan's more assertive strategic posture, and South Korea's more ambivalent or neutral stance toward Beijing. These events exemplify how historical and ideational legacies become mobilized in response to, and in shaping of, contemporary geopolitical strategy.

This visual synthesis reflects a key premise of our hybrid theoretical approach: that neither foreign policy nor interstate behavior can be understood without accounting for their historically embedded and mutually reinforcing nature in conjunction with broader geopolitical developments. The relationship between Japan and South Korea is thus revealed not as a linear trajectory of cooperation or conflict, but as a dialectical process in which identity, memory, and strategic interest are continuously negotiated and contested.

Diagram 2: Japan–South Korea Relations and the Dialectics of History, Identity, and Power
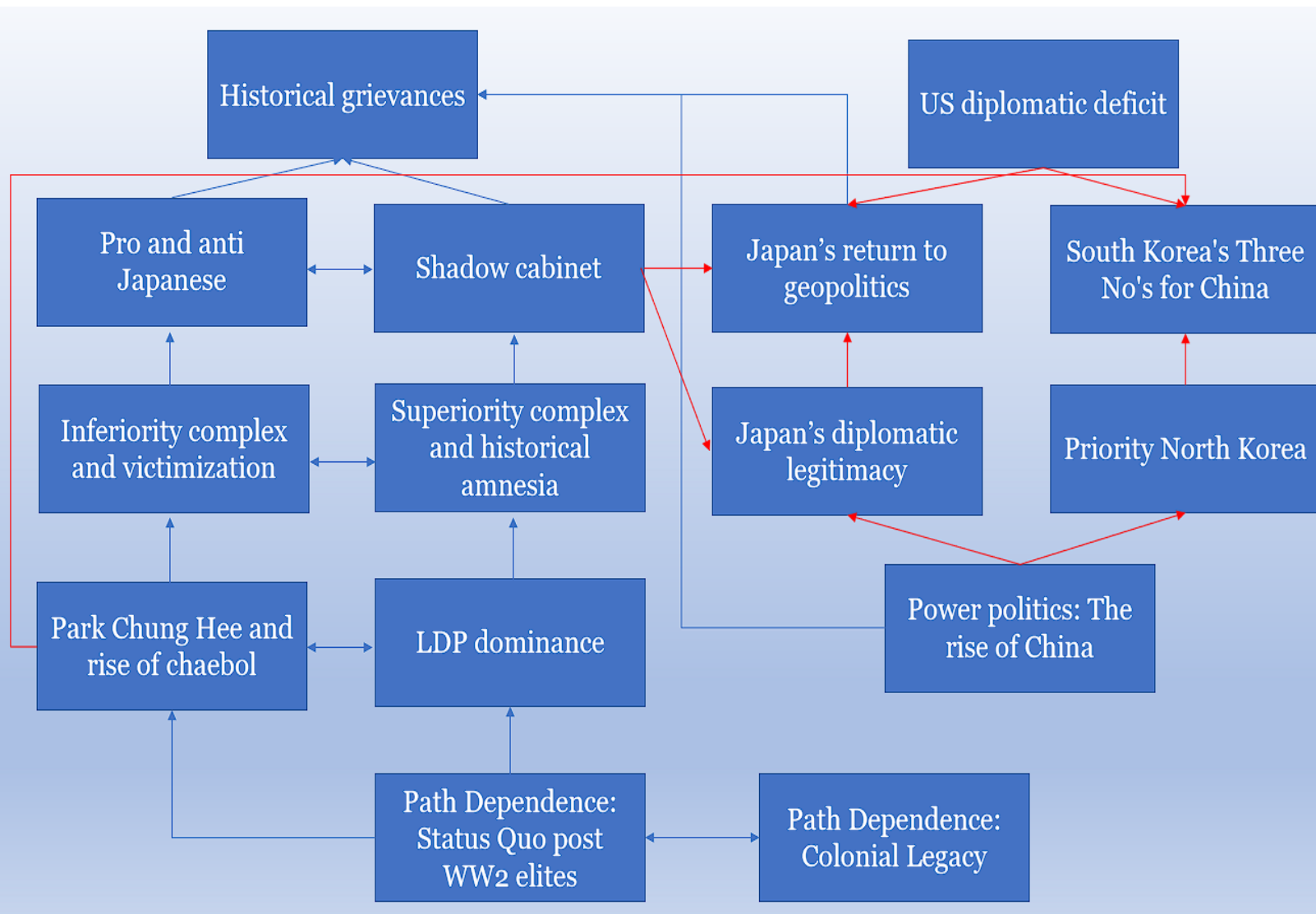
Diagram 3: Identity, Sovereignty, and the Strategic Value of Taiwan

This diagram captures the complex co-evolution of identity formation, historical memory, and geostrategic imperatives in the Taiwan Strait, reflecting the core assumptions of a realist-constructivist approach. The blue lines illustrate long-term historical and socio-political structures. These include Taiwan's marginal position in the Chinese imperial system, Japanese colonial rule, Chiang Kai-shek's nation-building efforts, and the internal identity split between the Waishengren and Benshengren communities. The layered historical trajectory, from Taiwan's peripheral integration in successive Chinese regimes to its colonization by Japan and the Cold War myth-making of the Republic of China, produced multiple, often conflicting identity claims.

The red arrows highlight how the interaction of these structural variables with major geopolitical developments such as China's rise, Taiwan's democratization, the Sunflower Movement, and increased U.S.–Japan strategic involvement have reshaped Taiwan's foreign policy behavior and international position. The redirection of Taiwan's identity from "ROC is China" to "ROC is Taiwan" reflects both bottom-up social transformations and top-down political recalibrations. Events such as the 2014 Sunflower Movement and the growing alignment with Japan signify critical junctures in Taiwan's path toward self-identification and global visibility. The purple lines in this diagram represent Japan's historical influence over Taiwan.

The green lines indicate how these ideational and political developments contributed to the fragmentation of the cross-strait status quo. Taiwan's increasing alignment with democratic norms and its centrality in global semiconductor supply chains through TSMC's technological dominance have elevated its strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific, generating new foreign policy responses from China, the United States, and Japan. U.S. congressional visits, military assistance, and Taiwan's integration into the Indo-Pacific further eroded the ambiguity of the One China policy. Strategic calculations are shaped by evolving identities, while historical narratives are deployed to legitimize geopolitical aims. Neither Taiwan's identity politics nor cross-strait tensions can be fully understood in isolation from each other or from the broader regional dynamics. As the diagram illustrates, foreign policy is not merely reactive to power shifts but also a product of historically sedimented identities, contested memories, and the constant negotiation of sovereignty.

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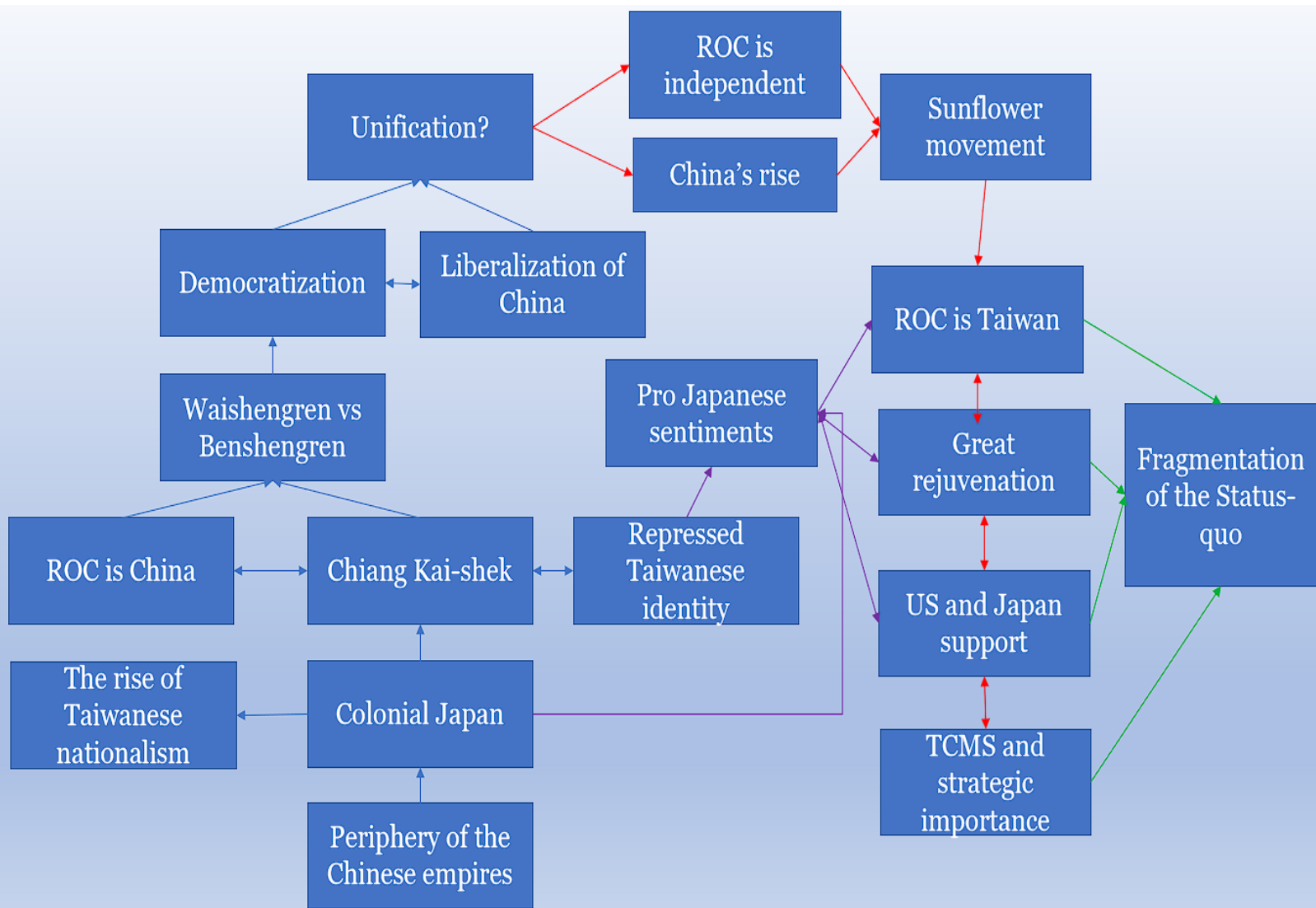
Diagram 4: Hong Kong's Resistance as an Ontological Threat to Chinese Statehood

The diagram traces how historically embedded structures, such as colonial path dependencies and institutional legacies, interacted with emerging ideational movements to produce a distinctive form of national consciousness that came to challenge Beijing's central authority. The blue lines in the diagram signify both the long-term structural legacies of colonial governance and China's repressive responses, which are themselves embedded in path-dependent institutional and ideological patterns. The structures inherited from the British colonial period are: legal institutions rooted in rule of law, economic elitism shaped by laissez-faire capitalism, and an education system that merged Enlightenment ideals with Confucian traditions. These structures cultivated values such as civil liberties, procedural justice, and a hybrid cultural identity that positioned Hong Kong apart from mainland China.

The red lines capture how the interaction of these path-dependent legacies with power politics generated escalating political confrontations. Specific events depicted in the diagram include the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the 2019 anti-extradition protests, the implementation of the National Security Law, and the broader trend of China's transition from authoritarianism to totalitarian surveillance governance under Xi Jinping. At stake in this struggle were conflicting visions of legitimacy (institutional, moral, and popular), contrasting understandings of sovereignty (centralized authority versus local autonomy), and rival models of modernity, one grounded in liberal democratic norms and civil society, the other in technocratic authoritarianism and ideological centralization.

This diagram challenges conventional state-centric approaches by highlighting how non-traditional actors, such as Hong Kong's civil society and youth movements, constrained the strategic calculations of a great power like China. In this case, Hong Kong's rise as a symbolic alternative to the CCP's model of Chinese identity constituted an ontological threat to Beijing's centralizing project, making its repression not only strategic, but existential. Hong Kong's experience also exemplifies the birth of a national consciousness without a state. The outcome is not predetermined, as it remains contingent on the future trajectory of Chinese society itself, whether it evolves toward some form of pluralistic representation or hardens into a totalitarian model.

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