



RISING POWERS INITIATIVE

SIGUR CENTER FOR ASIAN STUDIES
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Asian Identities and Their Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

Understanding the identities of Asian nations could help American policy-makers develop better policies toward its counterparts in the region. Identity encapsulates a nation's historical experiences as well as its aspirations for the future, setting the stage for the country's normative orientations toward questions of power and security in its external relations. Identities of major Asian countries, therefore, could have important implications for prospects of regional cooperation or conflict. This Policy Brief highlights some of the key insights on what this means for U.S. foreign policy toward Asia, as was discussed at a [recent conference](#) organized by the Rising Powers Initiative on April 16, 2012 in Washington, D.C.

Whereas Americans "have come to see security issues in predominantly military and coercive terms," Asian countries may have a very different view, said Chas W. Freeman, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. In his keynote address to the conference, Freeman pointed out that U.S. military presence in Asia "is only one aspect of national security and influence," and that "concepts of both power and security in and around Eurasia are far less unidimensional."

By probing the multiple dimensions of national identities in Asia, U.S. policymakers might be able to set more realistic expectations in their interactions with their Asian counterparts, as seen in the cases of bilateral relations with India and the possibility of multilateral cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. A country's identity may also point to opportunities for policy promotion and innovation, as illustrated by U.S. trade relations with Japan. However, in countries where identities are less stable, one should be also be wary of drawing premature conclusions about identity's influence on policy, such as in China and South Korea.

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Identity and Cooperation: Setting Realistic Expectations

U.S. policymakers who hope that India will become a key alliance partner in Asia are likely to be disappointed, because a formal alliance structure or even the perception of an alliance runs contrary to India's strong identification with national autonomy. According to Deepa Ollapally of the George Washington University, becoming entangled in alliances is a major "taboo" that governs Indian foreign policy. This aversion to alliance commitments derives from India's experience in gaining independence from the British Empire as well its sense of "civilizational entitlement" that sees India as a tolerant and pluralistic civilization whose external sphere of influence is based on culture, values and trade. Americans should understand that autonomy will continue to remain a central value in Indian identity, emphasized Jonah Blank of the RAND Corporation, and "U.S. policymakers can ignore this, bemoan it, or embrace it."

The Sigur Center's Rising Powers Initiative examines how domestic political debates and identity issues affect international relations in Asia.

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In another example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has taken on an increasingly important role in U.S. policy toward Asia, yet the organization's collective identity might also set limits on its potential as a platform for multilateral cooperation. As a grouping of ten nations, ASEAN has developed an identity as a "nascent security community" that is becoming the basis for various possible regional institutional arrangements in trade and security, such as ASEAN + 3, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asia Summit, amongst others. Amitav Acharya of American University is known for his theorizing of ASEAN's collective identity, and he has argued for the "centrality" of ASEAN as a "fulcrum" of regional architecture in Asia. However, as Acharya also pointed out at the conference, the norm of non-intervention is a foundational component of the ASEAN identity, and this norm may be an obstacle to multilateral cooperation, particularly in issue areas such as human rights. Hence, policymakers should also refrain from setting false expectations in this regard.

Identity and Policy Promotion: Opportunities for Innovation

As a contrast to India and ASEAN, the case of Japan shows that a nation's identity complexes might point to opportunities for policy promotion and innovation. Mike Mochizuki of GWU and Isao Miyaoka of Keio University characterize Japan by a set of "identity complexes," which include notions of Japan as a peace state, a trading state, a maritime nation and a democracy. These various facets of Japanese identity have formed the basis of domestic support for Japan's pacifist foreign policy, as well as enabled Japan to reassure regional neighbors that its engagement with ASEAN countries is peaceful and non-expansionist. For U.S. policymakers, Japan's identity complexes show that there is potential for further strengthening relations with this important ally, such as by deepening trade relations through the Trans-Pacific Partnership. As Mochizuki pointed out, Prime Minister Noda has "invoked the identity of a trading nation in order to support his policy of becoming a negotiating partner in the TPP." Hence, although Japan has not yet formally decided to join the TPP, perhaps recent developments point to such a possibility.

Unstable Identities: A Cautionary Note

Nonetheless, not all countries have clear identities that one can rely on as guideposts for formulating policy. The rapid political, economic and social changes across Asia in the past few decades, in addition to the divergent historical experiences of Asian nations, have also generated unstable identities that are still being contested domestically. China is the prime example of a nation whose identity is still in flux. Research by Allen Carlson at Cornell University shows that a broad and diverse range of ideological viewpoints exist amongst Chinese public intellectuals, and thus policymakers should recognize that the Chinese identity is "far from monolithic." Carlson said it would be a mistake to "only select on the more

combative and assertive nationalist views" in China, because doing so might amplify a "circle of distrust" in U.S.-China relations.

In South Korea, domestic contestation over identity falls along the lines of national identity and state identity: a nation of all Koreans on the Korean Peninsula versus a state identity embodied by the Republic of Korea government in Seoul. As Gregg Brazinsky of GWU explained, "South Korea presents a particularly complicated case because there has not been congruence between state and nation during the last six decades." Its national identity engenders an affinity toward North Korea, a historical hostility toward Japan, and an ambiguous attitude toward the U.S. On the other hand, its state identity as a modern economy and democracy that has relied on America for its development takes a much more benign view of the U.S. In light of this complex landscape, Brazinsky suggested that these identity orientations may help predict the policy inclinations of specific South Korean leaders, but Washington should avoid appearing to support one set of political forces over another.

Conclusion

How do Asia's rising powers perceive their security environment and the role of the U.S. in regional politics? Research on what characterizes the identities of Asian countries, and how those identities have developed over time, can provide useful insights on this question. These ideological contours shape the range of options that Asian actors consider in their foreign policies, ranging from bilateral relations to the extent and type of regional cooperation. As the conference discussions have underscored, U.S. policymakers would do well to develop a deeper understanding of Asian identities and consequently the range of possibilities in crafting America's relations with Asia.

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The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asia scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts, and policymakers.

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