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# Understanding Determinants of Military Conflict in East Asian Authoritarian Regimes

## Topic and Research Question

One of the most interesting and important aspects of governments is the way that they resolve conflict with others—whether with violence, or with diplomacy. However, the hallmark of all authoritarian regimes—be they military juntas, single party states, or personalist dictatorships—is violence (Weeks 2012, 326). That violence, committed against their own people or against their neighbors, has resulted in several studies analyzing the tendencies of each variant, charting their willingness to engage in both internal violence and external conflict, and speculating what additional determinants of those choices are. In East Asia—a region densely packed with authoritarian regimes, where history is often cherry-picked and institutionalized to feed the changing needs of those regimes—does this changing collective memory serve as a determinant of authoritarian regimes' preferences for direct military conflict?

Many studies have, by their realist nature, largely disregarded ideas and identity as immaterial to the behavior of regimes, favoring concepts such as regime type and elite organization as determinants of their conflict behavior. These forms of analysis leave out a key component necessary to understand preference formation and, while providing general caricatures of behavior, do so at the cost of in-depth understanding regarding specific cases.

## State of the Art

This study is a departure from the established empiricist study of regime typology and regime behavior. This study is, rather, informed by two key pieces which have broken with realist and empiricist doctrine and have centered ideas as determinants of political behavior and political preference creation.

Firstly, *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* by Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane which created a key framework for establishing the existence of, and of highlighting the causal routes of ideas.

Secondly, the improvement of, and poignant application of Goldstein and Keohane's framework by Zheng Wang in his book *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. In this work, Wang pushes the framework to encompass the sociological concept of collective memory—expanding the scope of the previous framework and

applying it to a closed authoritarian regime's political behavior.

## Methodology and Approach

This study deploys a hybrid analysis consisting of a four-part approach. Firstly, to create a scaffolding upon which to analyze collective memory, the study relies upon established regime typology theory using Jessica Weeks' typology criteria and eight diagnostic questions. Further, in order to provide key moments of interest and focus the collective memory analysis, a timeline of conflict accompanies the regime typology analysis to assist in demonstrating the historical trajectory of beliefs and conflict behavior. In this way, we have effectively provided a baseline with which to understand the regimes' behavior and any deviations where collective memory may have proved a determinant are more evident.

The core collective memory analysis is broken down into two parts based on Goldstein and Wang's frameworks. Firstly, collective memory's existence is established using evidence representing the six types of ideas and collective memory: Worldviews, principled beliefs, causal beliefs, constitutive norms, relational content, and social purpose content.

After collective memory has been established, its various features are scrutinized for causality along three routes: ideas as roadmaps, ideas as focal points, and as institutionalized ideas.

As large-N studies are largely impossible in closed regimes, in order to measure these features in the two authoritarian regime cases, contemporary China and Showa Era Japan, measurement is based around primary and secondary sources such as civilian interviews, memorialization and monuments, government documents and speeches, and polling data when available.

## Main Facts

Based on in regime typology theory, Japan is a hybrid regime with features of personalist, party, and junta regime types. In support of this system, contemporary collective memory had consolidated in various forms—particularly the concept of Japanese ethno-racial superiority, emperor worship, and the concept of Asianism—or benevolent Japanese imperialism. These concepts, manifested through policy, monuments, art, and education were poignant roadmaps, focal points,

and routes of institutionalization of certain narratives which directly contributed to the rise of the hybrid fascist system and the continued escalation of the war beyond rational elite behavior.

In the case of China under Xi, consolidation efforts over the last 12 years pushed China from a liberalizing party regime squarely into personalist authoritarianism. Chinese collective memory established by the CCP during the patriotic education campaign has remained centered around China's history—both that of its excellence and its humiliation, the concept of governmental response to disasters but also governmental corruption being the cause of China's past humiliation. What is a core to the collective understanding, above all, is the concept of National Rejuvenation—the recovery of China's rightful place in the world. This concept, alongside many others, serves as the cornerstone of Xi's ascent to power as well as his justification for continued and increasing conflict with his neighbors. However, as with Japan, we find that this collective memory does not only impact the leadership but also directly determines perception of violence as an acceptable policy tool in the mind of the average person—a perception growing more and more favorable with every change in international politics.

## Results

Although both cases do follow traditional understandings of their regime types with violence increasing with increased consolidation of the junta and the personalist, the analysis proved conclusively that collective memory—as the genesis of collective preference formation—serves as an additional determinant of political behavior and more specifically, authoritarian regimes preferences for direct military conflict.

In both cases we find a similarly centered collective memory despite a difference of 100 years, history, culture, and regime type. The ideological core centered around a national goal beyond the individual—the emperor or the national rejuvenation. In both cases we find that this formed the very core of the government's legitimacy and served as the rubber stamp for all choices made, however bellicose or economically detrimental to society.

Causal routes of collective memory, though different, achieve similar effects in both cases—defining their national stance against, or alongside other East Asian states and 'The West' as well as the political and social hierarchy within the nations themselves. What is perhaps more important are the social purpose and

constitutive norms where nationalism, ideological purity, and self-sacrifice serve as cornerstones of identity and have led directly to increased military conflict.

Despite being outside the scope of the study, the degree of conflict between the two cases is drastically different. China's modern conflicts, myriad as they are, do not cross into outright war. What the collective memory analysis finds is that while Chinese collective memory is increasingly focused on military service, this is not a traditional or core facet like nationalism or self-sacrifice. Through analysis we understand that while Japan had a grass-roots fascist fanatic wing which was encouraged by collective memory to take imperial will into its own hands, Chinese collective memory lies largely dormant until activated by events which threaten the Chinese international reputation.

Here, collective memory provides a nuance that previous studies could not. In the case of Japan, elite disunity coupled with grass-roots pressure meant that the very elite who had institutionalized that collective memory could no longer control or contain it. In the case of China, however, careful institutionalization across many iterations has resulted in a collective memory which the CCP can deploy or disable through careful control of publicly available information.

## References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at [theses.univie.ac.at/detail/74711/](http://theses.univie.ac.at/detail/74711/)

## About the Author

Kyle Theodore Cote-Houghton holds a BA in Political Science from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. After graduation, he will seek a career in international organizations to contribute to global cooperation and capacity building initiatives.

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