**Towards Political Attitude rather than Political Behavior: Understanding East Asian Geopolitics**

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**Abstract**

The discourse of East Asian geopolitics is often filled with keywords such as threats, territorial disputes occurring in several regions, and the ongoing transition of the international structure from the hegemonic power of the United States to the responses of countries in the region to China’s rise. Understanding East Asian geopolitics has always been dominated by Western mainstream perspectives, leading to taken-for-granted conclusions that East Asia is prone to major conflicts. This study aims to understand the dynamics of political attitudes in East Asia with a focus on geopolitics in the region. Using qualitative descriptive methods, this study focuses on the analysis of political attitudes rather than political behavior of people in East Asia, taking into account the influence of complex geopolitical factors. The study result show that East Asian geopolitics is shaped by a complex interplay of historical tensions, territorial disputes, and the influence of external powers, particularly China and the United States. While realist and liberal perspectives focus on military threats and power dynamics, constructivist views emphasize the role of political attitudes, diplomacy, and institutions in maintaining regional stability. Countries in the region, despite tensions, have shown a preference for resolving conflicts through legal frameworks and multilateral institutions, rather than open conflict. This suggests that while geopolitical tensions exist, they are often managed through cooperation and diplomacy, offering a more balanced and peaceful outlook than traditional power politics might sugges.

**Keywords:**

East Asia, Geopolitics, Political Attitude, Institutions, Initiatives

**Introduction**

The intensification of geopolitics in the East Asian region is a result of the rationalization of the realist approach, which emphasizes the importance of power and sovereignty inherent in states. As a consequence of this rationalization, East Asian countries are heavily influenced by the rivalry between great powers represented by China and the United States (Manicom, 2014). Despite the United States being an external player in the region, its influence and post-Cold War power in building security networks with Japan, South Korea, and Australia have made its presence a benchmark in geopolitical discourse (Herd, 2010).

The rise of China and the United States in the East Asian region has become the highest concern in the rivalry between major powers, primarily viewed through the lens of political behavior rather than political attitude. The consequence of emphasizing political behavior is that China is often associated with suspicion and other research with negative undertones (Chambers, 2005; Chan, 1999; Waldron, 2004). As a result of this rivalry between great powers, interconnected issues such as territorial disputes and the post-Cold War regional structure have become crucial references in the discussion of East Asian geopolitics.

The territorial disputes overlapping in the East Asian region indicate great powers’ influence and even involve external actors such as Russia (Brown, 2016; Scott, 2016). Additionally, within the internal dynamics of the East Asian region itself, territorial disputes are conformed through each country’s maritime security concerns. These issues encompass two major maritime areas, namely the South China Sea and the East China Sea, involving neighboring states within the region (Emmers, 2009).

The structural issues in the East Asian region tend to involve regional institutions such as ASEAN, which serves as a significant platform for great powers to share security and economic interests while competing for influence (bin Hassan, 1995; Goh, 2004; Sundararaman, 2004). Apart from institutional involvement, East Asian geopolitics also serves as a reference for determining the power and performance of the liberal international order, which is currently being questioned in a paradoxical context. This paradox arises from the absence of the United States during the Donald Trump era and the increasingly assertive policies of China (Kristinsson, 2023).

The quest for the international structure itself is discussed as a search for alternative orders provided by the unique dynamics of East Asian life, which is perceived to be significantly different from Western arrangements (McGrew & Brook, 2013). This poses a challenge because it appears that East Asian countries are confined to the assessment of political behavior to find a suitable framework within Western research. The discussion on attitude within the framework of East Asian geopolitics is explored as a form of transformation and uniqueness distinct from the Western context (Overholt, 2007; Pablo-Baviera, 2003).

This study will further explore political attitudes to understand that the factors examined in this research, such as threat, territory, and structure, can be analyzed through the lens of attitudes rather than behavior. This perspective challenges the mainstream perception presented in the existing literature and previous studies on East Asian geopolitics. The presence of political attitude serves as a framework to explain that translating behavior into attitudes is a more suitable approach due to the unique complexity of the East Asian region.

**Literature review and Framework of Analysis**

The discussion on political attitudes in East Asian geopolitics is based on the overall power dynamics of the Asian region, which can provide both economic opportunities and security dilemmas, particularly as the United States and China initiate a rivalry (Overholt, 2007). The security dilemma and economic prospects then become the focal point of the discussion, stemming from the lens of political behavior that often invokes suspicion and uncertainty, given the sensitive post-Cold War legacy of the United States and the rapid development of China.

However, when discussing foreign policy through political attitude, the consideration of public opinion as a related variable is crucial, as it reinforces the belief that in the domestic realm, which does not involve state elites, the general population tends to have public opinion and desires for conflict-free geopolitics (Trumbore, 1998). Multilateralism is expected to emerge from this public opinion because of the sense of togetherness, just as when discussing China’s foreign policy, which is perceived negatively within the framework of the liberal order (Wang, 2000).

The presence of public opinion creates a dynamic interplay, even between great powers involved in rivalries such as the United States and China. From the perspective of Chinese society, which influences China’s foreign policy as a nation, they demonstrate a lack of rivalry and recognition towards the United States across various domains, including history, economy, security, and politics (Aldrich & Lu, 2015; Jisi, 1997). From this standpoint, it becomes evident that through political attitude, an explanation of geopolitics can be dynamically elucidated.

The distinction between attitude and behavior within the framework of foreign policy is most fundamentally observed in China’s participation in the UN Peacekeeping program, where it demonstrates a commitment to the norms established by the United Nations (Chen, 2009; Kang, 2015). The existence of this foreign policy framework is further enhanced by the presence of institutions that serve as a collective home for many countries in the East Asian region (Peterson & Steffenson, 2009). From the perspective of political attitude, these institutions can even extend to show that the geopolitical framework is not solely about conflict, but also holds the potential for deepened cooperation.

Within the framework of political attitude, the dynamics of opinion are drawn based on the agency that stems from non-dimensional and ideologically driven dynamics (Neumann, 2017; Way & Masters, 1996). The formation of attitudes can be seen as a mechanism that generates distinct clusters, each attempting to map out different decision landscapes. The benchmark for attitudes considers cultural and cognitive aspects drawn from a nation’s history.

Studies in international relations strive to translate the meanings of culture, cognition, and decision-making through the lens of constructivism, which combines cultural realism, historical culturalism, and social interactionism in the field of security policy (Peou, 2008). The consequence of this fusion, within the analysis of political attitude, is how the logic of balance of threat can be approached differently compared to the mainstream political behavior pursued by realism.

The dynamics of political attitude can be depicted through various cultural and policy models (Voinea, 2016). These two models are reinforced by agency models, simulations, and are based on different complexities from the perspective of liberal hegemonic powers. The universalism of liberal hegemony in East Asian geopolitics is heavily nuanced due to the rise of China, which adheres to an ideology that contrasts with that of the United States.

Indeed, when compared to the mainstream approach of political behavior, the political attitude perspective reveals that understanding East Asian geopolitics can be viewed through diverse cases. This leads to discoveries, indicating that issues of threat, territorial disputes, and regional structure in East Asia are not always solely political in nature. Instead, they exhibit pluralism, where attitudes can vary among actors and are not solely focused on the possibility of open conflict.

In the issue of threats, this research aims to uncover the variables of threat identified in various literature sources, as well as territorial disputes and international structures that serve as important indicators in the discourse of East Asian geopolitics. These three variables can be discussed through an institutional framework and individual states to reveal a perspective heavily influenced by political behavior rather than political attitude.

Political attitude, as discussed, encompasses several important principles that can be drawn upon as analytical tools. These include the history of East Asia, the uniqueness of East Asia compared to the West, and a constructivist approach that highlights the complexity of state responses. It emphasizes that East Asian countries are not inherently inclined towards conflict but rather have the potential for both cooperation and conflict in different aspects and dimensions.

**Method**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, as explained by (Hollstein, 2011), where the descriptive method aims to describe or analyze research results without drawing broad or general conclusions. The qualitative method focuses on collecting and presenting data in a descriptive form, either in written or spoken words, derived from observable individual behavior. In the context of this research, the descriptive qualitative approach is highly relevant because the researcher aims to delve deeper into the issue of East Asian geopolitics, specifically in understanding political attitudes in the region, without making overly broad generalizations.

The research uses secondary data obtained from various reading sources, such as documents, the internet, newspapers, academic journals, bulletins, and scientific magazines. Additionally, data can be sourced from archives, personal documents, and other relevant written sources. The data analysis process involves several stages: data collection, data reduction to filter relevant information, data display, and concluding. By following these stages, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of various aspects of East Asian geopolitics and how political attitudes are formed in this context.

**Result and Discussion**

The primary focus of threats in East Asian geopolitics relates to the problematic history, sovereignty, and territorial disputes that have arisen due to the concentration of power after the Second World War (Brown, 2016; Drifte, 2013). Geographically, the issues involving great powers revolve around two regions: the East China Sea and the South China Sea, which are perceived as sources of threat. This presence of China as a great power has been a trigger for crises, particularly when examining its behavior and actions.

The concentration of political behavior in this discourse tends to highlight the controversies surrounding China in the East Asian region, in addition to the ongoing territorial disputes such as the heightened tensions between China and Taiwan (Chan, 2012; K. F. Lim, 2012). The consequence of this approach is that it positions the United States as the determinant and guarantor of security, along with its allied countries. Political behavior seems to disregard the roles and initiatives of East Asian countries and instead focuses on the geopolitical turmoil that is unfolding.

The evidence that supports the argument of political behavior extends beyond the involvement of external actors closely associated with the Western liberal hegemonic model, such as the presence of the United States. It also includes the influence of ideology and democratic political systems in shaping the behavior of both allies and adversaries toward the West (Bae, 2013; O’Shea, 2014). Geopolitical security is expected to arise due to the increase in military power and the perception of threats, which are particularly felt by South Korea and Japan as part of the United States’ alliance in addressing the issue of weapons proliferation by North Korea (Yoo, 2012).

The dominance of realism in the concept of threat is further explored by liberal hegemonic thinkers who view the presence of the United States as a security guarantor for its allies in the East Asia region (Aston, 2013; Miyagi, 2012). Both realist and liberal perspectives, as a whole, emphasize behavior rather than attitude in understanding East Asia’s geopolitics. The evidence that there are opportunities for political behavior in understanding the region’s geopolitics cannot be disregarded, as evidenced by the diversity of foreign policies and diplomatic styles among East Asian countries.

The opportunity for the inclusion of political attitude lies in explaining that the universality of threats in East Asian geopolitics can be seen through the broadening of security as a national interest for each country. The existence of economic, social, political, and environmental discourses through political attitude demonstrates the possibility that East Asian countries are not solely driven by the potential for military conflict (Chun, 2016; Emmers, 2012). In this context, a deeper understanding of policies and attitudes reveals that they only reach a state of warmth, maintaining an equilibrium.

Both realist and liberal perspectives recognize the threats posed by the behavior of other countries, particularly China and North Korea, in the case of East Asia. The changing perceptions of countries such as Japan and South Korea regarding the nuclear issue with their neighbors are believed to continue generating similar dynamics but not necessarily long-term perceptions (Schoff, 2012; Tunsjø, 2021). The shift in perceptions influencing foreign policies highlights the importance of emphasizing different political attitudes rather than solely focusing on political behavior.

The specificity of the constructivist approach in presenting the perspective of political attitude can be seen in the historical fact that there have been no open conflicts, aside from legal disputes and rhetorical exchanges in the region. The possibility of open conflict is always present when examining the behavior of states perceived as threats from the perspective of political behavior, which is predominantly dominated by realist and liberal perspectives, leading to different conclusions. The universalism of the concept of political behavior tends to dismiss the existence of other possibilities (Barclay & Smith, 2013).

The tug-of-war between the dominance of realism and liberalism has become a kind of ‘normalization’ for the countries involved, especially alliances like Japan (Howe & Campbell, 2013; Jackson, 2018). This argument can serve as evidence that contemporary Japan, South Korea, China, and other East Asian countries exhibit diverse approaches and do not tend towards open conflict or war in the realm of geopolitics. The focus on security in geopolitics is understood through fluctuating perceptions and public opinions, which can vary from warm to cool at different times.

The presence of diverse cultures and values in the East Asian region, along with varied historical interactions, and the current reality of a balance between nationalism and pan-Asianism, create a greater opportunity for political attitude to take precedence over the understanding of political behavior (Miller, 2014). Furthermore, East Asia has emerged as a significant hope due to its substantial economic growth, which has greatly influenced contemporary international relations dynamics (Guan, 2012).

The assumption of economic growth and the prevailing economic facts in the East Asian region has led liberal scholars to perceive liberal trade as the main stage (Bhattarai, 2012). In contrast, realist scholars, with their assumption of potential conflicts driven by power dynamics, acknowledge the existence of both anarchy and hegemony. Political attitude, on the other hand, delves more intensively into the spontaneous attitudes that are adopted, which may refer to specific interests, albeit in a seemingly short-term nature.

Constructivism adopts a distinct approach to political behavior, distinct from both realism and liberalism. Through a constructivist lens, political attitude encompasses multiple countries, acknowledges the presence of warm geopolitical tensions and security concerns, and simultaneously envisions the possibility of institutional formation due to extensive connectivity and contact among individuals, mutual understanding, and a belief in the reduction of tensions in the region (Lim, 2020).

The development of this approach is necessary due to the limited number of previous researchers who have put forth the notion that the geopolitical landscape of East Asia is not as harsh as imagined. When mapping the behaviors and attitudes of countries in the region, it can be observed that great powers tend to exhibit assertive stances, but at the same time, they also work together under the umbrella of institutions (Prasetya et al., 2020; Scott, 2019). Even middle powers do not experience injustice unless the assumptions of geopolitical narratives within political behavior continue to be emphasized.

The presence of the subsidiarity norm within the East Asian regional order, which is generally distinct from other regions, plays a significant role in understanding why the envisioned and perceived intense geopolitical conflicts do not occur in this region (Acharya, 2011). The most crucial aspect emphasized by the constructivist approach in examining East Asia’s dynamics is the existence of diverse institutions that are being constructed by countries, even in the face of escalating tensions. Furthermore, the norms and interests underlying the Northeast Asian alliances are fundamentally different from those in Europe or the United States.

Indeed, the constructivist approach provides a significant opportunity for the inclusion of political attitudes by highlighting the importance of identity formation among East Asian countries, particularly those institutions that strive to maintain multilateral networks and distance themselves from the problems of great power structures (Eaton & Stubbs, 2006). However, it is important to note that the development of identity has not been extensively explored in terms of how the opinions of local citizens can contribute to the formulation of foreign policies by each country and the development of institutions. The role of public opinion in shaping foreign policy decisions and institutional development within East Asian countries warrants further investigation and analysis.

Indeed, by focusing on how political attitude can fill the gaps in understanding East Asian geopolitics and how the attitudes of each country and regional institutions are interpreted as equilibrium, constructivist scholars believe in the mutual reinforcement of ideas, norms, interests, and power balancing as questions of geopolitical security (Batabyal, 2004). The diversity of attitudes and policies among states regarding the discourse of geopolitics demands evidence that this dynamic East Asian region cannot be equated with the conclusions drawn from the analysis of political behavior. The constructivist approach offers a valuable perspective that goes beyond traditional notions of power politics and explores the complex interplay of ideas, norms, and interests in shaping the security dynamics of East Asia.

The absence of open conflict in the disputed waters of the East and South China Sea suggests that the policies adopted are not solely based on the perception of threat as often advocated by liberal-interventionist ideologies, as well as by realist and liberal scholars (Center for Preventive Action, 2023). This can be evidenced by the resource to international legal avenues rather than open military conflict in addressing the heated maritime disputes in the East Asian region (Miranda & Maljak, 2022; Taoqeer, 2020). Such a trend indicates that the countries involved have sought to manage tensions through diplomatic channels and legal frameworks, demonstrating a preference for peaceful resolution and adherence to international norms and laws. This challenges the assumptions of political behavior theories that emphasize power dynamics and conflict as the primary drivers of geopolitics in the region.

In addition to legal efforts due to the involvement of UNCLOS, diplomacy has been carried out by the countries involved to defuse the ‘hot’ geopolitical tensions in these two maritime areas (Cobus, 2017; Darmawan, 2021; Kardon, 2023). The path taken to secure national sovereignty by each country has not been through open military actions, but rather through international legal instruments and diplomacy, which demonstrate, in the framework of attitude, a departure from the behavioral model of great powers ready to conflict.

Various multilateral institutions have been established by the countries in East Asia involved in the ‘heating up’ of geopolitics in the region. Through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asian Summit (EAS), discussions on the South China Sea dispute are conducted through dialogic networks rather than preparations for open conflict (de Alwis, 2016). When this issue is intensively voiced and the performance of multilateral institutions is perceived as slow, it can be seen as a positive sign and not always interpreted negatively when juxtaposed with the logic of the balance of power.

The escalating geopolitical tensions in these two seas and the delayed response by the involved countries and institutions can be seen in a positive light, as it demonstrates that these countries are not overly focused on exacerbating the dispute (Khokhar, 2023). Once again, this can address the arguments put forth by realist proponents, advocating for countries to strengthen their military capabilities, and the calls from liberal proponents for open alliances with only one party, which cannot be achieved in this context.

The policies and attitudes of East Asian countries towards threats may appear similar due to their overall focus on territorial sovereignty and nationalism. However, this cannot be used as a benchmark to understand East Asian geopolitics solely through the lens of political behavior. Meanwhile, political attitude reveals the diversity of decisions influenced by other constructs such as history, alternative cooperation, and a desire to avoid conflict.

Indeed, to demonstrate these differences in attitudes, a more comprehensive packaging of discussions is needed, separately addressing the diplomacy of each country, the presence of international law, and the norms believed and applied in the East Asian region (Kardon, 2023). After recognizing these differences, the understanding of contemporary East Asian geopolitics can no longer be perceived through political behavior alone, as the region has shifted from hegemony to regional pluralism, indicating a change in the underlying structure.

The depiction of East Asian geopolitics, based on the political attitude approach, can have an in-out as well as an out-in role. When examining it from the in-out perspective, the result is public policies based on close analysis of states through diplomacy and specific attitudes that may contradict both realism and liberalism. On the other hand, from the out-in perspective, realism and liberalism operate in the realm of opinions and possibilities, often unable to fully explain political attitudes that strive for coexistence in a heated environment while still advocating for peace and stability.

The agency model of states, to illustrate the existence of threats, can be seen as detached from ideology. Take China, for example, as analysis must be detached from the singularity or even the monopoly of variables because in reality, it not only displays assertive behavior but also contributes to building a regional order based on a rules-based order through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or the One Belt One Road (OBOR) (Chong & Pham, 2020; Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019). This consequence then indicates that the heated tensions in East Asian geopolitics will not necessarily lead countries to open conflicts but rather create security dilemmas and needs.

The practical realities in diplomacy and foreign policies of East Asian countries have successfully demonstrated that the balance of power and balance of threat is not perceived as complete threats, but rather as dynamics equilibrium that ultimately leads to the creation of multilateral institutions. This serves as a political message that each country may have disagreements on certain aspects but, in other areas, they engage in deep military and economic cooperation.

When examined further, the intensification of geopolitical tensions in the East Asian region occurs when external powers attempt to counterbalance it, although on the other hand, it also provides positive evidence that the East Asian region is always open to the establishment of various institutions to accommodate interests and multilateral networks. When China initiated networks through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or OBOR, the United States then introduced the Pivot and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, albeit with geopolitical implications.

The tendency of external powers to form defense alliances can be dangerous for the East Asian region as it increases the intensity of dilemmas and threat perceptions for certain countries. Returning to the mapping, important countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea will have different understandings of initiatives like AUKUS and the Quad, based on their respective perspectives (EIU, 2021; Salil, 2021; Stromseth, 2021). This indicates that the United States, amid its hegemonic crisis in the region, is shifting its focus from a geoeconomic agenda to a geopolitical one.

Political attitude, as explored in this research, elucidates the dynamics of East Asian geopolitics, building on the tenets of constructivism to explain that the diversity of policies resulting from local and external processes demonstrates a warm tension that is not as dire as envisioned by realists and liberals. An important lesson derived from this study is how to further uncover the nuances of political attitude based on the practices of diplomacy, international law, and ongoing connections within each country. This endeavor aims to facilitate a lighter understanding of geopolitics.

**Conclusion**

As a consequence of realism and liberalism, political behavior portrays the geopolitical situation in the East Asian region in a seemingly forced manner. Supporting data and arguments are based on facts and assumptions closely linked to threats, territorial sovereignty, and the post-Cold War regional structure. The presence of external actors in the region has colored the geopolitical landscape with a sense of heightened tension beyond what is being done by each country.

The openings provided by constructivism regarding political attitude highlight the need for research based on ideas, norms, culture, history, and facts. The existence and operation of numerous institutions and multilateral and bilateral diplomacy involving countries indicate that the equilibrium in the East Asian region is not heading toward conflict but is merely creating a heated atmosphere.

When discussing possible simulations, East Asian countries, either individually or through institutions, always strive not to exacerbate tensions but rather adhere to norms, deepen cooperation in other areas, and prove that their approach does not rely on the assumptions and predictions of realist or liberal perspectives. This presents a positive image for the East Asian region as it successfully manages governance despite perceived conflicts.

In future research, it is hoped that there will be a deeper exploration of the differences between political attitude and political behavior to understand geopolitics, even extending beyond the frameworks of realism and liberalism to encompass other regions. While various theoretical approaches may elegantly explain the subject, the reality on the ground may be more nuanced than what researchers envision to comprehend East Asian geopolitics.

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