

# Remembering or Overcoming the Past?: “History Politics,” Asian Identity, and Visions of an East Asian Community

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## *Abstract*

*The East Asian region is at the center of debates on Asian integration. It is often viewed as the core and engine for further political integration. It also serves as the main potential source of an Asian identity. In fact, many political and research initiatives by governments (East Asia Vision Group, East Asia Study Group), as well as non-governmental organizations (Korean East Asia Foundation, Chinese-led Network of East Asian Think Tanks, Japanese Council on East Asian Community, etc.), have focused on this region, with attention awarded mainly to Japan, China, and South Korea in Northeast Asia and, to a lesser degree, the Southeast Asian countries of ASEAN. Yet, East Asia is also a region of fierce competition for regional leadership, particularly between China and Japan, and continuing nationalist ambitions impede the formation of an integrated political body and a shared Asian identity. History, or more precisely, the political usage of history, has been identified as a major limitation to these integrative and formative processes. “History politics” appear to obstruct the creation of a transnational consciousness which is deemed necessary to strengthen Asia, both vis-à-vis other world regions, and against rivaling nationalisms within Asia.*

*Against this background, this article examines the current state of “history politics” through an analysis of the activities and publications of government representatives (“track 1 diplomacy”) and foreign policy related think tanks (“track 2 diplomacy”) from Japan, China, and South Korea that exert a major influence on public debate and political decision-making domestically and across Asia. A particular focus is placed on how the past is employed as “political currency” (Heisler) in the triangular relationship between history, integration, and identity. The article thereby addresses the wider, and potentially positive, implications of East Asia’s contested past for the debate on further political integration in Asia and the formation of an Asian identity.*