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### **Friend-enemy divided thinking ignites flames of conflict**

Researchers found that stronger friend-enemy divided thinking leads people to believe more in conspiracy theories, and hold more negative attitudes toward international relations.

**Fukuoka, Japan**—From heated election campaigns to regional wars, 2024 has witnessed many dramatic political conflicts across the globe. Understanding the underlying causes of these conflicts is crucial for finding pathways to peace.

Researchers from Kyushu University, Fukuoka University, and Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University conducted an interdisciplinary study combining insights from political science and psychology. Their research aimed to uncover the psychological mechanisms that contribute to political conflicts. They focused on how “friend-enemy divided thinking” influences political attitudes regarding international relations and conspiracy beliefs.

As humans, we have grown accustomed to categorizing people into “us” and “them” based on characteristics like nationality, gender, or beliefs. When such binary categorizations are coupled with “friend” versus “enemy” labels, it deepens opposition, which can create the smoke of intergroup conflict—even when there's no real fire.

Analyzing 735 survey responses from Japan, the researchers found that individuals with a strong “friend versus enemy” mindset are more likely to perceive threats in matters of national security and immigration, supporting negative policies toward international relations. These people also hold stronger conspiracy beliefs, particularly those suggesting other groups are secretly plotting harmful actions. The study was published in [SAGE Open](#) on May 28, 2024.

“Those who strongly differentiate between friends and enemies hold biases that outsiders are unfriendly, untrustworthy, and impossible to communicate with,” says [Toru Oga](#), Associate Professor at [Kyushu University's Faculty of Law](#) and co-author of the study. “This mindset fosters defensive and hostile political attitudes toward international issues, making individuals more likely to perceive military threats and feel anxious about increasing numbers of foreign residents.”

The research also revealed a strong connection between this friend-enemy thinking and conspiracy beliefs. These individuals are more likely to see significant social and political events as deliberate plots by foreign nations or interest groups. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, they tended to believe that governments were concealing true infection numbers, media outlets were profiting from public fear, and another country engineered the virus as a bioweapon.

“Among all the factors we studied—including gender, education level, and ideology like conservative or liberal—friend-enemy divided thinking emerged as the strongest driver of conspiracy beliefs,” notes Oga. “When people view the world through this lens, they often interpret opposing viewpoints not as simple disagreements, but as deliberate attempts to

deceive or harm them. This makes them particularly vulnerable to conspiracy theories.”

Such cognitive biases play a powerful role in shaping social polarization by fueling hostility and exclusionary attitudes. The research team hopes their findings can help predict public responses to policies and guide strategies for bridging societal divides.

Looking ahead, the team plans to investigate friend-enemy thinking patterns across different cultures and countries. By better understanding these cultural variations, they aim to encourage dialogue that fits different cultural contexts, ultimately promoting better global cooperation and understanding.

“At a time when political polarization and flaming on social media are intensifying, dialogue remains our essential tool for conflict resolution,” Oga emphasizes. “While differences in opinions and preferences are natural, understanding how to engage in meaningful discussion can prevent conflicts from escalating. Instead of pursuing a conflict-free world, we’re working to develop better ways to handle disagreements when they emerge.”

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For more information about this research, see “Friend–Enemy Divided Thinking from the Perspective of Intergroup Conflict: Relationship with International Attitudes and Conspiracy Beliefs,” Nawata Kengo, Makoto Fujimura, and Toru Oga, *SAGE Open*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241249166>

### About Kyushu University

Founded in 1911, [Kyushu University](#) is one of Japan's leading research-oriented institutes of higher education, consistently ranking as one of the top ten Japanese universities in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and the QS World Rankings. The university is one of the seven national universities in Japan, located in Fukuoka, on the island of Kyushu—the most southwestern of Japan’s four main islands with a population and land size slightly larger than Belgium. Kyushu U’s multiple campuses—home to around 19,000 students and 8000 faculty and staff—are located around Fukuoka City, a coastal metropolis that is frequently ranked among the world's most livable cities and historically known as Japan's gateway to Asia. Through its [VISION 2030](#), Kyushu U will “drive social change with integrative knowledge.” By fusing the spectrum of knowledge, from the humanities and arts to engineering and medical sciences, Kyushu U will strengthen its research in the key areas of decarbonization, medicine and health, and environment and food, to tackle society’s most pressing issues.



Fig. 1.  
Research shows that a “friend or foe” mindset leads to belief in conspiracy theories and fosters defensive, hostile political

attitudes toward international issues.

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