

World Knowledge Forum 2013

New Solutions for the Territorial Dispute in Asia

Amongst the emerging issues in East Asia, there remains ancient arguments over territorial claims and border disputes. At the 2013 World Knowledge Forum, Robert D. Kaplan, Chief Geopolitical Analyst at Stratfor, Christopher Hill, Dean of Josef Korbel School of International Relations at the University of Denver, Mark Valencia, Senior Research Associate at the Nautilus Institute, and Qingguo Jia, Associate Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, met to discuss whether these conflicts could be brought to a close.

The territorial disagreements focused on were primarily maritime problems, and according to Mr. Hill, "This is not a new topic." He cited mercantilism, as well as nationalism, as factors contributing to the perpetual disputes. "In recent years, there has been a major uptick of nationalism...I think when you look at the increase of nationalism, you can also see why some of these old hardy perennials of territorial disputes have become seemingly more emotional and difficult to resolve."

Mr. Kaplan echoed Mr. Hill's sentiments, also citing nationalism as a hindrance to resolving the disputes. "Nationalism is alive and well," he said. "The divisions are not those of ideas, they're not those of human agency versus determinism, communism versus capitalism, or idealism versus realism. The disputes are over territory, over lines on a map, over naked blue water territory."

One of the possible reasons presented for the recent rise of nationalism was new technology. Dr. Jia said, "We're in an age of the Internet, which makes nationalism more prominent. Now, the Internet can instantly reflect what's going on at the borders. Then you have people making comments, and then they interact with each other across national boundaries, which creates new problems of nationalism for countries to manage."

Dr. Valencia feared that this nationalism could ultimately entangle the United States. "The U.S. is unfortunately involved," he said. "It's sort of in the middle, but it's also obviously not neutral, because it's an ally of Japan."

The panel also overwhelmingly agreed on another primary factor: China's influence within the region.

"One of the unintended consequences, and perhaps the one that people in this room are more concerned about, is the fact that as we began rebalancing to Asia, we began it in a sense that looked like we were about to challenge China," stated Mr. Hill. "[The U.S.] engaged in a policy that was more aggressively aimed at a containment of China. With such policies, when there is an implication that you are going to somehow contain someone, there is a reaction. And there has been a reaction in China."

Dr. Jia emphasized that China has put forth solutions, stating, "China's longstanding proposal is that of solving the disputes and engaging in joint exploration of the resources. This approach does not require the concerned parties to give up their sovereignty claims, it only requires them to be pragmatic and share the resources so as to reduce the significance of the conflicting territorial claims."

The United States entered the stage once more, with Mr. Kaplan affirming, "The U.S.-China relationship is the most important bilateral relationship in the world. It's that simple."

"In looking ahead, the U.S. must navigate between two extremes," said Mr. Kaplan. "On the one hand, it cannot let China dominate the battlespace in the East and South China Seas. But on the other hand, it can never let countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines lure the U.S. into a conflict with China."

With many countries entangled throughout East Asia, as well as the world, it is certainly a delicate and complicated situation. Dr. Jia, however, proposed a simple policy that would ensure a peaceful resolution. "In seeking a solution to the problem," he said, "no country should aspire to be an absolute winner and make the other country or countries absolute losers. If that can be realized, then every country can be a winner."