

WKF Day 2: The G2 War: China, the New Global Rule-Setter?

Reporter: Theresa Arico

Moderator:

Sungjoo Han – Korea University, Prof Emeritus

Speakers:

Christopher Hill - University of Denver, Dean of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

John Mearsheimer – University of Chicago, Professor

Angang Hu – Institute for Contemporary China Studies, Tsinghua University, Dean

Xiguang Li – Tsinghua University International Center for Communication Studies, Professor/Director

The world is becoming increasingly polarized between the United States and China, in what is commonly referred to as the G2 War. Will this polarity result in an earth-shattering clash, or can the two great powers come to understand each other? On the second day of the 16th annual World Knowledge Forum in Seoul, a group of distinguished panelists from both the United States and China gathered to discuss the future of Chinese-U.S. relations and how they might affect the world.

These days, the world is governed by a number of financial and diplomatic institutions where countries can, in theory, create rules to better manage the environment, the world economy, and even monitor human rights. However, as Professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago pointed out, “Whoever writes the rules is going to write them in ways that benefit the country in charge of rule-writing.”

Historically, as the dominant world power, the United States wrote all of the rules. Now, as China grows in power, Prof. Mearsheimer predicted a shift in the dynamic.

“There is going to be a real tug-of-war between the United States...and China. And the United States is going to do everything it can to maintain its existing rules,” he said, pointing to the U.S.’s recent refusal to join China’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiative.

While the U.S. speakers seemed wary of Chinese actions, both of the Chinese speakers were much more optimistic in their outlook.

Professor Angang Hu of the Institute for Contemporary China Studies at Tsinghua University stressed the need for the U.S. and China to work together.

“People talk about the G2 War,” he said, “but that perspective is wrong.” He claimed that, in fact, the United States and China can work together to “play a very good role for the betterment of the global community.”

Professor Xiguang Li of the Tsinghua University International Center of Communication Studies echoed Prof. Hu’s sentiments.

“I actually don’t like the title of this session,” Prof. Li said, “It sounds like the title of an entertainment program, [or something] the candidates of the Democratic and Republican Parties would use to attract the attention of the voters.”

Prof. Li described Chinese policy as a peaceful one of “benevolence and harmony”, emphasizing that differences in political governance are irrelevant in the face of our own “common values.”

When his American co-panelist, former U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill, spoke of recent Chinese maritime aggression towards its neighbors, Prof. Li disagreed.

“Everyone must eat,” he said, meaning that each country has its own needs and that China respects that fact.

Ambassador Hill, now Dean of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver, described China as the U.S.’s new “riddle wrapped in a mystery in an enigma.”

While U.S. policy-makers may not completely understand China, they are still willing to work to have a peaceful relationship with the country. Ambassador Hill reiterated many times that American policy toward China is very different from its former stance of containment toward the Soviet Union.

No matter what the future holds for the U.S. and China, and their European and Asian allies caught in the middle, all of the panelists agreed that continued communication is key.

“The U.S.-China relationship is too big to fail,” concluded Ambassador Hill.