

Smart Talk
No. 30

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This product presents a
policy-oriented sum-
mary of the Smart Talk.

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Island Disputes and the “Democratization” of
East Asian National Security Decision Making

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On December 20, 2012, the East Asia Institute invited Dr. David A. Welch and Dr. Seung Hyok Lee to discuss on Island Disputes and the “Democratization” of East Asian National Security Decision Making. The following are some of the main points from the presentation and the subsequent discussion with South Korean experts and scholars.

Summary of the Seminar

Territorial disputes tend to receive widespread public attention and evoke a strong sense of national identity. This is very noticeable in East Asia, where the ongoing island disputes are being driven by the growing influence of societal actors over the international interactions of their governments. While greater public input into the policy making process is generally regarded as a positive development, the democratization of foreign policy (DFP) in East Asia has actually further complicated these contentious issues. Dr. David A. Welch and Dr. Seung Hyok Lee in their presentation contended that DFP does not necessarily denote a trend toward the liberalization of domestic political institutions and outlined the difficulties posed by DFP in managing and resolving highly-charged issues, such as territorial disputes.

Elaborating further, Welch and Lee explored the dynamics and associated dangers of DFP by looking at three ongoing territorial disputes in East Asia: the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute between South Korea and Japan; the

Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute between Japan and China; and the Southern Kurils/Northern Territories dispute between Russia and Japan.

The Dokdo/Takeshima issue is problematic because it involves an important third party, the United States which is a close alliance partner of each country and seeks better relations between the two antagonists. There are further complications regarding Dokdo as it is intertwined with other unresolved disputes from the colonial period, such as the comfort women issue. In the DFP over the Dokdo dispute, the media has played a crucial role in transforming what is a strongly politicized issue into something resembling a national ideology.

With the case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute between China and Japan, it is evidence that DFP is not necessarily a phenomenon exclusive to democratic states. Unlike the Dokdo dispute, the conflict over Senkaku/Diaoyu is more symmetrical in that the policy in both states is strongly driven by public emotionalism. Despite some minor differences between the two disputes, they are both highly-charged emotional issues that have a corrosive impact upon bilateral relations.

On the other hand, the Southern Kurils/Northern Territories issue is a little different as it is more stable and therefore has become a fixed feature of the bilateral diplomatic landscape between Japan and Russia. Welch and Lee offered three plausible factors in an attempt to understand this puzzle. First, the Southern Kurils/Northern Territories have been the subject of negotiations in the past

which gives the two governments “ownership” over the issue. This inclines societal actors to take a back seat, thus limiting the degree of DFP. Second, the dispute itself is set within a broader national-identity issue since there is no lingering colonial legacy in Russo-Japanese relations. Third, this case does not consist of two countries with similar cultural backgrounds. Such a factor usually results in societal actors seeking to claim a stake in foreign policy issues as a way to assert their national identity.

In regard to territorial disputes, Welch and Lee outlined three possible paths to a resolution: 1) one side gives up its claim; 2) both sides reach a compromise; or 3) both sides agree to arbitration or adjudication by a third party. Welch and Lee concluded by stating that in the case of the DFP related to the island disputes in East Asia, leaders should seek to prevent nationalist passions from boiling over and guide popular sentiment down the path of seeking a peaceful resolution.

During the discussion, one of the discussants raised the point that the fact that governments are allowing the democratization of issues rather than simply claiming their sole ownership may suggest a positive effect of DFP. Welch and Lee argued that while positive and negative effects of DFP are hard to clearly define and can be seen from different perspectives, DFP usually impedes rational approaches to foreign policy since it involves different societal actors who are usually emotionally attached to the issues. A further challenge identified was that these days the public has different platforms in which to access information on foreign policy issues. This makes it difficult for a government to claim sole ownership on a country’s foreign policy. Another topic covered during the discussion

was the difficulty of inviting an arbiter to resolve territorial disputes in East Asia. It was agreed that this would be political suicide for any leader if he or she tried to push arbitration through onto the national agenda. Considering that the public believe that even the idea of inviting a third party to mediate is a form of relinquishing sovereignty, it is unlikely that either arbitration or adjudication would be considered as an acceptable measure to resolve island disputes in East Asia at the present time. ■

About the Speakers

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David A. Welch is Chair of Global Security at the Center for International Governance Innovation at the Balsillie School of International Affairs, and Professor of Political Science at the University of Waterloo.

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