

East Asian Security: Challenges for U.S. Policy and the Region

The Fletcher School, Tufts University

ASEAN Auditorium

160 Packard Ave., Medford, MA 02155

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Speakers and Participants

Adm. James Stavridis, Dean, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University

Tsutomu Himeno, Consul General, Consulate General of Japan in Boston

James J. Przystup, Center for Strategic Research, National Defense University

Sung-Yoon Lee, The Fletcher School

Hideshi Tokuchi, Former Vice Minister of Defense for International Affairs & Senior Fellow, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

Brian Harding, Center for American Progress

Sulmaan Khan, The Fletcher School

Summary of Presentations

In his opening remarks, James Stavridis recalled sailing across the Pacific and seeing Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. Even then, he said, it was clear that this would be the Asian century. That century had arrived for reasons including demographics, innovation, energy, and sheer drive. The world is pivoting to Asia and for the United States, there are two abiding planks to its Asian policy. First, there is the treaty relationship with Japan. Second, there is the treaty relationship with South Korea. These two major American allies have not seen eye to eye in the past, and the Seoul-Tokyo relationship will be important. The United States enjoys strong relations with both. The dean concluded by hoping that the conference would explore the appropriate role for the United States in the region, the role of India, particularly as it pertains to the US-Japan relationship, and the role of China in the maritime sphere. It was a tall order, but the conference, by and large, met it.

Consul General Tsutomu Himeno expressed his pleasure at the conference being held. Fletcher's ties with Japan go back a long way; hence his idea that the conference should be held at Fletcher and his suggestion to Sung-Yoon Lee for cooperation. Hideshi Tokuchi, he added, was a Fletcher alumnus; bringing him home was an added inducement.

After these opening remarks, a panel comprising James Przystup and Sung-Yoon Lee took the floor to discuss America's role in East Asia. James Przystup explored the challenges to maritime stability and security in the Asia-Pacific, in a talk that bound Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia together. American interests here include defense of the homeland, access, balance of power, regional stability, rules and norms, and non-proliferation. These interests are challenged by unilateral coercion, the existence of gray zones, China's activities in the East and South China Sea, the modernization of the People's Liberation Army, and Sino-American differences over the law of the sea. Przystup's thoughtful suggestions for countering these challenges included new defense guidelines for deterrence, the search for a binding code of conduct, diplomacy, cooperation between allies, and confidence building measures. He concluded with the obligatory reminder that these were his views alone and did not represent those of the US government.

Sung-Yoon Lee's presentation focused on North Korea as being at the heart of the basic security dynamic in Northeast Asia. He mentioned the great war that swept across Korea from 1592 to 1598, pointing out

how it visited suffering on Koreans, was fought by great powers, and ended in a stalemate. The parallels with the more recent Korean War were obvious. South Korean historians, Lee pointed out, make these stories a morality play, suggesting that South Korea hitch its fate with China—a point Xi Jinping is keen to invoke. A policy of equidistance between China and the US has its supporters in Seoul. The ceasefire that marked the end of the Korean War was not a peace agreement, but a de facto peace—and one which has left North Korea unchallenged for decades. North Korea knows exactly when to strike and the US has paid dearly for underestimating it. The main issue is how to get China on board in dealing with North Korea. Moral suasion has not worked; Lee suggested putting sanctions on Chinese enablers.

A lively discussion ensued, which encompassed the wisdom of sanctions, the nature of the security dilemma, and the pace and extent of land reclamation. Following this, the second panel—comprising Hideshi Tokuchi, Brian Harding, and Sulmaan Khan—took the floor.

Tokuchi's presentation focused on the East Asian security environment, the new phase of the US-Japan alliance, and on regional cooperation. He began by invoking Cold War diplomat George F. Kennan's notion of industrial complexes; Kennan had thought Japan much more important than China and believed that Americans tended to overestimate China's importance. Times change, and China now was larger, stronger; power had shifted from Europe to the Asia-Pacific and from Japan to China. The current security system, Tokuchi observed, is also characterized by an uneven power distribution between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Restoring the balance of power and maintaining stability demanded reinforcing the existing system. The US-Japan alliance should be strengthened; maritime security should be safeguarded. Deterrence should be extended. Freedom of navigation activities should continue. The US should continue to train and equip littoral South China Sea states, a project Japan should support. Tokuchi also suggested strengthening cooperation between Japan and other American allies such as Australia and South Korea.

Brian Harding's presentation focused on Southeast Asia, a part of the world which, he noted, is getting increased attention. Issues in the South China Sea are being raised at a multitude of fora which include Southeast Asian countries. The outcome has been unfavorable to China, provoking new security partnerships in a region that does not wish to be dominated by any external player. The security architecture in the region is being redesigned. Relationships between the US and Indonesia, the US and the Philippines, the US and Singapore, and the US and Malaysia are strengthening. All of this, coupled with the achievement of the Trans-Pacific Pact, leaves the next administration with a tough act to follow. Harding concluded by warning that while to outsiders the main issues might seem to be security issues, to Southeast Asian countries the most concerning questions remain the economy and political survival.

Sulmaan Khan began by noting that everyone is pivoting to Asia: the US, Russia, even China with its increased maritime activity. From China's perspective, he pointed out, the world looks fundamentally hostile. Japan's military revival, the elections in Taiwan, the scramble in the South China Sea, along with Washington's bellicosity, makes the Chinese feel vulnerable and hemmed in. China's recent moves may be understood as being defensive in nature—and if defending oneself meant behaving like a great power, so be it. Khan suggested that Japan's attempts to be treated as a normal country are hampered by its ineptitude at public diplomacy, whether in the woodenness of its apologies for World War II atrocities or its fumbling over history textbooks. The USA's regional conduct is driven by a belief in the importance of open sea lanes, suspicion of China, and commitment to allies. Russia, he pointed out, has turned to China economically, but ethnic and political divisions remained powerful. Russia is likely to seek a balance of power in the region. Given these dynamics, an annual Pacific Four summit might help mitigate tension. Khan closed with the controversial suggestion that disputed territories in the region be declared international territory and shared.

The discussion that followed was far-ranging and deep, covering issues from whether or not Japan should make yet another apology to how feasible sharing disputed islands was. What was remarkable was how much had been explored and how many areas remained waiting for exploration. The question of Taiwan had been unaddressed. Large structural forces—demographics, environmental change, resource demand—will have an impact on East Asian security and demand deeper attention. And East Asia's place in the broader global community might merit further scrutiny. All of which could provide excellent themes for a future conference.