

Asan Dosirak Series with Experts- Conference Sketch

“The Politics of Historical Memory: Comparing East Asia and Europe”

Thomas Berger, Professor at Boston University

Date/Time: Friday, June 8, 2012/10:30 am-12:00 pm

Place: Conference Room [2F], The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

On Friday, June 8, 2012, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies held the *Asan Dosirak series* with Dr. Thomas Berger under the title, **“The Politics of Historical Memory: Comparing East Asia and Europe.”** The discussion was based on the role of history and the timely issue of reconciliation in international politics amidst leadership transitions in Northeast Asia. In this context, Dr. Berger provided a comparative analysis of East Asia and Europe’s directions of historical reconciliation. The way in which the Germany and Japan understand their respective security policies and strategic cultures has great impacts on their grand strategy, and the directions they are headed. Dr. Berger argued that despite Europe and Asia’s different histories, both experiences share dynamics and processes from which we can draw lessons.

Dr. Berger provided a genealogical framework of the European experience and the evolution of how issues were dealt with over five periods. The end of World War II left a desire for justice and the emergence of revenge, exhaustion, and anger. Following this period, countries coped with the residual aftermath of World War II through sustained efforts in pursuing ‘transitional justice’ as seen in the German and Austrian case. The difficulty in implementing transitional justice policies led to policy failures amidst the urgent need to rebuild the country. After the Cold War there was an outbreak of guilt and the emergence of reconciliation by European countries, leading to Germany’s military involvement in NATO and anti-ethnic cleansing operations. Yet, Germany recognized that reconciliation is a continuous process. Alternately, Dr. Berger discussed Japan’s movement towards reconciliation as exemplified by Murayama’s apology, and the recent pressure on East Asia to confront the past, pressured by issues such as the revision of Japanese historical textbooks.

Dr. Berger further elaborated on the reasons for differences in outcome between Europe and East Asia being attributed to the absence of multilateral frameworks to manage certain issues, compounded by the problem of structure, and lack of intellectual capital to understand. He advised containing these issues, taking them off the political agenda, and finding ways to prevent these issues arising to the surface. Dr. Berger stressed that it is essential to prevent these dynamics from intervening in territorial issues such as Dokdo/Takashima, Senkaku/Diaoyu, and the South China Sea. Dr. Berger recommended analysis of the European experience in reconciling the past in East Asia through compensation to the victims and sustaining commemoration and education policies.

During the subsequent Q&A session, Dr. Berger stressed the need for both the government and public to cooperate in reconciling the past, despite generational changes. Moreover, he acknowledged that historical issues have not been a focus on the Japanese agenda yet, due to the lack of political capital available and the opportunity to push it as a national issue.

* The *Asan Dosirak Series with Experts* is an informal roundtable series that brings foreign visiting scholars and policy officials together with the public for an hour and a half of open discussion. Named after the Korean word for “lunch box,” the *Dosirak Series* allows for a more conversational and free-flowing discussion between speakers and participants.