

Session: Session 3-2 (Flashpoints in Asia: Taiwan Strait and South China Sea)

Date/Time: May 14, 2024 / 14:55-16:10

Rapporteur:

Ida Hoevik, Yonsei University

Moderator:

Duyeon Kim, Center for a New American Security

Speakers:

Jimbo Ken, Keio University

Ellen Kim, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Patricia Kim, Brookings Institution

Kim Young-Ho, Korea National Defense University

Wang Junsheng, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

Session Sketch:

Concurrent session 3-2, “Flashpoints in Asia: Taiwan Strait and South China Sea” discussed the territorial and maritime disputes that impact the region. A core theme of this session was how military accidents and miscalculations generate tension for the two major flashpoints in Asia, which are the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. The importance of crisis management mechanisms was particularly emphasized.

Dr. Duyeon Kim opened the session by introducing the two flashpoints in Asia, namely the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Her first question, which was presented to all five panelists, concerned the identification of which potential pathway for a conflict they found most concerning and most likely in the Taiwan Strait.

Dr. Jimbo Ken, Professor in the Faculty of Policy Management at Keio University, identified two major pathways toward conflict. The first is the conflict of necessity, which Dr. Jimbo notes to be based on the One China principle, under the Anti-Secession Law. The second pathway is the conflict of opportunity. Dr. Jimbo emphasized that the growing imbalance of power over the Taiwan Strait could potentially enable China to take forceful action against Taiwan.

Dr. Ellen Kim, Deputy Director and Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, proceeded to identify three conditions under which China might use force against Taiwan. The first is when Taiwan declares independence, the second is when the United States moves away from the One China policy and recognizes Taiwan as an independent and sovereign state, and the third is when China loses faith in a non-forceful approach to unification. Dr. Kim said that she finds none of these likely to take place.

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Dr. Patricia Kim, Foreign Policy Fellow at the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution, similarly believed that military action taken by China in the case of the Taiwanese similarly stated declared independence and forceful unification by China as potential pathways to conflict. However, Dr. Kim believed the most likely pathway to be a conflict triggered by an unintended clash or escalation by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and Taiwanese forces.

Dr. Kim Young-ho, Vice President, and Professor at Korea National Defense University, agreed with Dr. Patricia Kim that unintentional escalation by Chinese navies would be the most likely pathway toward conflict in the region.

Dr. Wang Junsheng, Director and Professor in the Department of China’s Regional Strategy at the National Institute of International Strategy and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences points out that the current situation is very dangerous. We work out from the dilemma that China, out of international cooperation ought to respect each other's countries. He emphasized that the last thing China wishes for is a conflict in Taiwan. The most likely imaginable scenario might be one of two: One possible scenario is if Taiwan announces independence, and another is that Taiwan will be a cause of armed conflict between China and the United States, comparable to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

Furthermore, the discussion included the potential global implications, particularly concerning the Korean Peninsula and Japan, if there were to be an escalation of conflict in the region. Dr. Kim Young-ho suggested scenarios where China might provoke North Korea to distract the United States’ attention from Taiwan and the possibilities of North Korea exploiting such a situation. Dr. Ellen Kim pointed out the critical economic implications for South Korea, given its reliance on trade routes through these contested waters.

Lastly, the panelists discussed the role that South Korea might play in such potential conflict scenarios, from limited logistical support towards more active engagement. Lastly, the need for diplomatic efforts and communication to mitigate risks and further stabilize the relationships between China and the United States was underscored, which concluded with a call by Dr. Kim Young-ho to seek out increasingly effective mechanisms through which tensions can be managed and de-escalated.

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