



SESSION SKETCHES

Asan Plenum 2013: “New World Disorder”
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Confronting History in East Asia

Panel: Session 4 (Grand Ballroom I)

Date/Time: Wednesday, May 1, 2013 / 09:00-10:15

Speakers: Christopher Nelson, Samuels International Associates, Inc.
Bong Youngshik, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
Mark Manyin, Congressional Research Service
Pan Zhenqiang, China Reform Forum
Tatsumi Yuki, Stimson Center

Rapporteur: Steven Denney, Yonsei University

Through a volley of clichés about history, moderator Christopher Nelson moved quick to illuminate the political importance of “remembering,” the significance of national histories and discourse, and the security implications of history in East Asia. Nelson pointed to the resolution condemning Shinzo Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni war shrine, passed by the Korean National Assembly as he and others were making their way to the Asan Plenum, as an indication that history, especially in East Asia, is as Falkner understood it: “not ... the past.”

In good humor, Bong Youngshik began by thanking the Shinzo Abe government for making the panel extremely relevant. Speaking for his native South Korea, Bong focused on the Japan-Korean bilateral relationship, with unique insights on the possibility of Japan and South Korea improving their bilateral partnership by overcoming the burden history. Bong’s assessment is, in his words, “not so bright.” Going forward, “it seems that it is impossible ... to get an apology [from Japan] that will satisfy South Koreans.” Citing from the Asan Institute’s public opinion poll data on the 1995 apology issued by Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, Bong found that less than 3 percent of the South Korean public have *both* heard of the apology and understand what it meant.

Pan Zhenqiang, coming at the issue from the Chinese perspective, made two broad points. The first was related to, as Pan put, “the many tragedies in East Asia, caused by Japanese aggression.” In the face of such tragedies, “many Chinese wonder why the Japanese so obstinately refuses to face modern history.” In the face of decades of economic malaise

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and a myriad of other domestic problems, Pan suggested a possible explanation: the high-jacking of public discourse on the issue by the highly nationalist political rightist. The second point related to the US role and responsibility in the history issue. “American has a role in historical issue,” Pan stated. Taking a position similar to historian John Dowager’s, Pan linked Japan’s special relation with the United States, forged in the post-WWII era, as preventing the US from taking a more responsible role in resolving “the history issue.”

Tatsumi Yuki, a Japanese scholar based in Washington DC, provided some balance by highlighting the Japanese perspective. She started off by reading three different apologies that have been proffered by three different Japanese Prime Ministers over the last 18 years, starting with Murayama’s 1995 apology. Though she sided with her Chinese, Korean, and American colleagues that visits to the Yasukuni shrine by high level officials, in addition to other provocative decisions (e.g. support for textbook revisions), works against Japan’s self-interest and further entrenches the region’s negative views towards Japan, Yuki beckoned those concerned with the issue to consider how the Japanese have internalized the highly politicized ideational issues related to Asia-Pacific War. “As they [continually] get panned by this view, [even ordinary Japanese] become resentful.”

Mark Manyin, presenting the American view on the issue, painted a narrative which would allow him to suggest that America plays a “referee” role in the ideational soccer match. As such, Manyin provided a general critique of all players involved. In addition to agreeing with all on the panel Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni shrine is detrimental to Japan’s image and the regional order, he emphasized that Abe’s return to the position of prime minister was in no small part a reaction to the highly nationalist behavior of China and South Korean during 2012. Actions like President Lee Myung-bak’s visit to Dokdo and his inflammatory comments about the Japanese emperor elicited a nationalist response in Japan. Though he pointed to both Japan and South Korea’s seeming inability to reconcile past issues, he remained hopeful that through prudent political leadership and the use of existing frameworks for dialogue, reconciliation can be reached.

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