

Smart Talk No. 25

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The World America Made and Current Challenges in East Asia

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On May 22, 2012, the East Asia Institute invited Dr. Robert Kagan (Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution) to discuss on the U.S. position in the world and current challenges in East Asia. The following are some of the main points of the discussion with South Korean experts and scholars.

Summary of the Discussion

Since the global financial crisis in 2008, the relative decline of the United States and the rise of China have prompted many to consider that the U.S. position in the world is in retreat and that its superpower days are fading. Such views are now becoming increasingly common within the United States as economic difficulties erode previous confidence and optimism. Dr. Kagan began by stating that these perceptions are not only premature but also misguided in the way that they view the United States. He then outlined three reasons on why the U.S. position in the world remains strong and why it will not be surpassed by another power.

The first is that talk of the United States being in decline is based on a mythical view of U.S. history. That is, people tend to overlook the fact that the United States has struggled in the past having lost wars and suffering economic setbacks yet still maintained its dominant position in the world.

The second important point to note is that the United States has the advantage of geography which no other superpower in history has benefited from. As the United States

faces no direct threat, it is able to dispatch forces around the world without weakening the security of its homeland. This luxury is something China or Russia is unable to enjoy as they both face direct threats on their periphery.

Lastly, the third factor for U.S. strength is the way in which it continues to lead in social media and higher education, areas which are crucial for the future growth of the United States and for its influence around the world.

Much of the discussion focused on the main challenges for the United States in East Asia. The first issue related to North Korea as the Kim Jong-un regime establishes its power base and concern grows surrounding a possible third nuclear test. There was general agreement during the discussion that the succession process in North Korea has proceeded smoothly and that the Kim Jong-un regime will enjoy stability for the short to medium-term. However, the long term picture remains unclear, particularly if Kim Jong-un remains committed to his father's military-first politics.

Despite the apparent stability of the succession process, two areas of genuine concern were pointed out during the discussion. The first is Pyongyang's harsh rhetoric against South Korea and even personal attacks against President Lee Myung-bak. Following up with these verbal barrages, North Korea has been jamming GPS signals in the Yellow Sea which has affected flights and shipping in the area. This latest provocation has actually resulted in strong criticism from both China and Russia whose own aircrafts and ships have been af-

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

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fected. It is interesting to note that the jamming of GPS signals came to a halt a day before the ROK-China bilateral summit was held in Beijing on May 14, 2012.

The second concern was on the possibility for North Korea to conduct a third nuclear test. It has been the pattern in the past for Pyongyang to conduct a rocket launch and then follow up with a nuclear test. International attention has therefore been focused on the Punggye-ri nuclear test site. As yet though there has not been a test and it was agreed during the discussion that China was a major factor in this regard. Despite some of the domestic benefits from conducting a test, such as strengthening the regime, Kim Jong-un has to consider the impact it would have on any future visit to China. Again this shows the important role of Beijing in managing Pyongyang's behavior.

The next regional challenge for the United States is its relations with China and the contentious issues that are causing conflict between the two countries. It was identified in the discussion that China's "assertive" behavior in 2010 has probably caused more problems for Beijing than Washington. As a result of those actions, countries in Asia have become more concerned about China flexing its muscles. These countries are now turning to the United States for support much to Beijing's disappointment. Such an outcome has allowed for the Obama administration to reassert U.S. leadership in the region through the so-called "pivot."

Considering the future course of U.S.-China relations, there was certain optimism expressed that the relationship can be managed but concerns that Beijing's "core issues" could be a source of future conflict. It is possible that China will defer some of these difficult issues, possibly until its national power

will be able to match the United States. Still, the domestic challenges that China's faces are immense and the United States still remains in an advantageous position. For a long time to come, the United States will be able to ensure its dominance in Asia and the wider world. ■

About the Speaker

Robert Kagan

Robert Kagan is a senior fellow in Foreign Policy at Brookings. His most recent book is *The World America Made*. Dr. Kagan also serves as a member of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's Foreign Affairs Policy Board and is co-chairman of the bipartisan Working Group on Egypt. He writes a monthly column on world affairs for the *Washington Post*, and is a contributing editor at both the *Weekly Standard* and *The New Republic*. He served in the State Department from 1984 to 1988 as a member of the policy planning staff, principal speechwriter for Secretary of State George P. Shultz, and as deputy for policy in the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs.

Dr. Kagan is a graduate of Yale University and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and holds a Ph.D. in American History from American University. His book, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the 20th Century* (Knopf, 2006), was the winner of the 2008 Lepgold Prize and a 2007 Finalist for the Lionel Gelber Prize. His acclaimed book, *Of Paradise and Power* (Knopf, 2003), was on *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* bestseller lists. Kagan is also the author of *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (Knopf, 2008).