

Smart Talk  
No. 34

**Presenter**

David A. Welch and  
Paul Evans

**Moderator**

Sook-Jong Lee

**Discussants**

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

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## Confidence, Trust, and Empathy in Asia-Pacific Security Relations

October 21, 2013

On October 17, EAI and the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), an independent, non-partisan Canadian think tank focused on international governance challenges, held a discussion centered on the role of empathy in Northeast Asia security issues. The topic was presented by David A. Welch of CIGI – based on two of his current working paper drafts – and Paul Evans of the University of British Columbia, who were joined by selected Korean scholars and government officials.

### Summary

Confidence-building measures (CBMs) and trust-building measures (TBMs), such as prior notification of military exercises and invitations to observe maneuvers, are common tactics employed to reduce the threat of a security dilemma among nations. Welch seeks to make a seldom-used term – empathy – more prevalent in East Asian security discourse, because it is ‘a necessary condition for stable peace.’ He defined empathy as putting oneself into another person’s shoes – the capacity to see the world from another’s perspective.

Welch argued that empathy must be added to the security lexicon along with CBMs and TBMs, because confidence implies the actor is optimistic but not entirely sure. Therefore, there is room for doubt, which leads to greater security concerns. Trust suggests a special connection based upon the character and disposition of the two nations and the nature of their relationship – U.S.-Canada relations, for example. Trust can be violated, however, because it is just a stronger extension of confidence, not an inviolable bond. It also does not apply to security based on

situational conditions, such as the environment in East Asia.

A lack of empathy widens the gap between real threats and perceived threats. South Korea and Japan misperceive security threats over Dokdo and South Korean demonization, respectively, while ignoring real threats such as environmental degradation. In addition, a lack of empathy creates dangerous security situations that could lead to war. Welch witnessed this when he conducted a critical oral history – bringing together important decision makers on all sides of an historic event to provide personal accounts – for the Cuban Missile Crisis and determined the Americans, Soviets, and Cubans stumbled into it due to mutual misunderstanding.

Welch discussed his two current working paper drafts, which are intended to develop the concept of empathy with the goal of understanding: ‘Why do smart people make so many mistakes?’ The first working paper titled “Confidence, Trust, Empathy” focuses on the definitions of the three terms with the goals of clarifying ‘unclear, flabby English’ and placing experts on the same level by producing a common understanding of the terms. The second working paper titled “The Yawning Gap between Threat and Threat Perception in Northeast Asia (and how to bridge it)” outlines Welch’s argument that people fear things that they shouldn’t fear. If there was more empathy in the region, there would be fewer worries.

The salience of empathy in security considerations was then discussed in relation to the Park Geun-hye administration’s policy of Trustpolitik, created to reduce the trust gap with North Korea. Sang Hyun Lee described the three pillars of Trustpolitik: 1) a circle of trust building

to build on small, incremental steps bit by bit; 2) the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative to embed the trust-building process into the regional theater; and 3) middle power diplomacy to engender trust among like-minded middle powers who can work hand-in-hand to ameliorate possible security dilemmas.

The assembled South Korean discussants offered their varied viewpoints toward the idea that empathy can reduce security concerns in East Asia. There was concern that even if the trust gap was reduced through increased empathy, the region's territorial issues would still remain. East Asian nations will not surrender territorial claims just by understanding the other nation's counterclaim. On the issue of North Korea, it can be argued that empathy does not equal sympathy. One can understand the reasons behind Kim Jong-un's policies but still believe there is a better way. Small gaps in mutual agreements on how to proceed can lead to greater political problems. In addition, it was discussed that if empathy led to fully understanding a rival power's military and political capabilities, then it would sometimes be necessary to balance against it – not solving the security problem.

The discussion then debated the merits of Trustpolitik with arguments that it is a soft security approach that does not know the difference between trust and confidence. It does not take into account the pessimistic reality of East Asia and does not facilitate the trust that is necessary to build empathy and achieve hard political breakthroughs. Also, it is not entirely clear that East Asian nations really want to trust each other. To further complicate the problems that confront Trustpolitik, it is possible that regional biases drive the domestic politics which often hinder the development of empathy. In the case of the recent downturn in Korea-Japan relations, it was argued that South Korea already exhibits a high level of empathy with Japan, yet it creates more misperceptions.

In conclusion, Welch said that sympathy

does not exist in international relations. It is not necessary to achieve positive results, as long as there is shared understanding. Also, a functionalist approach to trust based on the accumulation of minor agreements is inefficient. European integration was founded more upon social roots, which led to greater empathy. Evans, however, posited that functionalist and social approaches toward trust should not be separated. At the highest levels, leaders can complicate issues if they spend too much time working together on functional issues. Lower level interactions, however, have increased greatly in East Asia in the past twenty years and have helped people in each nation to improve their understanding of each other – which ideally will lead to greater empathy. ■

### **About the Speakers**

#### **David A. Welch**

David A. Welch is a CIGI senior fellow, chair of global security at the Balsillie School of International Affairs and professor of political science at the University of Waterloo. He is also founder of the Japan Futures Initiative.

#### **Paul Evans**

Paul Evans is a professor at the Institute of Asian Research and Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia.

#### **Moderator**

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#### **Discussants**

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