



## **Towards a General Theory- Territorial Disputes, Sealing Borders and What's an Asian Border, Anyway?**

**Speaker:** Edward Boyle

**Chair:** Prof. Patricia Uberoi

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Starting his presentation with a brief summary of his doctoral work and comparing the border issues of Japan with that of Georgia, China and the North Eastern region of India, the speaker broadly sought to engage with the notion of territory in modern state structures and whether there can be different histories of territories as against a normative European history of a nation.

The speaker's ongoing doctoral work was premised upon the study of Northern Japan from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century and the process of incorporation of the area of Hokkaido into the state of Japan. Hokkaido was known to be a barbarian land and in the course of the period from 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, it came to be defined as a borderland between Japan and Russia. Therefore, the doctoral work engaged with how the notion of barbarian land was territorialized and then came to be mobilized as well as acted upon by the state of Japan.

The speaker stated that Japan has three territorial disputes: One, with Russia over the four islands [Iturup (known in Japanese as Etorofu), Kunashir (Kunashiri), Shikotan and the Habomai islets] since the Second World War. Second, with South Korea over Takeshima and a third one with China over the Senkaku Islands after the US withdrawal from Okinawa in 1968. The speaker observed that the Japanese government seems to be changing its previous position where the disputes were discussed at bilateral levels, to now laying claim to these islands as integral territories for the maintenance of Japanese sovereignty. Therefore, while globalization was expected to result in the erosion of sovereign state borders, increasingly, now they seem to be reconfigured, clearly visible in the case of Japan where these territories are mobilized by the state for specific purposes. Recent developments, such as the Map of Japan (specifically defining these territories) adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's intentions to project power overseas by building an armed force to protect Japan's islands and also by amending the Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan, reinforce this trend.

According to the speaker, the dispute over the Northern Territories only became significant in the late 1960's through a movement for the 'Return of the Northern Territories'. The movement was initially opposed by the Japanese government but was later co-opted by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), while the other two disputes did not gain as much salience politically. The civil society groups at the prefectural levels also demanded for the return of the Northern territories and tried to mobilize politicians, therefore as emphasized by the speaker, the notion of integral territories mobilized at different scales like, the civil society organizations and the prefectural level governments to increase their influence at the Centre. Further, it has also been widely seen that the notion of 'integral territory' was now no longer unique to the Japanese discourse, but was being increasingly used by China and South Korea to describe the disputed territories in its communications with Japan.

The reason for these territories gaining more prominence at the moment, in the speaker's view might be owing to the project of 'Rise of China'. Therefore, according to the speaker, Japan's quest of being a normal sovereign state versus Rise of China is premised upon the classical Westphalian notion of the meaning of the state. While it is widely assumed that states in Asia broadly conform to the classical Westphalian notion of the state, the author differs and argues that states in Asia be defined by their own pasts instead of Europe's past.

Moving on to the case of Georgia, which gained independence in 1991 after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the speaker stated that two territories, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, declared their independence from Georgia in 1991 and 1992 respectively. After the 2008, Russo-Georgian war, Russia recognized these two territories as States and in 2013 the Russian border forces in South Ossetia started fencing the border, which although small in scale, was highly disrupting. Although only 10 per cent of the border has been fenced, farmers have been separated from their fields and Georgians have been unable to cross the border for medical services, etc.

As fencing is ongoing, the border fences are being monitored by the European Union, and increasingly, it is being seen as an economic burden by the governments of Georgia, the US and the EU. The fence no longer restricts local people from crossing the boundaries, instead it now connects to the idea of Europe being divided between the victorious forces of capitalism and the evil forces of socialism. Georgia is relegated to the outer edge of Europe, under the supervision of the EU and as emphasized by the speaker, these small territories are being mobilized at successive scale and in this case at an international level.

With regards China, the speaker argued that while the 'One Belt One Road' initiative aims to infrastructurally connect Eurasia, the notion of territories become confusing. On the one hand, the project of China Rising presents the state in very Westphalian terms, while on the other hand, it is also characterized by movements and flows of economic cartels from China that will bring development to the region.

The speaker concluded by discussing his experiences during his visit to North East India recently while posing some important questions with respect to understanding Asian borders in contrast to the European normative idea of a border. How have the economic cartels played

out in Northeast India and how these territories will be reconfigured by incorporating them into wider networks of Look East policy, such as the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation), and if there is a possibility of defining Asian borders in terms of Westphalian sovereign state securitization model as a function of Chinese growth or any other reason.

## **Discussion**

The discussion was an exchange of ideas trying to collectively understand the idea of an Asian Border. Some very important points came out during the discussion. One of the observations pertained to the fact that much of the borders of North East India cannot be neatly put into boxes since they are an outcome of a combination of colonialism, Westphalianism and legacies of history.

On the question of if it is necessary for Japan to acknowledge Senkaku as a disputed territory despite having a jurisdictional control over it, the speaker replied that it might be a case of power projection and an attempt to get international attention towards the fact that if there is ever a Chinese occupation of the territory, it would be seen as invasion of Japan and defended by US. Therefore, one of the functions of the modern state, according to the speaker, is to project power.

According to the author, a normative understanding of what a state is, applies to both Asia and Africa, despite its differences with the European system and apart from the geographical understanding and the historical truth.

*Report prepared by Jaya Kumari, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

## **About the Speaker**

Edward Boyle is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Law and the Center for Asia-Pacific Future Studies, Kyushu University, Japan. His doctoral research concentrates upon the incorporation of Japan's north into the space of the state during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, looking at the history of the cartography of the region as well as the concepts of territory that underpinned them. More recently, he has been looking at the comparative history of early modern imperial mapping, contemporary practices of bordering and the multiscale nature of borders under globalization. His work intersects with political science, geography, history, and scholarship on international relations.

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