

On March 6th, 2024, the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR) convened a group of scholars to discuss maritime security.

Mayu Watanabe, President of the JFIR, set the stage for a crucial webinar addressing global concerns amid the upheaval of the international order, triggered by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Emphasizing the significance of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept in restoring the liberal international order, she highlighted the pressing challenges to territorial integrity and sovereignty, particularly in regions such as southern and eastern Ukraine and the East and South China Seas.

Chairperson Yuichi Hosoya, a Distinguished Research Fellow at the JFIR and Professor at Keio University, set the theme for discussion on the challenge to the liberal international order regarding territorial sovereignty and Japan's response. Reflecting on the global repercussions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he emphasized the ongoing crises arising from territorial disputes worldwide. The symposium aimed to explore perspectives from Japan, Australia, and Europe to re-evaluate the global order amidst these tumultuous events.

Chisako Masuo, Professor at Kyushu University, provided insights from a Japanese perspective on territorial and maritime issues, particularly regarding the Senkaku Islands. She highlighted the persistent pressure from China, notably evidenced by increased Coast Guard activities targeting Japanese fishing vessels since 2020. China's narrative, framing Japan as challenging its "peaceful administration" over the islands, conflicts with historical facts, with Japan's longstanding governance of the islands dating back to 1895. Furthermore, recent actions, such as the use of AIS signals and warnings for Japanese aircrafts, heightened Chinese efforts for control. This aligns with the initiation of China's domestic administrative system over the Islands under the 14th Five-Year Program, commencing in 2021. She underscores China's expansive territorial and spatial programs, integrating various geographical and maritime initiatives to assert control and expand its influence globally, particularly in regions such as the South Pacific. This emerging technological infrastructure not only bolsters China's maritime capabilities but also extends its influence over authoritarian regimes worldwide, raising concerns over a new international debate between democracies and autocracies.

Luis Simón, Director of the Research Centre for Security, Diplomacy, and Strategy, delved into the intricate interplay between global power competition and regional geopolitical disputes in the Indo-Pacific, Euro-Atlantic, and Middle East. He explored how China's changing role has impacted Europe's security landscape. He discussed the Sino-Russian alignment, where China's support aided Russia amid Western economic and political pressure. He examined the strain on US military planning and resources in the Euro-Atlantic owing to China's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific, which is significant for Europe's deterrence architecture. He analyzed the evolving US strategy in the Middle East, emphasizing the implications of reduced engagement in regional

stability and broader rebalancing toward Europe and East Asia. He highlighted the shared interests among various actors, such as Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, Iran, China, and Russia, in countering America's regional approach to the Middle East. While potentially aligned with the objectives, these actors may operate independently, adding layers of complexity to the geopolitical landscape.

Yurika Ishii, Associate Professor at the National Defense Academy of Japan, discussed the challenges facing the liberal international order, focusing on the basis of state action in a particular region. She emphasized the importance of territorial and maritime titles in understanding state actions. She delved into the complexities of acquiring territorial titles and highlighted the need for peaceful and effective sovereignty. She also examined the limitations of resolving territorial disputes through legal means, noting the lack of enforceable jurisdiction in the courts and the impact of public sentiment and historical issues on diplomatic resolutions. Regarding maritime titles under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), she emphasized the comprehensiveness of UNCLOS and the challenges of recognizing maritime zones that are not explicitly covered. She analyzed China's assertions in the South China Sea and questioned their compatibility with UNCLOS. She concluded by underscoring the significance of territorial issues and advocating for increased public awareness and engagement in discussions on territorial sovereignty.

As the final speaker, Thomas Wilkins, Associate Professor at the University of Sydney, aimed to provide a broader perspective on the international order. He highlighted the evolving nature of the international order and its implications for global dynamics. He outlined two interpretations of the international order: one as a descriptor of prevailing structural conditions and the other as a subjective description of states' desired objectives. He emphasized the shifting power dynamics, with rising powers such as China reshaping the global system and challenging Western-led structures. The liberal international order, based on universal values, faces challenges from revisionist powers that advocate for alternative governance structures. He proposed the concept of a "rules-based order" as a pragmatic approach to international relations, exemplified by initiatives like the Free and Open Indo-Pacific. This approach seeks to accommodate diverse values, while maintaining a framework of acceptable rules and norms, including respect for international law. He highlighted the need for adaptability in navigating the complexities of contemporary international relations.

During the panel discussions, the panelists answered various questions from colleagues and the public. The discussion revolved around the perceived decline of the rule-based liberal order and the emergence of alternative power structures led by countries such as China and Russia. Masuo highlighted the shifting dynamics of international relations, with developing countries expressing support for challengers in a Western-led order. She also mentioned China's proposal for a global partnership network with developing countries, signaling a potential shift away from Western alliances. Simón emphasized the central role of military power in upholding the international order, stating that it has always been underpinned by power dynamics. Ishii discussed the complexities

of international law and regional interests, suggesting that the decline of the Western-led order does not necessarily imply the weakening of international rules. Wilkins underscored the need for proactive responses to the challenges posed by revisionist powers such as China, advocating a more assertive approach to deterrence. The panelists also touched on the implications of China's actions on the Senkaku Islands and the need for nuanced and balanced resolutions to navigate complex international issues.

(The responsibility for the wording and content of this article lies with JFIR.)