

Two-week Inspection of Think Tanks in Washington D.C.

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From the end of April to the beginning of May 2009 a series of conferences on actual problems relating to Russia and China were held at Washington based think tanks and universities which have centers focusing on Russian and Central Asian affairs. I stayed in Washington D.C. from April 26 to May 9 firstly to organize the event “U.S.-Japan alliance: Beyond Northeast Asia” at the Brookings Institution on May 8, which was co-organized by the Slavic Research Center (SRC) and the Brookings Institution’s Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies. Another task for the SRC’s new project “Comparative research on major regional powers in Eurasia” was to sift through current trends in Slavic Eurasian studies in U.S. foreign policy communities and to learn how to best organize events in collaboration with major think tanks. In this essay, I would like to report on five impressive events from a series of conferences and our symposium held on May 8.

1. The Russia-China events at Washington think tanks

From April 27 to April 28, the 28th Annual World Russia Forum was held at the Hart Senate Office Building and at George Washington University. In this forum speakers representing diplomatic, business and academic circles as well as mass media discussed some of the critical issues of the past year. This year’s topics included the question of how Russia and the U.S. will manage the current economic downturn and how the triumvirate of the U.S., Russia and China in the international arena will work together to resolve global issues. One of the panelists from Moscow pointed out that, despite poor official relations over the past several years, the U.S. and Russia are now

more connected in the fields of business, education and science than they were in the past. He emphasized that the two countries have to address differences and disagreements on the basis of mutual interests and dialogue. The relationship between Russia and the U.S. will continue to be characterized by ongoing cooperation and conversation. It is impressive that the Russian side considered that even today their relationship with the U.S. remains a distinctive factor in global politics. Simultaneously, they were afraid that relations with China could be more crucial to the United States than their relations with Russia (this may already be the case). While Russia is the only nuclear power comparable to the U.S., China is now the U.S.'s second largest foreign trading partner. Through the forum, the importance of expanding economic cooperation, including energy cooperation and the investment, was stressed during discussions.



The 28th World Russia Forum on April 27, 2009

The Eurasia center, which was in charge of logistics for this forum, called for a large audience, more than 200 people, but most of them were Russian-Americans, and surprisingly there were no Asian participants except me. I hope that such a significant

project will attract a far broader range of audience members in the future. In today's world, disagreements and agreements between two countries are not just theirs, but a common issue for us all.

Besides, I found that the embassy of the Russian Federation in Washington D.C. that supported this annual forum made an active effort to seek an understanding of Russian foreign policy. Ambassador Sergei Kislyak attended a lunch conversation with students in the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies (CERES) at Georgetown University on May 5. During the conversation we could directly ask questions about the Russian attitude toward Georgia to Ambassador Kislyak. It was also an advantage that these events were officially open to the public. If he / she sent a RSVP in advance, anyone could participate in the events at the university as well as think tanks. While the questions tended to be general ones, the level of the educational contribution to society was in evidence.

During my stay in Washington, one of the most exciting events was "The United States and China: What Next?" which was co-sponsored by the China-United States Exchange Foundation, the Harvard Kennedy School, and the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States on April 28. This event was held in order to introduce the main authors' views on Sino-American bilateral issues affecting both countries to prevent future confrontations. For example, global warming, trade relations, Taiwan, democratization, WMDs, bilateral humanitarian intervention and so on. These issues are discussed in more detail in the book *Power and Restraint: A Shared Vision for the U.S. – China Relationship*, the result of a collaborative effort by influential Chinese and American scholars such as Graham Allison, Gu Guoliang, Jia Qingguo and Joseph S. Nye.

Furthermore, from May 6 to 7 the symposium "Sino-Russian Relations in Central

Asia and Beyond” was held at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies, while the symposium “Reviving U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control” was held at the Brookings Institution on May 6. The agendas of these events show that the Obama administration believe Russia has a more pivotal role to play in the framework of nuclear disarmament, and that Sino-Russian relations are focused more on the context of Central Asian geopolitical uncertainties rather than on East Asian affairs.



“Reviving U.S. – Russian Nuclear Arms Control”

2. “U.S.-Japan Alliance: Beyond Northeast Asia” at Brookings on May 8, 2009

During these two weeks, our event was the only one which covered U.S.-Japan relations. For me, it was a little disappointing that the presence of the Japanese foreign policy community in Washington D.C. could not be seen, however, it is certain that our event could impact Washington Northeast Asian foreign policy circles and the American audience in the following two ways.

Firstly, unlike the above events relating to Russia and China, this symposium

involved a variety of specialists who belong to the different communities of area studies or foreign policy studies. There were three panel sessions at the symposium, in which the panelists discussed how the U.S.-Japan alliance can contribute not only toward Northeast Asia, but also toward Europe, the Middle East, Central and South Asia. Therefore, American and Japanese panelists were given the opportunity to learn more about the foreign policy of both countries, especially in the regions which they are not all that familiar with. Indeed, it was a rare opportunity to showcase Japan's expertise in area studies to U.S. specialists and policy makers.

Secondly, the symposium shed light on the gap of perceptions on geo-strategy between the U.S. and Japan. While from the Japanese point of view Russia and China are regarded as neighbors in Northeast Asia, most strategic thinkers in the U.S. view Russia only from across the Atlantic Ocean as a European actor. So, in fact, Americans don't normally discuss China and Russia in the same framework. In order to bridge this perception gap, it is vital that both countries come to a mutual understanding and rethink the role of the U.S.-Japan alliance in Eurasia.

In addition, Japanese academia also has much to learn from these Washington think tank events, for example, sharing the results of research with the public and strong criticism against the government and among panelists and audience members. Clearly, this symposium was fruitful for each side.



Keynote address delivered by Professor Kent Calder at the event “U.S. – Japan Alliance: Beyond Northeast Asia”

Link

<http://www.russiahouse.org/wrf/index.html>

http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=514556&fuseaction=topics.event_summary&event_id=518947

http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/forum/China-Russia_Agenda.pdf

http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/0506_us_russia.aspx

http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/0508_us_japan.aspx