



CIGS and Stimson Center Joint Seminar
**Policy vs. Politics: Tackling the myth that
voters are disconnected from foreign policy**

EVENT SUMMARY

Date: June 13, 2019

Venue: 1211 Connecticut Ave NW, 8th FL, Washington, DC 20036

On June 13, 2019, the Stimson Center and the Canon Institute for Global Studies (CIGS) jointly hosted a discussion on the disconnect between foreign policy and politics. Moderated by East Asia Program Co-Director Yuki Tatsumi, the panel featured Kuni Miyake from CIGS and former Deputy National Security Advisor to the Vice President Stephen J. Yates, currently at DC International Advisory.

Tatsumi opened the discussion by asking the panelists about the “myth” that foreign policy does not buy votes. Stephen Yates stated that a separation in policy and politics should not be a shocking idea. People stay within their own specialties, and do not like to cross over or connect outside their respective lanes. However, some foreign policy issues influence the grassroots level of politicking, and in some cases, foreign policy issues come from the ground up. Miyake used his experience as the private secretary to foreign minister Shintaro Abe as an example. He was tasked with finding the border between politics and policy. He came to believe that foreign policy is for the country as a whole, and politics is only for the politicians, but there were many occasions where the two would overlap.

Tatsumi asked Miyake if there was a direct relationship between Prime Minister Abe’s foreign policy decisions and the success of his party or political career, which has been suggested by the Japanese media. Miyake stated that political writers know a lot about the domestic politics but not much about foreign policy. Foreign policy is a dangerous game of Prime Minister Abe: doing well does not translate to political success, but failure can endanger the Prime Minister’s electoral hopes. Yates agreed with Miyake’s points, stating that foreign policy and national security have an impact on how people vote. He elaborated that voters select a candidate based on their political experiences and background. Yates also pointed out that there is a gap between the people in the country and the politicians of DC concerning foreign policy, particularly the concept of alliances and how they work.

In the past, the Democratic Party of Japan had many policy savvy members in the legislature, but they failed to be productive in the years they were in power. Tatsumi asked if they were so focused on policy that they become blind to what people care about. Miyake responded by using Japan’s trade negotiations with the U.S. as an example. The trade negotiations have been much easier than the trade negotiations of the 80s and 90s. The reason may be that agriculture is a major issue in the upcoming Upper House elections. Miyake stated that a policy disconnect exists not only between the politicians and voters, but also among policymakers.

Tatsumi opened the floor to questions. An audience member asked Miyake whether the special sensitivity of Japan's relations with Korean Peninsula and China overlap directly with Japanese domestic politics. Miyake stated that although immigration from these countries is increasing, politicians in Japan are reluctant to allow them to participate in domestic politics. The problem is with immigration law and not policy.

Robert Watson from the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition cited a recent report by the Center for American Progress that pointed out that voters are primarily concerned with foreign policy when it concerns national security and American jobs. He asked if there were trends in voters connecting their domestic concerns with foreign policy. Yates responded that under the current economic challenges, such as the U.S.-China trade war, there will be impacts on the politics of local, state, and national elections.

Another audience member quoted George Washington's farewell address where Washington advised the American people to "cherish public credit." The audience member insisted that nobody pays attention to that now and asked if democracy can survive if voters expect their elected officials to provide them with something for nothing. Yates replied saying that we are very far from the social compact between citizen and government that the Framers were promoted. The role of the federal and state governments has vastly expanded. He stated that it is the job of those who disagree with the current system to organize and prove that policy should move back in that direction. Miyake comments that the pursuit of democracy can result in populism. There are positive and negative aspects of populism, and it is crucial to strike a balance between the two.

Tatsumi then asked where the line is between a robust democracy and downright populism. Yates responded by saying that it is always important to engage in discourse and not label people or ideas in black and white terms. There are constructive and necessary elements of populism, but we need to stray away from making policy about personality versus substance. Do not denigrate people based on your impression of their personality, Yates advised. Miyake stated that politicians should control and minimize the negative side of populism, particularly when it comes to xenophobia, discrimination, and nationalism.

Dave Fitzgerald, a retired Foreign Service Officer, commented that personality is driving policy far more than it has in any other previous administration, whereas Japan has never had a personality-driven approach to policy. Tatsumi asked panelists about how social media has changed the way politicians connect with voters. Miyake

answered that it is unlikely there will be a Japanese politician that can use social media in the same way as President Trump in the foreseeable future. However, politicians who cannot utilize modern technology will not be elected. Yates claimed that some people who are supposed to be the news-takers and cover the news have become the news-makers in the era of social media. If people give voters more information from more sources and let them exercise the ability to make up their own minds on issues, we will have a better political system, according to Yates. Social media can also have a profound negative impact on policy when there are things such as fake news and fake accounts. The result could be mistakes made by candidates or a less informed public.

Tatsumi closed the seminar by thanking the panelists and the audience for the discussion.