Interview - Nori Katagiri

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Nori Katagiri is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Saint Louis University. He teaches and conducts research on international relations, security studies, and East Asia. Dr. Katagiri received a B.A. from the University of South Carolina, a Master of International Affairs from Columbia University, and a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Pennsylvania. He joined Saint Louis University after five years of U.S. federal service teaching at Air War College, a joint military graduate school for senior officers and officials of the U.S. government and international officers at Maxwell Air Force Base. In 2015, he received the Meritorious Civilian Service Award from the Department of the Air Force. His book, *Adapting to Win: How Insurgents Fight and Defeat Foreign States in War* was published this year by the University of Pennsylvania Press and reviewed in *Foreign Affairs*. In the book, he explores why some insurgencies achieve the unthinkable – to beat more powerful foreign governments in war – when most insurgencies actually fail. He is working on his second book on Japanese military power and East Asia and has been a visiting fellow in Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Japan. He can be contacted at katagirin@slu.edu.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I see most exciting research where we can apply the findings immediately to the real world, especially as a solution to ongoing events and crises. We can test the new theories and arguments in a reasonably timely manner and use them for the good of the humanity. So when I see works that explain why refugee crises occur, for instance, we apply those ideas to the latest events in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. And that's how I chose my Ph.D. topic when I was in graduate school – to contribute my research on violent insurgencies and terrorism to the scholarly and policymaking communities. The outcome is the book you mention above, which proposes a few ideas about how overseas insurgency and terrorist attacks can be explained to a wider audience.

So I carry out my research with the intent to use it to apply to policy, and that's how we academics make the "bridge" to the real world. I had that in mind when I wrote my article, forthcoming in the next issue of *Asian Survey*, that discusses a set of strategic and grand strategic options for the United States and China. The article generates a lot of implications for what the two countries can do and should do with regard to territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the US relationship with our allies and friends in East Asia. Likewise, my book on Japan's military power and security policy will have a lot of things to say about what the Japanese are thinking about today and what they are likely to do in the near future.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The way I see the world, especially on security matters, changed as I moved from Japan to the United States. People have quite different views on security between the two countries. A majority of ordinary Japanese continue to embrace a strong sense of pacifism at the core. Social rejection of national armed forces – what we called the Self-Defense Force (SDF) – has been deeply embedded in Japanese minds since the end of World War II, which is also well documented by a select number of knowledgeable Japan specialists. Pundits talk about Japan's becoming "nationalistic" and "militaristic," or even "going nuclear," but that's hardly the case. You will realize it when you actually go there and mingle with people in Japanese. While it is true that things are changing over time and Japanese people are becoming keener to their security environment than before, the change has been slow and

suppressed, and the recent controversy over the security legislation of collective self-defense shows that.

My worldview changed after I came to the US for college and graduate training in which I studied with realist scholars of international relations. I'd say that my advisers in graduate school most strongly influenced my thinking and career, and I was very fortunate to have them. Pacifism and IR realism are opposite to each other in many ways, and dealing with both at the same time can be tricky but also just funny. So when I go to Japan and give lectures for government officials, like I do this winter in Tokyo, I see they find it amusing to hear me – a native Japanese speaker and civilian – talk tough politics and security like an American.

Being born and brought up in Japan and having being educated in the United States, what differences and/or similarities have you observed between Asia's and America's perceptions of each other?

There are some similarities between Asia and parts of America. Growing up in Japan, I was exposed to high expectations for discipline, humbleness, and selflessness, some of the values you see in most ordinary Japanese. Because of this exposure to those values, I found it relatively easy to fit into my first job in the US military and work with officers across all services. The military embraces these values at the core, among other things, with rare exceptions, so I felt comfortable with their culture as I understood it, even as a civilian. And I had a great time there.

Now I have a quite different audience at Saint Louis University mostly with civilian undergraduate students. I teach an undergraduate course on the introduction to international relations, upper-level US strategy course on Asia, upper-level security studies course, and a graduate seminar on international relations. I am happy with these courses because they are what matters to America, our community, and our students for the future. Because my student audience is different now, obviously it takes some adjustment, but the teaching experience has been absolutely rewarding. My students are keen to issues that matter to the world, and I am enjoying every minute of it at Saint Louis University.

Cultural differences between Japan and a broader America remain stark, though, and mixing them without knowing can cause unnecessary trouble. One of the biggest differences would be what they call the "hon'ne" and "tatemae" system in Japan. In short, Japanese people are known to have two different faces in private (hon'ne) and public (tatemae) lives, whereas in US culture, human expressions are normally straightforward, with some variations of course. The "hon'ne" and "tatemae" system is hard to grasp at first, but when you master it, it helps you do well in real life. What I do with it in daily life is first to be myself, but be also ready to accept differences and appreciate local norms, traditions, and expectations.

As another academician noted[i]**, Japan is perhaps considered 'the Great Britain for the Fast East' with it being the most important ally in Asia, how do you perceive US-Japanese relations, especially given China's rise and North Korea's belligerent role in the East Asia region?**

US-Japan relations have been robust in many ways, and the military alliance is likely to grow further as Japan strengthens its legal foundation to use force along with US forces. But the growth is driven by Japan's internal desire as well as external threat environments like China, North Korea, and Russia, or American interest. China's rise in power and North Korea remain a key source of Japan's security innovation. Yet security calculations must incorporate a broader political interaction that entails a high degree of economic interdependence across East Asia.

On the other hand, Japanese attitude to the US-Japan alliance is not just externally driven. You get the sense pretty much from most sensible Japanese you talk to – whether diplomats or officers in the Ministry of Defense. With some variations, the main message I get from them is consistent; Japan has no malicious intent against its neighbors but for security reasons it needs the US deterrent to survive. The US military remains popular in Japan, especially after the successful execution of *Operation Tomodachi* in 2011 responding to the triple crisis of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown. Of course, at some point in your conversations, the "hon'ne" and "tatemae" may kick in, too. So if you want their bottom-line above all the rhetoric, you should go out for drinks with them, and that's where real conversations take place.

Do you expect Japan's relations with the world change in a way that US-Japanese relations won't remain the same; especially given the challenges with the recent case of the Okinawa military base?

I expect the US-Japan relations to only get stronger over time, but slowly. My wish is that Japan will become more activist and "normal" in world politics, although not any more dependent on US protection and military technology. Yet Japan is shrinking relative to the world – economically, demographically, and in terms of diplomatic influence, and that will continue until Japanese people find a way to reverse the trend. So unfortunately, I am not sure if Japan will be a key political player in the globe for a long time. It will remain an economic powerhouse and leader of advanced consumer technologies and scientific discoveries, but material growth does not always translate into political power; Japanese leaders must find a way to use the resources right to remain a vital political member of the international community. As of now, I don't think they have truly recognized the importance of doing so, let alone how to do so.

The case of Okinawa is longstanding and critical to the bilateral relations, and I feel that the issue will not go away anytime soon. As a democracy, Japan should continue to listen to people across the country, including people in Okinawa, even when, and especially when, they disagree with government policy. At the same time, I don't think that the ongoing local opposition to base and relocation is systematic enough to block the alliance from evolving. Local and prefecture governments, the national government and related ministries and agencies, as well as the US government are working hard toward resolution of competing interests. It is possible that the dispute will last for some more time, but the alliance itself is likely to develop into a stronger one.

In your new book, *Adapting to Win*, you focus on insurgencies and how they strategize to defeat foreign armies and governments in many parts of the world. Can you elaborate further about your research on this topic?

Sure. As we have seen in the past few years, wars with insurgencies are long, messy, and hard to win, for both sides. Yet through my research I have grown relatively optimistic about powerful states fighting non-state insurgents. People often highlight cases of asymmetric warfare and victory by the weak – Vietnam, Somalia, for instance – but the reality is that the overall trend of war between the strong and weak has long favored the former overwhelmingly, although over time, insurgencies have become entrenched and tougher to beat. So when we see this sort of wars going on in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, we need to be highly cautious; but at the same time, there are reasons for us to be optimistic about final results, even if those wars are lengthy and unpopular.

Much of your work focuses on insurgencies and military strategy and given the role of non-state actors in conflicts around the world; what are your thoughts about the situation in Syria and ISIS' role in the region?

We scholars often look for ways to simplify events like these to explain them in short order, but the reality is complex, involving a number of actors, factors, and interests. That means that nations' responses to groups like ISIS, whether France, Russia, or the United States, must entail a series of instruments designed to generate a comprehensive political effect. You cannot just bomb away opponents' territories and cities and hope that they will create outcomes you want. Instead, countries are better off not just using military means alone, but coordinating actions with allies and friends across economic, diplomatic, and intelligence fronts.

On the ongoing "extra-systemic war" (a type of war between states and non-state actors) in Syria and Iraq, I argued in my article published earlier this year that, while the conflict will last long and remain bloody, historical records show that powerful nations are likely to emerge victorious at the end of the day.[ii] Of course, the war in Syria is different in many ways from other cases. But I think some of the most decisive factors taking place that are going to put the insurgents at a disadvantage are their behavior toward innocent civilians and the fact that outside powers' strategy is evolving to adjust to local conditions to generate maximum effect.

What are some of the main hypotheses that students of IR can take away from your broad research on insurgencies, counter-insurgencies and military cooperation?

One of the key take-aways of the book is to think about how to "sequence" war efforts, or put war planning and execution in order as orderly as possible. I call this the sequencing theory in the book. I ask questions like what are some of the most important steps warriors have to take to do well in war? And what kind of "order" should countries use to determine courses of action? The type of insurgencies and military operations we see in places like Iraq and Syria these days requires a multiple set of ideas and operations that must be planned early and executed in well-thought-out sequences of action. And to me, that's the biggest point I make for the IR research community.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

There are many, but I'd single out and say follow your passion and work hard whatever topics you engage, and be excited that your hard work will pay off in the end. What you do in school has a huge impact on the rest of your career, so think ahead, read lots of books, find something interesting, and stay optimistic.

Notes

[i] Hughes, Christopher W.. (2007) *Not quite the 'Great Britain of the Far East': Japan's security, the US-Japan alliance and the 'war on terror' in East Asia.* Cambridge Review of International Affairs, Vol.20 (No.2). pp. 325-338.

[ii] Katagiri, Noriyuki. (2015) *ISIL, Insurgent Strategies for Statehood, and the Challenge for Security Studies* . Small Wars and Insurgencies, Vol. 26 (No. 3). pp. 542-556. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2014.989672

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This interview was conducted by Farah Saleem. Farah is Managing Editor of E-IR.