Interview – Kentaro Fujikawa

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Kentaro Fujikawa recently joined the Graduate School of International Development at Nagoya University, Japan, as Associate Professor to teach peacebuilding and security studies. He previously worked as a Fellow in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he also received his doctoral degree. He has been working at the intersection of international relations, comparative politics, and international law with a focus on self-determination conflicts. His academic works have been published by the Pacific Review (2017) and Global Policy (2021).

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I started to develop my interest in self-determination conflicts during my undergraduate study at the University of Tokyo. This was partially because I heard a lot about the violence in areas such as Palestine and Darfur while I was growing up. As I started to hope to contribute to the settlement of these wars, I decided to focus on self-determination conflicts which I thought would probably require different sets of solutions from cases where warring parties aim at capturing central governments. Moreover, as a naïve undergraduate student, I felt that many academic works analyzed the latter rather than the former, so I thought there might be a niche to fill. There is a reason for this naivety; in most of the courses on conflict and peacebuilding at the undergraduate or even postgraduate level, core readings rarely discuss solutions for self-determination conflicts such as autonomy, partition, or a self-determination referendum.

Also, in hindsight, growing up in a not-so-overtly nationalistic country of Japan (for example, I once attended an international student conference; there, students from Brunei took great care so that their row of flags, a symbol of their nation, never touched the floor while Japanese students did not show any strong concerns about their row of flags), I was interested in nationalist conflicts where fighters and their leaders are more than happy to die for the sake of their nation. Indeed, in self-determination conflicts, rebels usually have little chance of victory against strong central governments as they fight with few weapons of their own and without international support or sympathy. To me, it was understandable for people to be willing to die for causes such as religion—when it promises an afterlife in heaven—but why did nationalist fighters sacrifice themselves for the unrealistic goal of independence? Isn't it possible for them to be satisfied with substantial autonomy? Is self-determination really the answer to the problems they are facing? I have been motivated by these questions throughout my academic career.

You recently published a piece evaluating autonomy arrangements as a solution to self-determination conflicts, with a particular focus on Aceh in Indonesia. Could you tell us a bit about what drew you to this specific area of debate/country-specific example and what your major findings were?

My interest in Aceh also originated from my undergraduate study when I had an opportunity to write a research paper. I thought Indonesia, which has had three self-determination conflicts—Aceh, Papua, and East Timor–was an

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interesting avenue for comparison. I further wrote a master's dissertation at the London School of Economics (a revised version of which was published in *the Pacific Review* in 2017) comparing the Indonesian government's policies on Aceh and Papua. But I then started to realize that this *Pacific Review* article did not fully explain why Aceh's conflict was peacefully settled in 2005.

In fact, Aceh is an exceptional case because it has been argued that ethnonational conflicts are generally difficult to resolve through autonomy for two reasons. First, governments tend not to offer substantial concessions because ethnonational rebels, merely operating in the periphery and being militarily weak (without heavy weapons), do not pose threats to them. Second, even if governments offer autonomy, rebels have difficulty accepting it, as they are worried that the autonomy arrangement would be unilaterally abolished in the future. Indeed, the number of peace agreements settling conflict decisively with autonomy alone (i.e., excluding the possibility of future self-determination) is very limited.

This observation made me explore why the conflict in Aceh was resolved through autonomy in 2005. I found that the government was willing to offer significant concessions as it was aware of the long-term cost of the conflict. Even though the peripheral and weak rebels imposed only a limited threat and cost per year, the war would still be costly in the long term because ethnonational conflicts tend to last for decades. On the part of the rebels, they were willing to sign the autonomy arrangement only when they believed that their autonomy was internationally guaranteed. These findings have implications for policymakers when they aim at settling a self-determination conflict peacefully through autonomy.

Another of your recent pieces looked specifically at self-determination referendums as 'peace-bringers' in several countries, such as East Timor, South Sudan and Eritrea. How did the results of this work compare to your previous findings on autonomy arrangements?

This blog post summarizes the findings from my doctoral thesis. The main difference between Aceh and the cases I examined in this work was that in the former, the international community (and international mediators) pressured both the rebels and the central government to accept a wide-ranging autonomy while, in the latter, they were willing to endorse self-determination for various reasons.

Whether self-determination and independence are an answer to self-determination conflicts depends on the context. In clear decolonization cases such as East Timor or Western Sahara, local citizens have the inalienable right to self-determination. Beyond decolonization cases, there are self-determination conflicts which linger for decades because of the consistent discrimination against and political exclusion of minorities under a number of different administrations (e.g., the conflict in Southern Sudan). In these cases, I believe a case can be made that minorities should be given the right to self-determination. This is because such discrimination is unlikely to end if it has persisted for decades. However, dividing the state into two does not offer an automatic solution. On one hand, the independence of a new state would potentially bring about the issue of "trapped minorities": for example, Serbs that remain in Kosovo. On the other hand, even without this trapped minority issue, newly independent states, often with very limited institutional capacities, face a huge task to be successful in peacebuilding.

You also argue that some negative outcomes of post-conflict self-determination referendums could be mitigated. You write that "the excessive optimism by international actors is a matter of perception and thus, not inevitable". Why do you see this as problematic on an international policy level and what would you propose as an alternative?

Excessive optimism is generally a big problem in politics as is evident from the current Covid pandemic. This is true in peacebuilding as well. Post-2003 Iraq is a case in point. The American government claimed that its intervention in Iraq could produce outcomes similar to post-WWII Japan or Germany without fully realizing the huge differences between the former and the latter. In fact, we should be very cautious as peacebuilding very often fails to produce the peace, democracy, and development it sets out to achieve.

In the specific cases I looked at (Eritrea, East Timor, and South Sudan), excessive optimism emerged among

international actors because they wrongly believed that the elites and citizens were united in these newly established states. This misunderstanding resulted from their observation that they were united behind independence as exhibited in the referendum process and outcome. The international actors failed to grasp that a different post-conflict phase would emerge once the conflict was over. This misconception meant that international actors failed to pay attention to the political divisions among the local elites, and were not well prepared to prevent the introduction of dictatorship in Eritrea, the 2006 crisis in East Timor, and the 2013 civil war in South Sudan.

In order not to be trapped by this excessive optimism, we should put more emphasis on the political culture and history of the region/state in question. In general, we should rely more on regional experts and local researchers when thinking about how to build peace in these war-torn societies. History matters, and in conflict-ridden societies, history is complicated.

Do you think your international experience, living in Japan and then moving to the UK for doctoral work, has changed/re-shaped your work/views in any way?

This is not a new observation at all, but it made me acutely aware of the dangers of talking about "the international community" as if it were a single actor. Quite often, the view of "the international community" is shaped by a small number of states. Furthermore, they are often not the same states depending on the issue and the place at stake. For example, regarding East Timor, important actors in the international community are states such as Japan and Australia. In contrast, concerning South Sudan, the USA, the UK, and Norway, together with regional powers such as Ethiopia and Uganda, are the most important actors in the international community. Interestingly, Indonesia or Sudan does not seem to be part of this said international community in each case because they are seen as an interested party. But then countries such as Australia and Uganda also have significant stakes in these cases. In that sense, who is part of the international community and who is an interested party are socially constructed.

This is not to say that there are no occasional cases where the international community seems to speak with one voice, representing the viewpoints of citizens around the world. The pressure exerted by both developed and developing states during the post-referendum violence orchestrated by the Indonesian military in East Timor in September 1999 is a case in point. In this specific case, this pressure made the Indonesian government accept the international force to stabilize the situation in East Timor. Similarly, the recent act of terrorism at Kabul's airport in August 2021 was condemned by various Western, non-Western, and developing countries. But in general, we should be careful when we use the term "international community." In fact, when I presented my research in Japan, one researcher told me that it was perhaps better to use the term "international actors" than "international community." While I do not always adhere to this advice, this point is worth noting.

What are you currently working on?

I am currently focused on publishing my findings from my doctoral thesis in the form of academic journal articles and a book. I am also extending my analyses of post-conflict self-determination referendums to the most recent case: the 2019 referendum in Bougainville. I am also currently writing a spin-off article from my doctoral study which argues that the 2006 crisis in East Timor and the 2013 civil war in South Sudan came about due to similar reasons.

In the meantime, I am developing my interest in the burgeoning rebel governance literature. One of the aims of this literature is to try to understand why some rebels, often committed to democracy, human rights, and open society, end up in an authoritative mode of governance. This literature might help explain, for example, why peacebuilding in East Timor has been largely a success (despite the setback of the 2006 Crisis) while peacebuilding in South Sudan has suffered from successive civil wars.

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

International Relations is an interesting and diverse field which lacks coherence. I strongly suggest that you learn about different approaches (from realism to constructivism, critical theories, and feminism) and different methodologies (from quantitative analyses to case selection and discourse analyses), without assuming that one

particular "-ism" or methodology is superior to others.

If you plan to work on the issues of countries where you have never lived, I advise you to live there for a couple of years. This was the advice I received from my supervisor at the University of Tokyo, and I regret that I did not follow it. In particular, if you are not from the region, that is all the more reason to live there in order to understand the region, the country, its people, and its culture, given your weaker familiarity with the area.

If you are interested in remaining in academia, I have two further pieces of advice. First, you need to consider how strong your commitment is to remain in academia. Is this your top priority? For example, are you willing to move to an unfamiliar country to continue your academic career far away from your family and friends? If you are a western researcher studying postcolonialism, are you perhaps willing to move and contribute to a non-western institution? Furthermore, if you have a partner, are they willing to move with you, or can you maintain a long-distance relationship (and for how long)? This is not to say that there is no researcher who can remain in the same city throughout their whole academic career, but this is not very common. It is useful if you can start to think about your answers to these questions earlier rather than later.

If, after careful consideration, you still want to remain in academia, my second piece of advice is to publish your master's dissertation (or possibly seminar papers for US PhD programs) in an academic journal. Even if it does not achieve the highest grade, your dissertation might still be publishable. Indeed, my master's dissertation from LSE received a high merit, but a revised version was published in a respected journal. Having one journal article published at an early stage will not only boost your CV but also help you familiarize yourself with the rules of the game in academia.