Politics and Society in Japan at a Turning Point

Dimitri Vanoverbeke (K.U. Leuven, Belgium)

Aims & Objectives

This course addresses dynamics of politics and society in Asia focusing on Japan in particular. The focus of this course will be on political, legal and social institutions, not only by analyzing how these institutions are shaped today but also addressing them from an historical, cultural, and sociological perspective. Based on an understanding of domestic and bilateral issues, in this course students will also study how Japan is defining its position in Asia by fostering regional cooperation and how Asia as a region is redefining its relation with the US and Europe.

The course introduces some of the main concepts and analytical approaches of political science as an academic discipline. At a time when Korea is to sign a FTA with the EU, tensions between North- and South-Korea are increasing and when Japan is experiencing apparently radical political change, following the dramatic change of government, from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), we will address a number of topical issues.

The purpose of this course is to provide students with a foundation for thinking creatively about dynamics in politics and society in Asia.

Requirements

Students will be evaluated according to participation in the class discussion and according to a simulation exercise we will prepare together in the process of the lectures.

Assessment

The assessment will be divided as follows: participation in class discussion 20% and simulation exercise: 80%.
Topic 1: The East Asian Region in a Dynamic Context

Question:

How did the dynamics of regional cooperation in Asia change over time?

Lectures mainly based on the following articles:


Topic 2: Economic Policy and Soft Power in Asia – Asia and the EU

Questions:

What are the necessary conditions for institutionalized regional cooperation in Asia? How can increasing cooperation between Asia and the EU contribute to realize this goal?

Lectures mainly based on the following articles:


Topic 3: The Rule of Law, institutions and ‘Good Governance’: The Constitution and Court in Japan and Korea

Questions:
How important is the Japanese constitution for today’s Japan in a domestic and international context? What is the role of the Supreme Court in Japan and the Constitutional Court in Korea?

Lectures mainly based on the following articles:


Topic 4: Movie and discussion (an election campaign in Japan)

Topic 5: Human Rights Politics: focus on Japan and its Global Corporations

Questions:

How can we explain the business culture of Japanese companies in a global context? Is the economic role of Japan changing in today’s world?

Lectures mainly based on the following articles:


Topic 6: The State and Citizen in Dynamic Societies

Questions:
How do government and bureaucracy in Japan address important conflicts which can threaten status quo in society? What do environmental disputes and the struggle for gender equality tell us on the separation of powers?

Lectures mainly based on the following articles:


**Topic 7: Society and Crime in Korea and Japan**

**Questions:**

How can we explain the low crime rate in Korea and Japan and what does it tell us about the relation between the state and citizen in these countries?

Lectures mainly based on the following articles:


Topic 8: The Politics of Change: Judicial Reforms and Fortifying the Rule of Law in Japan and Korea

Questions:
What are the necessary conditions for a fundamental reform of political institutions? Were these conditions fulfilled in Japan and Korea in the 1990s?

Lectures mainly based on the following articles:

Topic 9: Movie and discussion (I just didn’t do it)

Topic 10: The “1955 System” and the Rise and Fall of One-Party Dominance in Japan

Questions:
Why did Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party govern for so long and why did it lose power? What does its rise and fall tells us about the nature of democracy in post-1945 Japan?

Lectures mainly based on the following articles:

Topic 11: The “Developmental State” Model and its Japanese
Variant.

**Question:**
What was the essence of the *developmental state* model and to what extent does it explain the economic successes of post-war Japan and South Korea?

*Lectures mainly based on the following articles:*


**Topic 12: Japanese Foreign Policy and the “Normal State” debate.**

**Question:**
How ‘normal’ is Japan’s post-war foreign policy and how has it changed, if at all, since the ending of the Cold War?

*Lectures mainly based on the following articles:*


**Question:**
What are the origins of the North Korean nuclear crisis and how might it be solved?

*Lectures mainly based on the following articles:***
Victor Cha, “What do they really want? Obama’s North Korea Conundrum,” 
*Washington Quarterly* (October, 2009), pp. 119 – 138. [Available at: 