Meeting Summary

Public Diplomacy, Contested History and Media Perspectives in Northeast Asia

7 March 2014
This is a summary of a roundtable event held at Chatham House on 7 March 2014. It is intended to serve as an aide-mémoire to those who attended and to provide a general summary of the discussion for those who did not. The event was held under the Chatham House Rule.

At a time when there has been much public discussion about growing tension between Japan, China and the two Koreas over a range of issues, including territorial disputes, historical controversies, the legacy of the Second World War, and the apparent growth of nationalism in the region, this event brought together journalists and regional experts to consider the current situation. Among the participants were representatives from the Chinese, South Korean and Japanese press, along with a number of UK journalists with experience reporting from the region.

The participants described and commented on the role of the media in their respective countries. They also discussed the ways in which print, online and broadcast media sources shape, disseminate and influence views relating to regional tensions. The degree to which journalists feel able to report freely and accurately was a recurring theme, and it was noted that the media in each of the three countries act as an ‘echo chamber’ around these sensitive issues, sometimes amplifying public opinion rather than reporting the news. Concerns were also raised over the ways in which social media increasingly fuel nationalist sentiment, further exacerbating regional tensions.

With shrinking budgets and fewer international correspondents, the ability of the Western media to report effectively on tensions within the region was also examined. It was suggested that some (but by no means all) Western outlets might be guilty of producing poorly informed, sensationalist reporting, and sometimes also of failing to reflect the diversity of opinions that exist within the region.

A number of suggestions were made for how the media might defuse, rather than escalate, regional tensions, including, for example, the encouragement of new media ‘platforms’ or forums (both real and online) in which a broad range of regional voices and opinions might be represented. Above all, the participants recognized the need for greater interaction between journalists in the region and for a heightened understanding of their countries’ respective cultures, histories and political systems. There was enthusiastic support for holding further meetings at Chatham House bringing together East Asian media representatives and Western correspondents with experience in the region.