

S-face

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Deciphering a world by gaining knowledge about the region Yoko Hirose



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The “epicenter” of global issues in recent years
Studying the Caucasus region

I specialize in the study of international politics in the former Soviet Union, and particularly, in the Caucasus countries. The “Caucasus countries” refers to the three countries located in the South Caucasus region adjoining Russia, Turkey, and Iran, and sandwiched between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea—Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. Although these countries used to belong to the former Soviet Union, they became independent states in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many diverse ethnic groups have entered the Caucasus region and lived alongside one another in a complex manner. Furthermore, as it is located in a geopolitically important position connecting Europe, Asia, Russia, and the Middle East, the region has also come to be known as the “Heartland.” After the 20th century, the production of oil and natural gas began to thrive along the coastal parts of the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus region began to draw global attention as a production region for oil and natural gas, as well as a “transportation corridor” through which oil and gas from the coastal regions of the Caspian Sea was delivered to Europe. Due to this geopolitical importance, Russia, Europe, and the United States are currently working to maintain their influence in the region by intervening strongly in local conflicts (problems surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia and Abkhazia), and in the politics and economics of the region. The degree of chaos and confusion has become extremely severe. In actual fact, many of the “epicenters” of international politics in recent years can be found in this region. Such forms of “regional importance” also provide great incentive for me to conduct research in this field.



The Caucasus region

Deciphering a “world of confusion” through the problem of “unrecognized states”

Today, the world is rocked by problems concerning the concept of “state,” such as the Ukraine crisis and the annexation (Russia and some actors use “incorporation” or “reunion” for it) of Crimea into Russia. To the Japanese people, who are faced with the problems of Takeshima and the Senkaku Islands, this is certainly not “somebody else’s problem” that does not concern us. In order to decipher this increasingly unstable world, an important key lies in the presence of “unrecognized states” such as Kosovo, North Cyprus, South Ossetia and so on. Unrecognized states, explained simply, are states that have not received international recognition as countries despite having declared themselves as sovereign states, and having put in place the corresponding forms to appear as a sovereign state. In an attempt to explore the origins to global issues through this problem of unrecognized states, I published *Mishonin-kokka to haken naki sekai* (“Unrecognized States and a World Without Hegemony”) (NHK Books) in August 2014. There is a tendency for unrecognized states to be created in cases such as the situation that arose immediately after the disintegration of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, when a relatively large number of unrecognized states was created, with some falling a state of chaos and confusion, and others becoming what is known as “failed states.” Hence, the neighboring countries have to put effort into fostering peace and stability in the region, as well as to guide it toward a state of neutral peace by acting as a mediator that has in-depth knowledge of the region. Furthermore, my view is that the large powers should embark on a course of mediation aimed at achieving a state of neutral peace, rather than make use of these unrecognized states to serve the interests of their own countries.

The key to making area studies meaningful lies in having a bird’s-eye view perspective on the world

Today, the world is rocked by problems concerning the concept of “state,” such as the Ukraine crisis and the annexation (Russia and some actors use “incorporation” or “reunion” for it) of Crimea into Russia. The dilemma of the two principles of international law, “respect for the sovereign rights of sovereign states” and “preservation of territorial integrity” and “rights to self-determination by ethnic groups” lies at the root of such problems. Placing our judgements and making decisions on regional conflicts that are taking place around the world, based on the limited volume of information that we hold, carries the serious risk of misinterpreting the true essence of the problem. The research conducted by Professor Yoko Hirose moves beyond the boundaries of conventional area studies to capture and examine the turbulence in contemporary society from the perspective of international politics.

Unrecognized State



Prof. Hirose conducts research on unrecognized states, which are states that have not received international recognition as countries despite having declared themselves as sovereign states. Azerbaijan is one of the important bases, and it also frequently participates in such research cooperation and international conferences.

Intelligence Assessment



The poor image that the Japanese people have of Russia is the result of biased media reports and images created from the past. To prevent a mismatch between these impressions and the actual situation, it is important to assess the information, conduct an accurate analysis, and come to grips with a Russia that is “as large as life.”

The Arctic



Prof. Hirose has commenced work on a project about issues in the Arctic region, which are new issues in international politics that concern the interests of many countries. She aims to disseminate information widely about these issues, which Russia is deeply involved in, and to heighten international awareness and interest toward this area.

Positioning the results of area studies in an academic context

Area studies are now the thriving field of study in all parts of the world. There are several reasons for this. To name a few, the end of the Cold War made it possible for researchers to enter regions that they could not previously get access to easily and conduct studies in these regions, while a decline in ideological bias(*) made it possible to engage in “genuine area studies.” However, it is undeniable that area studies are still positioned as a somewhat “floating” or unsettled field in the academic world. This is because when scholars in the field of area studies overly assert the “uniqueness of the region” that they are studying, they tend to be seen as merely disseminating one-sided information. To be sure, when we study a certain region in greater detail, the unique characteristics of that region become even more prominent, so it is perhaps natural for such tendencies to become even more pronounced. However, that generates only a sense of self-satisfaction for the researcher, and is not desirable for the development of the research field in the academic world. In light of that, my research laboratory engages in area studies research that can be applied to an academic context, through the exploration of “the dialogue and fusion of area studies with academic disciplines.” In short, rather than completing area studies research simply through the review of issues in a certain region, we apply it to an academic context and enable dialogue with specialists of other regions as well as theoretical researchers, and in doing so, aim to contribute to the academic field.

* Bias or prejudice in political and social thought.



Profile
Yoko Hirose

Professor, Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University. Completed the Master’s program at the University of Tokyo Graduate Schools for Law and Politics, and withdrawal after completion of doctoral course requirements. Specializes in international politics, area studies of the former Soviet Union, conflict and peace studies. Ph.D. in Media and Governance.

Please visit S-face website for details!

There are more articles and video of Yoko Hirose

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