

## **Conference Report — The Japan Association of International Relations 2020 Annual Convention**

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### **Report by Lukas Maximilian Müller**

The Japan Association of International Relations' (JAIR) 2020 annual convention, Japan's largest conference in the discipline, took place from October 23 to 25, online, via Zoom. While Japanese scholars are regularly present at international conferences on political science and international relations (IR), events organized by Japanese professional associations remain largely national affairs, still attracting little participation by outsiders. As it turned out, I was among a small number of non-Japanese contributors, in fact the only non-Asian participant based outside of Japan. As such, my participation provided rare insight into the current priorities and discourse of the Japanese IR community. My participation in the conference was made possible by a small grant disbursed by the German Association for Asian Studies (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Asienkunde, DGA).

Across 16 program sessions and 31 sectional sessions, the conference covered an eclectic set of themes, including political economy, regional politics, security, environmental politics, theory, and methods. International relations conferences are notorious for their anachronistic focus on great power dynamics and US-centric perspectives. In contrast, JAIR is a shining example of diversity in IR research. Given the history of international relations research in Japan, it is perhaps unsurprising that 18 out of 47 sessions were wholly or partly focused on politics in East Asia. Strikingly, however, 8 sessions had a focus on European politics, primarily regional cooperation. It appears that the trend of IR departments and journals turning their attention towards the European Union (EU) has held sway in Japan as well. Although the Japanese state remains somewhat skeptical of regional cooperation in East Asia, this does not appear to be the case for Japanese academia. Across the conference, views of regional politics in the EU and elsewhere were largely positive.

My own contribution to the conference, an analysis of the agency of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Commission, was part of a session titled *The Development and Limits of Regional Institutions: Comparative Studies of Non-Western Cases*. Including cases from East, South and Southeast Asia, as well as West Africa, the panel chairs and discussants provided a finely-tuned balance between the merits of various modes of regional cooperation, as well as the challenges of analyzing cases in the Global South. The session showcased both the strength of Japanese disciplinary scholarship on regional cooperation, as well as the academic community's profound area studies knowledge. I came out of my panel not only with constructive feedback from my discussants (all under 35,

which was a welcome surprise), but also with pointers towards interesting research emerging from Japan, which I might not have become aware of otherwise.

The conference organizers handled the COVID-19 induced issues wonderfully. Despite Japan having relatively low infection numbers throughout the summer, the executive committee announced in June that the conference would definitely be held online. This decisive strategy made participants' planning much easier. The digital conference format was excellently executed and I had the impression that this was significantly due to the organizing committee members' personal efforts. I was accompanied throughout the process, from the uploading of my conference paper to the timetable of my panel.

The conference format was specifically set up to mitigate the shortcomings of the online format. To make up for the absence of physical venues for networking, JAIR facilitated informal exchanges following each sub-committee meeting. While this is certainly no like-for-like replacement for physical encounters, it was a welcome change from some other online conferences I have attended in the past year. Taking into account the issues that young scholars are facing in breaking into the IR conference circuit during a global pandemic, a number of sessions were set up for graduate students, which were by all accounts well-attended and constructive.

Taken together, I left the 2020 JAIR Annual Convention with a new appreciation for the art of organizing conferences online, as well as the strength of the Japanese IR community. Given the quality and quantity of its research output, Japan still appears somewhat underrepresented in the global IR discourse. I would like to encourage closer cooperation of German and European professional associations (including the German Association for Asian Studies), in order to foster closer ties with the Japanese academic community. Attending the JAIR annual conference certainly is as good an entry point as any.

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