

International Geographic Union Conference Santiago, Chile November 14th-18th, 2011

Participating in the IGU/UGI Conference was an utmostly valuable experience to me for a variety of reasons. First of all, my academic identity is that of a student of International Relations (IR) of Asia Pacific and therefore all of the conferences I attended so far were set disciplinary in either the realm of IR or Asian Studies. The disciplinary distinctions are an obvious academic necessity as they help to define the theoretical, methodological and empirical boundaries of the objects of our academic investigation. At the same though, they often prevent us from viewing the same issues from other angles which can shed a completely different light on the issues in question.

Taking part in a panel at a geographic conference enabled me to gain important insights into the way geographers of whom the audience consisted and particularly the scholars of political geography approach territorial disputes which is the main focus of my research. Furthermore, I also learned that my understanding of Geography as a politically neutral discipline (as compared to IR, Political Science and Area Studies) was fundamentally wrong. I reached this conclusion based on two factors. One was the contents of certain comments from the audience during our panel. Some of them exhibited a strongly politicized perception of geographical borders of Japan, Russia and China. The other was the fact that the conference was hosted not by a regular academic institution but by a military academy. In the process of interacting with other participants I learned that because of the history of numerous border clashes in Latin America, Geography as an academic discipline but also related activities such as mapping are generally dominated by the military. This was an eye opening experience for me making me realize further similarities between IR and seemingly objective discipline of Geography.

Overall, taking part in the UGI conference was a very enriching experience for me and I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Slavic Center at Hokkaido University and to Professor Iwashita that played the key role in organizing this panel.

Alexander Bukh (Associate Professor, University of Tsukuba)