



EAST-WEST CENTER

For Journalists, Reporting on Cross-Border Disputes Poses Special Challenges and Dangers

Quick take:

- *In a recent [webinar](#), journalists who cover long-simmering enmities between neighboring countries discussed facing political pressure, entrenched attitudes of ethnic and religious animosity, lack of access to sources, disinformation, and threats to their personal safety.*
- *Journalists were among the casualties during the recent conflict in Gaza, and several were imprisoned.*
- *Panelists cited rising nationalism in East Asia as a barrier to impartial reporting on longstanding disagreements between Japan and South Korea.*
- *Journalists in India and Pakistan are unable to report effectively on each other's countries because of “high walls” that leaders have built between the nations.*



Residents inspect damage after recent airstrikes in Gaza. Photo: Fatima Shbair / Getty Images

HONOLULU (July 22, 2021) – Disputes between neighboring nations and peoples rank among some of world’s most persistent and bitter geopolitical conflicts. Journalists who cover such long-simmering enmities often face political pressure and must confront entrenched attitudes of ethnic and religious animosity, lack of access to information and sources, disinformation, and, not least, threats to their personal safety.

In a recent East-West Center webinar titled “[Divided by History](#),” moderator Owen Ullmann, Executive Editor of *The International Economy* magazine and former managing editor of World News at *USA Today*, talked with six journalists who cover both sides of three of the world’s most intractable cross-border clashes—between India and Pakistan, Israel and Palestine, and Korea and Japan—about the kind of difficulties they face in reporting accurate, unbiased news.

Casualties and manipulation in the Israel-Palestine conflict

Khaldoun Barghouti, Israel Affairs Editor for the Palestinian National Authority’s Ramallah-based *Al-Hayat al-Jadida* newspaper, discussed the threat of arrest and violence when Israeli forces disregard press credentials and fail to distinguish between journalists and Palestinian activists. This is true not only for journalists, Barghouti pointed out, but also paramedics. “In the field, they are seen as Palestinians before paramedics,” he said.

Both journalists and paramedics were among the casualties in the recent conflict in Gaza, he observed, and several Palestinian journalists were imprisoned in Israel. “If you talk about the [Israeli] ‘occupation,’ you may be accused of incitement,” Barghouti said. “If you post something on Facebook, you may find yourself in prison.”

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Washington Post Israel/Palestinian Territories correspondent Shira Rubin, who lives in Tel Aviv, added that in any coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict, “the local press is very much a front” that political leaders attempt to co-opt in the effort to control the narrative, or even to gain tactical advantage in the field.

As an example, she said that during the recent Gaza conflict the Israeli government informed international media of its intent to launch a ground invasion, which she hypothesized may have been intended to encourage Hamas fighters to take up positions that Israel could then target. “The international press found itself in a very strange position, which says a lot about the kind of reality that we’re facing,” Rubin said. “Nothing is ever straightforward and we can never really separate ourselves even if we want to, because we are part of the story.”

Uneasy East Asian allies

Taketsugu Sato, Senior Foreign Affairs and National Security Correspondent for Japan’s *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, cited rising nationalism in East Asia as a barrier to impartial reporting on longstanding disagreements between Japan and South Korea. The key friction points are historical grievances regarding Japan’s use of “comfort women” and forced labor during World War II, and the territorial dispute over islands in the Sea of Japan to which both countries lay claim.

“Leaders try to use nationalism as a tool to gain domestic support,” said Sato, citing former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s attempt to “mobilize anti-Korean sentiment among Japanese people for political gain.” This has led to a “negative cycle,” Sato said, wherein “politicians on both sides become more hardline [so that] it’s difficult for the two sides to compromise.”

Despite friction in the political realm, Sato said he hopes that some reconciliation is possible through cultural exchange. In Japan, Korean dramas and K-pop music are immensely popular, representing a “tiny light,” he said, at the end of a dark tunnel.

Son Taek Wang, a research associate with Yeosijae (Future Consensus Institute) and a former diplomatic correspondent for YTN News Network, described anti-Japanese nationalism in Korea as a “no flexibility zone,” in which the historical trauma Korea has suffered leaves little room for improving relations with Japan. Some Korean leaders, he said, exploit this anti-Japanese sentiment for political gain. He emphasized the importance of the United States in mediating the fragile geopolitical alliance between the two nations amid growing nationalistic fervor.

Asked by Ullmann whether he has personally felt political pressure to promote nationalist narratives, Sato noted that whenever *Asahi Shimbun* criticized Abe’s Korea policy the paper experienced backlash from right-wing hardliners. Through his reporting, however, he said he hopes to encourage readers to see the Japan-South Korea relationship from a more strategic perspective as a healthy alliance between democracies that is an important counterweight against Chinese and North Korean aggression.

Scaling the India-Pakistan reporting wall

In Kashmir—the disputed region on the border between India and Pakistan—the “high walls” that leaders have built between the nations mean that journalists “cannot visit each other, cannot discover our two countries for ourselves, and have to rely on many Western and Chinese sources for information,” said Aditi Phadnis, a consulting political editor of the New Delhi-based *Business Standard* newspaper. Phadnis remarked that a new challenge has arisen since the advent of the Internet: Whereas before there was a paucity of information, today “there is so much information sloshing around, but how much of it do you know to be accurate? How can you judge?”

But an even bigger challenge, she said, is rising nationalism. Phadnis said she tries to combat this by building relationships with sources across the hostile borders. “My responsibility as a reporter is to report truthfully and accurately,” she said, “and find the right people to blame when they botch it up. For this, we need to know much more about each other.”

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Kamal Siddiqi, former editor of *The Express Tribune* in Karachi, Pakistan, and now director of the Center for Excellence in Journalism at the Institute of Business Administration there, echoed his Indian colleague's remarks, particularly with respect to the rise of nationalism. "I want to report things as they are," Siddiqi said. "I don't want to report for the national narrative," which he said Pakistani reporters are pressured to follow.

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Siddiqi noted a lack of coverage about Pakistan within the country itself. "If you want to know what's happening in Pakistan," he said, "you can get more information from Indian newspapers because there is so much appetite for Pakistani news there." He further warned about the influence of "fake news" resulting from restrictions on reporters from freely covering the two nations: "We have seen that on social media platforms, a lot of stories about Pakistan in India and vice versa are not true, but there is no way to contradict them because journalists are not there on the ground."

With local reporters who don't follow nationalist narratives being obstructed and harassed, Siddiqi said, "at the end of the day it's foreign journalists, not Indian and Pakistani journalists who are actually getting access to report, which I think is a shame." If journalists were allowed to report freely, he said, "it would help create more understanding."

Phadnis agreed. "Half the problems will be solved," she said.

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Mailing Address: 1601 East-West Road | Honolulu, HI 96848 USA