

The US in East Asia: Not Architecture, But Action

By Gerald Curtis

United States policy in East Asia, regardless of who is elected president in 2008, is almost certain to be characterized by strategic continuity.

AN EMPHASIS ON ALLIANCES with Japan and South Korea and deepening economic and political relations with China, support for the status quo in the Taiwan Straits, a frustrating effort to get North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and an ambivalent attitude toward East Asian regionalism currently are, and for the foreseeable future will remain, the core features of US East Asia policy.

Basic US strategy in East Asia was forged early in the postwar period and it has proved to be remarkably durable. Its key objectives include preventing any country from establishing a hegemonic position, structuring a “hub and spokes” arrangement of alliances that facilitates the deployment of American military power in the region and beyond, and encouraging economic openness through trade and capital liberalization. It is a dynamic set of objectives that have evolved in response to changing circumstances.

There is no reason to believe that this strategy faces a major overhaul. The notion that the region needs a new security “architecture” has gained popularity far in excess of either its likelihood or its necessity. The next administration, whether Republican or Democrat, need not, and almost certainly will not, design a new security architecture for the region, although some supplements to the existing framework could be useful, as I suggest later in this essay. And it is clearly in America’s interest to sustain the existing international economic architecture, with its emphasis on open markets and free capital flows, which has brought such impressive benefits to the region and to the US.

Rather than reconfiguring America's strategic objectives, the challenge US policymakers face in East Asia involves formulating better and more comprehensive ways to advance those objectives. Concerns that the US will not define new strategies in East Asia are misplaced, because the region is different than the Middle East and Latin America, where there is a compelling need to rethink American strategy. The danger facing US policy in East Asia is that Washington's preoccupation with problems elsewhere in the world, especially in the Middle East, will result in the administration treating East Asia with a kind of benign neglect. This is all the more likely if the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue seems to be on track and thus demands less direct involvement from the president.

It is inevitable that the attention of the president and his foreign policy advisors should be drawn to the world's hotspots. But American political leaders in both parties, and especially their presidential aspirants, need to demonstrate a keener awareness than they currently do of East Asia's critical importance to America's overall national interests, both in terms of economic prosperity and security. It is certain that the region's importance can only grow larger. If they had such an understanding, the president and his foreign policy advisors would give East Asia sustained attention and replace benign neglect with active engagement.

WELCOME END TO HUBRIS

In one important sense there is bound to be an improvement in US-East Asia policy under the next president, regardless of party. As a result of the debacle in Iraq, the next American administration can be expected to be more prudent in the use of military force, more attentive to the views of allies and others, and more restrained in using sheer power to instigate domestic political change in countries whose regimes it deplors. In other words, we can look forward to the hubris of the neo-conservatives being replaced by a more cautious and realistic approach to foreign policy, with a greater empha-

sis on negotiating with adversaries, strengthening multilateral institutions and repairing the terrible damage that the Bush administration has inflicted on the US image around the world. The change in Bush's strategy for dealing with North Korea that led to the February 2007 agreement in the six-party talks suggests that salutary changes are already taking place and that the neo-conservative influence over American foreign policy is in sharp decline.

Building an East Asian 'community' is a long term project that will not diminish the importance of the bilateral relationships that are the core of American strategy in the region, at least for many years to come.

Talk of the dangers of the US retreating into isolationism seem overblown to me. Isolationism is simply not a realistic option. The decision to rapidly withdraw US troops from Iraq would not be the beginning of a retreat into isolationism, but a necessary step to return the US to responsible internationalism. Economic protectionism is another matter, however. There are mounting protectionist pressures in Congress being driven by a strong public backlash against globalization, propelled by ever widening income inequality in the US.

The next president no doubt will try to resist protectionist pressures because he or she will recognize that America's future depends on making markets more rather than less open. But whether the US moves in a more protectionist direction will depend on the state of the American economy and on whether the next administration defuses protectionist pressures by adopting fiscal and social policies that respond to the large numbers of American workers who have seen their

incomes stagnate or fall while the US economy as a whole has benefited from globalization.

It also will depend on whether China takes decisive steps to reduce its swelling trade surplus with the US. If China does not do so, criticism of its trade policies and its insistence on keeping its currency undervalued can only become stronger and spur Congress to adopt protectionist measures. But if the American economy avoids recession and China acts responsibly, the new administration will be more intent on containing Congressional pressures for protectionist policies than in disrupting economic relationships across the Pacific.

THE NEXT PRESIDENT

There is a tendency in East Asian countries to exaggerate the differences between Democrats and Republicans with respect to both economic and security policies in East Asia. Many Japanese leaders, for example, believe that Republicans are pro-Japanese and the Democrats less friendly. Similar views prevail elsewhere in the region.

A review of the historical record gives little support for such perceptions. It was a Republican president who initiated the currency measures known as the “Nixon shocks” in 1971, followed by the opening to China. Another Republican, Ronald Reagan, insisted on Japanese “voluntary” export restraints on automobiles. It was Bill Clinton, a Democratic president quite unpopular with the Japanese political establishment, who took the initiative to strengthen US-Japan security relations. In 1996 he signed a joint declaration with Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto that effectively redefined the US-Japan alliance and set the stage for revising the guidelines for US-Japan defense cooperation. Those new guidelines provided the framework for the subsequent Japanese role in contributing to security in “areas surrounding Japan,” the boundaries of which were purposely left undefined and which have in practice steadily expanded. Finally, it is the current Republican president, George W. Bush, who by suddenly changing his strategy for how to deal with North

Korea, which was a decision to be applauded, pulled the rug out from under Japanese policy and left Japan with the problem of trying to figure out how to get back in step with the other nations in the six party talks.

Less emphasis on unilateralism in American foreign policy is going to be a mixed blessing for countries in Northeast Asia. It should result in closer consultation and a greater emphasis on coordination, but it also is going to generate demands that other countries do more to contribute to common objectives. There is no difference between Republicans and Democrats on this point.

THE NEW DEFINITION OF “ALLY”

A greater American willingness to consult and engage in strategic dialogue does not necessarily translate into greater tolerance for opinions that differ from those of the US. Japan, South Korea and China will each have to be quite nimble in managing relations with a US government that expects others to do more for the common good, something which Americans, again regardless of their political party affiliation, tend to believe they are uniquely qualified to define.

And regardless of which party takes control of the White House and the Congress, security policy will be driven by the belief that we are in a “war” against terrorism. There is considerable, and appropriate, criticism among foreign policy intellectuals about imagery of a “war” against terrorism, which confers undeserved prestige on criminal bands of extremists and has been used by the Bush administration to trample on civil liberties and undermine the constitutional separation of powers. But whether or not the next president finds other words to describe the nature of the struggle to protect the American people from the threat of terrorism, the reality is that the American public feels vulnerable and frightened and wants a leader who is committed to destroying the ability of terrorist groups to do them harm, whatever that struggle is called.

Among its many consequences for American thinking about foreign policy, 9/11 changed the common sense definition of the term “ally.” In

the postwar period an ally was a country the US helped defend against the Soviet Union and what used to be called international communism. Americans had little reason to be concerned about reciprocity in security relations because they considered their country safe from attack except in the event of a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union. And especially after the Cuban missile crisis, there was a sense of confidence that deterrence made that virtually unthinkable.

An ally for the US in the post-9/11 world is a country that actively joins the fight against terrorism and helps the US protect its citizens from attack, not only by foreign states but by murky terrorist networks. In other words, an alliance for Americans now means a security relationship that is reciprocal and that responds to a global threat that cannot be met by deterrence alone.

This change has a direct impact on security relations in East Asia, especially with Japan. If Japan had stuck to the letter of the US-Japan security treaty, which obligates the US to defend Japan and imposes no reciprocal obligations, the US-Japan relationship would be in tatters today. The Japanese response effectively redefined the security relationship, and it also reinforced pressures that already were in play to draw Japan into a more active role in international security affairs.

EAST ASIAN REGIONALISM

One question that will confront the next administration is how to respond to growing East Asian regionalism. There are three points to be made about regionalism in East Asia, the first of which is that it is, and will continue to be, multi-layered, with the borders of the “region” ambiguous and changeable. There is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN +3, the East Asian Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and so on, each with a different membership and different functions. The extension of the six-party talks on North Korea to deal with broader regional security issues would add an

additional important layer to this institutional structure. This multiplicity of institutions is to be welcomed. It is a pragmatic response to dynamic and complex realities.

The second point is that building strong regional institutions will take a long time, but the value is more in the process than it is in the goal. Unlike the European Union, there is no likelihood that the countries of East Asia will yield any part of their national sovereignty to a supra-national institution for many years to come. Regionalism, however, can be a useful add-on to existing security arrangements, and regional institutions provide settings that the US should use more energetically to deepen relationships and expand its influence in the region. But building an East Asian “community” is a long-term goal that will not diminish the importance of the bilateral relationships that are the core of American strategy in the region.

The third point flows from the previous two: the US government should relax about regionalism in East Asia. The concern that the presence of East Asian regional institutions that do not include the US is somehow inimical to American interests is not persuasive. For one thing, the idea that China, Japan and South Korea will collude to pursue policies that threaten US interests is unrealistic.

A lack of trust is one of the most salient characteristics of relations among Northeast Asian countries. The more dialogue, the more transparency, the more interaction there is between the countries of East Asia, the better the chances that potential conflicts can be avoided or resolved. And that, of course, is in the interests of the US. There is little reason to be alarmed that some of these discussions take place in institutional settings where the US is not present.

Moreover, East Asian economies are so enmeshed in the global economy, so dependent on access to markets outside the region, that East Asian regionalism must necessarily be “open” regionalism. In the best possible world, openness would be promoted by global multi-lateral trade liberalization agreements. The re-

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ality, however, is that bilateral and regional free trade agreements are now the vogue. It is to be hoped that the Korea-US free trade agreement (FTA) will spark competitive liberalization, with Japan in particular being compelled to get on the FTA bus, and that it will thereby promote further economic openness between East Asia and the US.

Regional security dialogues, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, provide important opportunities for confidence building. Expanding the scope of the six-party talks also may be of potential benefit, though at the moment there is more enthusiasm about the format than there is informed discussion of exactly what issues such an expanded six-party organization would deal with.

The notion that a new security architecture is needed in East Asia does not stand up under the glare of serious scrutiny. It is more rhetorical flourish than substance. We will continue to see some innovation and the remodeling and updating of structures that have been around for a long time, but the basic security architecture is likely to remain in place.

The point to be stressed about East Asian regionalism is that the US should not overreact to the formation of regional institutions of which it is not a member. There is no danger that East

Asia is going to exclude the US: the entire region will continue to rely on the US as a major market for its products, as a major source of foreign capital and technology, and as the key provider of security. The real danger is that the US will not be alert to the complexities and dynamism of the region and to the opportunities and dangers they pose. The challenge for senior American policy makers vis-à-vis East Asian regionalism is quite straightforward: give the region the degree of attention that is commensurate with its importance to American national interests. Sadly, one looks in vain among the leading Democratic and Republican presidential hopefuls for anyone who has a sustained interest in and knowledge of East Asia.

THE CHINA-JAPAN-US TRIANGLE

The hallmark of US-China policy since Nixon has been continuity. Several of Nixon's successors have come into power promising to reverse the allegedly too-kind-to-China policy of his predecessor. Bill Clinton, for example, was critical of George H. W. Bush for being soft on China and he threatened the "butchers of Beijing" who mowed down innocent people in Tiananmen Square with a suspension of Most Favored Nation status unless China improved its human rights behavior. Within a few years

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he was the champion of a strategic partnership with China. The current President Bush entered office declaring that China was not an incipient strategic partner but a strategic competitor. A few years later, he, too, was enthusiastic about relations with China.

Sooner or later, each Administration since Nixon has come to the view that American interests are best served by engagement with China, and the next Administration is almost surely going to come to the same conclusion. It is hard to imagine anyone being elected president in 2008 who would depart from the established strategy of deepening economic relations with China, in order to encourage it to become more enmeshed as a “stakeholder” in the international system, and at the same time to hedge against the possibility that China will use its growing power in ways that are inimical to American interests.

Overall, the Bush Administration deserves fairly high marks for its China policy. Bush made it clear to Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian that the US was opposed to actions that raised tensions with the mainland, and he used the occasion of President Hu Jintao’s visit to Washington to state publicly that the US is opposed to independence for Taiwan. (It is, of course, also opposed to Chinese use of force to incorporate Taiwan.) In other words, the most hawkish American government in years, one that has made spreading democratic values, by force if necessary, a priority of US foreign policy,

has publicly taken a position in favor of sustaining the status quo in the Taiwan Straits.

US Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson’s investment of time and resources in a strategic dialogue with China seems to me to be a sensible approach that is likely to encourage needed institutional innovation in China and further China’s stakeholder role. Both Democratic and Republican presidents regularly choose their treasury secretaries from among successful investment bankers on Wall Street — Robert Rubin for Clinton, Paulson for Bush. It seems reasonable to believe that whoever becomes president in January 2009 is also going to put together an economic team led by people who share an enthusiasm for globalization and who see China’s emergence as positive for the world economy and for the US.

US interests would not be served by China and Japan becoming too close, but that is not a realistic concern. The more serious worry is that China and Japan would become more antagonistic, which would present the US with unpleasant and undesirable choices. The US has an interest in a strong alliance with Japan and good relations with China. Achieving both is not possible if there is a high degree of tension between China and Japan.

Thus the Bush Administration has encouraged China and Japan to strengthen their relationship, and the next president no doubt will do the same. It was telling that Bush publicly congratulated Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for his decision to visit Beijing last October even before he made the visit.

The Chinese responded with enthusiasm to Abe’s initiative to move the Sino-Japanese relationship out of the *cul de sac* created by the Sino-Japanese standoff over the Yasukuni Shrine visits by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. And Japan reciprocated with an invitation to Prime Minister Wen Jiabao to visit Tokyo in the spring of 2007. This turned out to be highly successful and well choreographed, full of smiles and handshakes with Japanese passers-by during Wen’s early morning jogs around Yoyogi Park, and an important speech at the Diet, Japan’s

parliament, that accentuated the positive in Sino-Japanese relations.

Both China and Japan have compelling reasons to avoid deterioration in their relationship. Bilateral trade and investment are of critical importance for both countries, the Chinese want as trouble-free an international environment as possible in the run-up to the 2008 summer Olympics and Japan does not want a return to the “hot economics, cold politics” of the Koizumi years, with its inherent danger of turning economic relations chilly or making politics “hot” in the wrong way. Neither country has anything to gain from a ratcheting up of tensions, especially since both place a high premium on good relations with the US, something difficult to sustain if they do not have tolerably good relations with each other.

Nonetheless the relationship is fragile. There are disputes over territory and access to the natural gas resources of the East China Sea. There is history, an issue always ready to trigger antagonisms because one side or the other may be tempted to use it to rally nationalist sentiment. And there is Taiwan, which for China is far more important than history. Any indication that Japan was tilting toward Taiwan would be certain to elicit a sharp Chinese response.

JAPAN'S POLICY DIVIDE

In Japan, even though Abe took the first step to improve relations, conservatives are deeply divided over China policy. On one side are those, including Abe, Foreign Minister Taro Aso, head of the Liberal Democratic Party's policy council Nakagawa Shoichi and others in the administration, who ruminate about strengthening relations with Taiwan, speak openly of a China threat and want to respond to China's rise by forging a strategic relationship with Australia, India and countries on China's periphery. On the other side are those who are more positive about Sino-Japanese cooperation and want to see Japan put more emphasis generally on its Asian diplomacy. The politics of competition between these two views are complicated by the

fact that advocates of both are found in the LDP and also in the opposition Democratic Party.

As American policy makers try to manage America's multiple relationships in East Asia, they are going to have to pay more careful attention to a dynamically evolving, inevitably more complex and probably more difficult US relationship with Japan. That relationship is strong and in military-to-military terms has been growing closer than ever. But the US-Japan alliance is entering into a new phase, driven by foreign policy activism and assertiveness on Japan's part that the US is not used to dealing with. The US has for years pressed Japan to play a larger security role and to be more active in international political affairs. It now will have to adjust to the reality that a Japan that does more has more to say about what needs to be done.

Some years ago the present Governor of Tokyo, Ishihara Shintaro, penned the famous book about the “Japan that can say no” to the United States. Since 9/11, Japan has taken strides to make the alliance more reciprocal and, contrary to Ishihara's vision, so far it has seemed to go out of its way to say “yes” to the US, incurring a considerable amount of criticism from the Japanese press in the process.

But Ishihara actually anticipated an important change in Japanese diplomacy: Japan is less shy than ever before about making its own demands on the alliance, as can be seen in its skeptical reaction to the February 13, 2007 agreement in the six-party talks, its campaign to get the US, as well as other countries that value their relationship with Japan, to support it on the issue of Japanese citizens abducted to North Korea, and its barely concealed criticism of the Bush Administration's decision to take a more conciliatory approach to dealing with the North.

It is worrying that Abe has decided to demonstrate a more self-assertive Japanese foreign policy by staking out a position on North Korea that puts it at odds with the US and isolates it within the six-party framework. The Bush Administration publicly has expressed sympathy for Japanese demands regarding the fate of

abductees not yet fully accounted for, but the reality is that Japan's priority is the abductees, while the priority for the US and everyone else is stopping further production of nuclear weapons and eliminating the weapons that North Korea already possesses.

Abe has reversed completely the North Korea strategy pursued by his predecessor. Koizumi opposed unilateral Japanese sanctions, believed that the nuclear issue needed to be resolved to clear the way for progress on the abductees, and urged Washington to initiate bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang. Abe has imposed and expanded unilateral sanctions, made progress on the abductees the pre-condition for Japanese participation in providing energy to North Korea in exchange for shutting down its nuclear facility at Yongbon and has not hidden his dismay at the US decision to negotiate directly with the North Korean regime.

The North Korean issue poses real dangers to US-Japan relations. If the US negotiations with North Korea move forward and if they get to the point where the US is prepared to remove North Korea from the list of states that support terrorism, *without* progress on the abductees issue, Tokyo will feel betrayed by its US ally. Such a reaction is already evident in the commentaries about US policy in the conservative press. Conversely, American irritation with Japan will only grow stronger if Japan is seen to be uncooperative on the nuclear issue because of its insistence on giving priority to the abductees issue.

North Korean leader Kim Jung Il might take care of the problem by backing out of the February 2007 agreement, thereby pushing the US back into the hard line position that the Abe administration supports. But that seems unlikely with the announcement that an inter-Korean summit would be held October 2-4 in Pyongyang. Given White House determination to avoid a crisis on the peninsula, the announcement, which was said to have "surprised" Washington, seemed unlikely to draw the same opposition from the US that President Kim Dae-jung's first such meeting did in 2001. If the sum-

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mit, and other positive signs of progress on the North Korean nuclear issue continue, Japan will find itself isolated unless it makes a substantial course correction in its North Korean policy.

It took the Bush Administration six years to arrive at a sensible strategy for dealing with North Korea. It is more than a little troubling that Japan is so far out of step with US policy on this, the most critical current security issue in Northeast Asia.

The results of the July 29 Upper House election in Japan, which dealt the LDP an historic defeat and made the Democratic Party the largest party in the House of Councillors, has thrown into doubt not only Abe's policies, but the survivability of his government. The Democratic Party is somewhat divided internally on key foreign policy issues, but it is not unreasonable to expect that in general it will impede the Abe administration's efforts to get Japan to adopt a more robust security policy. The US will have to adjust to Japan's new political realities as they unfold.

As far as US-South Korean relations are concerned, the impending change in the leadership of both countries should be grasped as an opportunity to initiate a new strategic dialogue. There are numerous changes in sight, many of them far-reaching. In addition to the continuing dynamics of the North Korean situation, the new administrations will be overseeing the transfer of wartime operational control over South Korean forces from the US to the South Korean government, which is scheduled to occur by 2012, and the redeployment and contraction of the US troop presence in South Korea. On the trade side, assuming that the Korea-US free trade agreement will clear the ratification hurdles in both countries, which unfortunately is not a sure thing, economic interdependence between South Korea and the US will deepen, and that should act as a spur to further trade liberalization in the region.

CONCLUSION

There are any number of issues relating to East Asia that will require skillful management by

American policy makers. If they are managed poorly, there will be problems. A new president, simply because he or she is new and brings in a new team, will take months to get organized. Mishandling of important East Asian issues can occur in that transition period.

There is little prospect, and little need, for fundamental strategic rethinking about East Asia, in my view. The more important question is how attentive and how skillful the US will be in dealing with a region in which the relationships are more complex than ever before. It was much easier to anticipate the consequences of actions when the Cold War imposed a structural stability on international relations. The range of possible effects is much greater now. Even though bilateral security arrangements, the hub and spokes approach, still form the core of US strategy in the region, the US has to think not only bilaterally but more in trilateral, multilateral and regional terms.

It is questionable, however, how much sustained attention senior policy makers are going to give to East Asia when their overwhelming preoccupation will be to manage the fallout of the Iraq quagmire. We do not need a new vision for US policy in East Asia, but we do need political leaders who understand how important this part of the world is to US national interests and invest the time, energy and resources to maximize the opportunities and minimize the risks for the United States.

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