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A Forward-Looking Partner in a Changing East Asia

Since the beginning of the Bush administration, many changes—some quite unexpected—have occurred in East Asia as well as in the United States itself. Even though some have expressed a level of complacency with President George W. Bush's achievements in Asia,[1] U.S. Asia policy practices have been driven by events—its China policy moved from a perception of Beijing as a "strategic competitor" to seeking cooperative and constructive relations after the EP-3 spy plane midair collision and the September 11 terrorist attacks—or by the situation—the North Korean nuclear issue—rather than guided by a deep understanding of the changes occurring in the region and their implications for the United States. The U.S. political elite have yet to reach a consensus on a sound and farsighted Asian policy. They must address three key questions: How should the United States perceive the changing East Asia as well as evolving Chinese and U.S. roles there? How can it construct a more sensible policy toward the region as a whole? How should the United States deal with a rising China?

Understanding the Tide of Change

The most significant development in East Asia over the past decade has undoubtedly been the growth of regionalism. A region long plagued by war, chaos, division, and mutual suspicion has begun moving toward integration. Seen in a broad historical perspective, East Asia as a whole has come a long way since World War II. From that time to the end of the Vietnam War, most East

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Asian countries wrestled with the tasks of nation and state building. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, the dominant agenda in East Asia was economic development, and it witnessed the so-called East Asian Miracle.

In the wake of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, East Asia looked to deepen regional economic cooperation and integration primarily to improve its economic stability and resilience but also to build a regional identity. Aspiring to create "a new community of common destiny whose members enjoy common development in times of peace and meet challenges together in times of crisis,"[2] the members of East Asian institutions are making serious, concerted efforts toward that goal. Ten years after the kickoff of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Plus Three process, which brought the 10 Southeast Asian member countries together with China, Japan, and South Korea, the achievements are remarkable. It has broadened and deepened cooperation in about 20 functional areas and put forth a blueprint for the next decade. Looking to the future, regional integration will remain the primary logic of and momentum for East Asia's development.

The United States needs a deep understanding of the changes occurring in East Asia.

Although most observers focus on China's rising power, the last decade has also seen Beijing perform a new role in the region. Before the Asian financial crisis, the region watched China's rapid growth with some level of wariness, and the notion of a "China threat" hovered about. In the last 10 years, however, China has turned itself into a major trading partner to many regional members, an active proponent for cooperation, and a responsible player in critical issues. As a result, a rising China has been viewed by most, if not all, of the region as a great economic opportunity, a constructive partner in cooperation, and a positive force for stability. This positive perception of China is reflected in a recent survey of 128 security analysts from the Asia-Pacific region and Europe.[3] Although these security experts generally reject the proposition that China's rise will destabilize the region, they express a significant level of concern that the United States will regard China's rise as a threat.

After World War II, the United States established a hub-and-spoke structure in the Asia-Pacific region through a series of bilateral alliances with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. Washington has gained tremendous influence in regional affairs by providing political, economic, and military support to a host of countries in the area. Yet, recent developments in East Asia have made the region much less dependent on the United States for security protection, economic prosperity, and political initiatives. Under these new circumstances, the likelihood of the United States maintaining its hub-and-spoke structure is declining, as is the region's dependence on U.S. leadership in regional affairs. The turning point has come for the United States to be a partner rather than a patron.

A Forward-Looking East Asia Policy

Great changes have taken place in East Asia over the last decade, and certainly even more will occur in the years ahead. Washington should not stand in the shadow of a competitive Cold War past but instead adopt a vision for a cooperative future that reflects the changes that have already occurred and anticipates those on their way. The policy should not be geared just toward the pursuit of narrow U.S. interests but also accommodate broader regional interests. This adjustment would demonstrate that the United States is not a selfish and parochial power but rather an enlightened and responsible one.

Moreover, in a changing regional and global context, Washington should embrace policy tools consistent with trends of the time and abandon those that are outdated or ineffective. In dealing with regional security challenges, for example, bilateral alliances are often inadequate and largely unproductive. Overall, U.S. regional policy should seek to bury the legacy of the Cold War, support the East Asian integration process, embrace multilateralism, and abandon the outdated game of balancing a rising China.

The United States should take significant steps to obliterate the vestiges of the Cold War in East Asia and help secure peaceful solutions to the North Korean issue and the Taiwan problem. Washington must understand that long-standing U.S.–North Korean antagonism is the cause of the North Korean nuclear problem, not the other way around. So far, the progress on the nuclear issue has been preliminary. Although the destruction of the cooling tower at the Yongbyon facility is an important symbolic step, its ultimate solution will entail more strenuous and sophisticated diplomatic efforts. To deal with the nuclear and the entire Korean issue, Washington should demonstrate a spirit of genuine conciliation and avoid ideological bias and winner's conceit. To a large extent, the current, strong domestic constraint on U.S. policy toward North Korea stems from ideological bias and impedes a comprehensive solution of the Korean issue. A courageous and farsighted U.S. president should bring an end to the confrontation with Pyongyang, thus building a new relationship conducive to the solution of the nuclear and other problems.

In Taiwan, the victory of the Kuomingtang (KMT) in the March 2008 election presents a historic opportunity for cross-strait relations. In contrast to the previous Democratic and Progressive Party administration, which sought the *de jure* independence of Taiwan, the KMT prefers the status quo and supports cross-strait economic and cultural exchanges. Although it is mainly up to the two sides of the Taiwan Strait to narrow their differences and build new relations, the United States remains important to the process. The U.S. political elite should no longer view Taiwan as part of its sphere of influence in the western Pacific or as a strategic lever against China. They should understand that the Taiwan issue is the most crucial challenge to Chinese-U.S. relations and to peace and stability in the western Pacific and that its peaceful solution will serve not only the interests of both sides of the Taiwan Strait, but regional and U.S. interests as well. As the most important external player, the United States should encourage the improvement of cross-strait relations and welcome a solution that both sides peacefully work out and accept.

The time has come for the U.S. to be a partner rather than a regional patron.

More broadly, East Asian regionalism, which will continue to be a prevalent trend in the future, poses a new challenge to U.S. regional policy. Washington's concern over East Asian integration concentrates mainly on three questions: whether East Asian integration will marginalize the United States, whether it will strengthen Chinese influence in the region, and whether it will undermine the progress of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Regarding the first question, given the profound political, economic, and security linkages between the United States and East Asia, Washington will definitely remain an indispensable partner to the region. Its involvement remains crucial to the management of a wide range of regional issues, particularly on the security front. Although East Asian cooperation will deepen and strengthen relations among regional members, many of them will continue to maintain close bilateral ties with Washington, keeping the United States engaged in the area and allowing for a U.S. voice in regional affairs. The United States therefore need not worry about its possible marginalization as long as it deals with East Asia in a constructive way.

For Chinese influence, a rising China must be conceived in the context of East Asian integration, rather than putting East Asian integration in the shadow of a rising China. Although China's active participation in regional integration may enhance its influence on regional affairs, given the growing interdependence in East Asia, it will also make China more reliant on cooperation with others. In the end, this web of complex interdependence in East Asia will likely make growing Chinese power an integral part of regional strength.

For the future of the APEC forum, many East Asian countries have turned their interest to promoting cooperation among themselves as a result of the Asian financial crisis and APEC's failure to reach consensus on its future path, particularly on the issue of furthering trade liberalization. Yet, this does not that mean that APEC is over. If a more realistic agenda can be set for APEC, it can certainly regain its vigor in the future. A wise and farsighted U.S. policy on East Asian cooperation would encourage and support this significant process. Expanded cooperation in East Asia may spill over into APEC, stimulating economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region.[4]

In the era of globalization and regionalization, multilateralism has gained its popularity in international affairs, and East Asia is no exception. Ironically, it may be the United States that finds this arrangement less agreeable, at least in East Asia. Since the Cold War years, the U.S.-centered hub-and-spoke structure has served to enhance the U.S. position in the region. As a result, bilateral alliances remain a major strategic asset to the United States. Even though Washington has shown some interest in regional efforts to promote multilateral security cooperation, its bottom line is that such efforts should not undermine or replace U.S. bilateral alliances.

In the context of deepening regional cooperation and integration, however, many states prefer multilateralism to bilateralism not only because multilateralism has become a widely accepted norm, but also because the multilateral approach can pool more resources. Moreover, bilateral alliances are not adequate to deal with today's security challenges, be they traditional or nontraditional. From fighting terrorism to managing the North Korean nuclear issue, the multilateral approach is the best choice. The transnational nature of terrorism requires multilateral cooperation, and the multilateral, six-party efforts on the North Korean nuclear issue can help mitigate the friction between Pyongyang and Washington and generate more resources to achieve a breakthrough.

As the first step of adjustment, Washington can utilize ad hoc multilateralism on specific issues such as the North Korean nuclear problem while maintaining the structural bilateralism in its regional security approach. As time goes on, however, it should make serious efforts to promote regional multilateral security cooperation. In Northeast Asia, for instance, a multilateral security mechanism evolving out of the ongoing six-party process with North Korea would profoundly transform the security landscape and contribute greatly to peace and stability in this part of world. The Bush administration brought up this idea in 2005, but it is not clear whether the next U.S. president would favor such a construct. Given the complex interactions of the major powers' interests in this area, a multilateral arrangement holds the key to regional security.

Since the end of the Cold War, one conspicuous feature of U.S. policy toward East Asia has been the game of balancing the indigenous powers against each other. Against the backdrop of the rise of China, the Clinton administration redefined the U.S.-Japanese alliance in the mid-1990s with the goal of balancing Beijing with Tokyo. The Bush administration, in addition to forging a stronger alliance with Japan, has also reached out to India with the aim of turning New Delhi into another counterbalance against Beijing. The game of balancing is nothing new, but in an ideal world, it should be jettisoned. It sows distrust among countries, impedes the development of more amicable and cooperative relations, and undermines regional stability and prosperity.

Start with a More Sustainable China Policy

In the post–Cold War era, we have witnessed two major turbulences in U.S. China policy: one in the early Clinton administration when it placed human rights as the core issue in the bilateral relationship, and the other in the early Bush administration when it defined China as a strategic competitor. Although both administrations later adjusted their China policies and shifted to a more pragmatic direction, political and security differences with China will continue to complicate U.S. policymaking.

In an ideal world, the United States would view Chinese politics not through the ideological prism of democracy or nondemocracy, but through the lens of good governance. As a form of governance, democracy is a great political invention, but it is subject to the concrete cultural and historical circumstances of different societies. Democracy does not necessarily lead to good governance. In today's world, there are both successful and unsuccessful, or functional and dysfunctional, democracies. In Asia, for instance, the Japanese and South Korean democracies have been quite successful, whereas the democratic experiments in Pakistan and the Philippines have encountered problems. At the end of the day, what really matters to people is whether good governance exists, that is, the presence of political stability rather than chaos, social harmony rather than conflict, and economic prosperity rather than poverty.

From a Chinese perspective, it would make more sense if the United States treated its political differences with China as issues of good governance rather than ones of ideology. To better manage the political differences between the two countries, Washington should avoid using human rights and democracy issues as instruments of its China policy and using them to seek short-term, tactical U.S. interests. It is also important that discussions over these issues be conducted in an atmosphere of equality, respect, and goodwill.

As China accumulates its material strength, the United States expects China to play a more active role in addressing the security challenges confronting the region. Yet, Chinese-U.S. cooperation on regional security has been intermittently impeded by U.S. security ideology that defines relations with countries in the region within an alliance-centered hierarchical structure. According to the U.S. security logic, allies always occupy a higher position in this structure, and nonallies invariably stand at a lower position. In reality, however, not all U.S. allies contribute to regional security as much as China does. China is undoubtedly the most important indigenous security player in East Asia, and it has the capability and willingness to help enhance regional peace and stability. Washington should shake off its alliance-centric security ideology, treat China as a key partner on regional security, and develop more cooperative and fruitful security relations with China.

Since the mid-1990s, U.S. China policy has been consistently plagued by one key issue: how to deal with a rising China. The realists view this as a zero-sum game, holding that China's growing power will undermine U.S. influence in East Asia and that U.S.-Chinese conflict is inevitable. They therefore stand for a policy of slowing down China's growth and containing or checking a rising China.[5] Others, however, view China's rise both as a challenge and an opportunity and advocate a strategy encouraging China to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system.[6] They believe that a cooperative relationship between China and the United States will benefit both countries and the entire world.

East Asian regionalism poses a new challenge to existing U.S. regional policy.

To place U.S. China policy on a more stable and pragmatic basis, the United States should recognize that it is both immoral and impossible to retard China's reemergence as a major power for the sake of U.S. primacy. It should also understand that even though the United States is powerful, it is far from omnipotent. Washington cannot monopolize power, nor can it solve the growing number of problems in the world single-handedly or only with its allies; it has to seek cooperation from other major power centers.

In this vein, the United States should adopt a positive view of the rise of China and cultivate a partnership with it. While encouraging China to be a responsible stakeholder, Washington should avoid gauging China's behavior by narrow U.S. national interests. The United States should also be setting a good example for China and the rest of world about how to behave as a responsible power in international affairs by not abusing its military muscle, by avoiding the pursuit of excessive unilateral advantage through its primacy, by treating others equally, and by staying sensitive to the concerns of the majority of the international community. Equally important, if Washington wants to share burdens with Beijing, it should be prepared to share influence as well.

Evolving Regional Order and Changing U.S. Role

Since the late nineteenth century, when the United States came across the Pacific in the wake of the Spanish-American War, the U.S. role in East Asia has constantly evolved in response to the changing regional order. From the late nineteenth century to the Pacific war, as the regional order featured major-power competition in China and then Japan's militarist expansion, the U.S. role was first to ensure the openness of China to U.S. business interests and then to help resist the Japanese conquest of China. During the Cold War, as East Asia became part of the global bipolar strategic competition, the U.S. role competed for influence with Communist countries, and China was a major target of U.S. containment policy in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s, as Beijing and Washington found common ground in dealing with the Soviet threat, Chinese-U.S. relations shifted from confrontation to cooperation. In the wake of the Cold War, East Asia has witnessed the rise of China and development in regional cooperation, while Washington has been seeking to preserve its primacy in the region by dealing with a rising China and the trend in regional integration through its bilateral alliances, which were largely successful during the Cold War.

Will the next U.S. president favor a Northeast Asian multilateral security forum?

As history tells us, the regional order in East Asia is not static, nor is the U.S. role. Over a century's involvement in East Asia, Washington has experienced both success and failure. The key to success is understanding the regional changes underway and playing its role correctly, whereas failure can mainly be attributed to Washington's misjudgment of the circumstances or its role. U.S. involvement in Vietnam, for instance, was mainly driven by Cold War geopolitics and ideology, and Washington's misjudgment of the political reality and the power of nationalism there led to its biggest defeat in the history of U.S.–East Asian relations.

Looking into the future, East Asia, along with Europe and the Middle East, will remain an area of strategic importance on the U.S. global agenda. To be sure, the region as a whole welcomes a constructive U.S. role, regarding the United States as the most important external actor affecting regional stability and prosperity. On the other hand, new political, economic, and security dynamics have emerged in U.S.–East Asian relations, and they are destined to affect both the form and content of interactions between the two sides of the Pacific. Washington must therefore adapt to the changing regional circumstances and adjust its regional policies accordingly, so as to escape the competitive Cold War lens of the last century and secure a mutually successful, or win-win, outcome in U.S.–East Asian relations for the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Victor D. Cha, “Winning Asia: Washington’s Untold Success Story,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 6 (November/December 2007): 98–113; Condoleezza Rice, “U.S. Policy Toward Asia” (speech, Washington, D.C., June 18, 2008), http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/06/106034.htm.
2. Wen Jiabao, “Work Together to Build an East Asia of Peace, Prosperity and Harmony” (speech, Cebu, the Philippines, January 14, 2007), http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t290180.htm (the ASEAN Plus Three summit).
3. Richard W. Baker and Glen W. Fox, *Asia Pacific Security Survey 2008* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2008), p. 1.
4. Wu Xinbo, “United States and East Asian Integration,” *China International Studies*, no. 8 (Fall 2007): 119–120.
5. John J. Mearsheimer, “The Future of the American Pacifier,” *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 5 (September/October 2001): 46–61.
6. Robert B. Zoellick, “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?” (remarks, New York City, September 21, 2005), http://www.state.gov/s/d/rem/53682.htm (before the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations).