

ALMOST QUIET ON THE ASIA-PACIFIC FRONT

An American Assessment of Asia-Pacific Responses to U.S. Security Policies

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This is a timely juncture at which to assess the United States' relations with the Asia-Pacific region. It is two years into the George W. Bush Administration, a year and a half after September 11, the ensuing "global war on terrorism" (GWOT) and the release of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), six months following the new National Security Strategy (NSS) and in the midst of on-going, intense policy debates about Iraq, North Korea and U.S. security and foreign policies more broadly.

U.S. relations with the Asia-Pacific today have a number of positive features. Taken as a whole, relations with the region are broader, deeper and more cooperative than during any decade since the end of World War II. Unlike in the preceding five plus decades, the U.S. has diplomatic relations with every country in the region except North Korea—and even that troubling country is one with which the U.S. has had an on-and-off dialogue, though for unwelcome reasons, during the past several years. The U.S. is involved in neither a hot nor a cold war with any country in the region. Popular anti-Americanism, naturally disquieting for Americans, is arguably not more intense or widespread than during the 1960s and 1970s. No revolutionary ideologies pose a serious challenge to America's espousal of open markets and democracy, though extremism of various types is troubling. The scope and number of societal contacts ranging from tourism to education exchanges, trade and investment have never been higher.

Other measures of positive relations are available, too. First, many of the policy and perceptual "gaps" between the U.S. and the Asia-Pacific during the first nine months of the new administration have closed or lost relevance. Certain new gaps have opened – the most immediate of these gaps is the confrontation with Iraq — but they are not unbridgeable and may ultimately prove to be more fleeting than the present media maelstrom suggests. Second, U.S. bilateral relations with a number of Asian countries have improved over the past two years. Third, and most importantly, the fundamentals of the Asia-Pacific security environment continue to favor the United States. Complacency and hubris of course are unwarranted, but so too are over-reaction and exaggeration, which would

obscure the real challenges that do face U.S. relations with the region.

The gap between American and Asia-Pacific anxieties during much of 2001 was worrying but not unprecedented given the transition of administrations in the U.S. While the region was still grappling with the effects of the 1997-1998 financial crisis, including political crises, social tensions, and the weakening of multilateral institutions, the U.S. was perceived as unhelpfully focused on "go-it-alone" strategies against military threats from rogue states or newly risen powers and on military transformation, including the deployment of missile defenses. From the regional perspective, Indonesia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were receiving inadequate attention. Apprehension also was rife that U.S.-China relations, especially in the wake of the EP3 incident in April 2001, would deteriorate to a point where regional countries would have to "choose" between the U.S. and their close neighbor.

Even before September 11, these gaps were narrowing, though September 11 certainly pushed the trend further and faster. A massive post-9/11 U.S. "re-engagement" with the region in the form of political attention, economic assistance, and security-related cooperation both on a bilateral and multilateral basis blunted earlier concerns about U.S. diffidence. Southeast Asia, and in particular Indonesia, which the U.S. was criticized for not paying enough attention to, have since become a hub of U.S. engagement. Asian interest in multilateralism, eroding prior to the Bush Administration taking office, received a boost as the U.S. utilized various forums to garner cooperation in the war on terrorism. The war on terrorism overshadowed but did not immediately derail debates over missile defense. However, eventual Russian and Chinese accommodation to U.S. plans to go forward with national missile defense (theater missile defenses having yet to be decided) has taken the edge off a contentious issue among the three big countries. All in all, as a result of calamity as well as design, the U.S. has minded the earlier gaps between itself and the Asia-Pacific.

A parallel part of this process has been the notable improvement in a number of bilateral relationships be-



tween the U.S. and Asia-Pacific countries. U.S.-China relations have witnessed three presidential summits, frequent and pragmatic consultations on international security issues such as North Korea and South Asia, newly issued export control regulations by Beijing and the first talks on human rights in over a year. Measured by relations in 2001, U.S.-China relations are less tense though not problem-free. Similarly, U.S.-Russia relations have been boosted by a Bush-Putin summit, Moscow's accommodation on the war on terrorism including the facilitation of a U.S. presence in Central Asia, and U.S. acknowledgment of terrorism in Chechnya. However, a United Nations veto regarding military action against Iraq by either country would seriously complicate relations in the near-term. U.S.-Japan relations avoided lingering trouble due to the deft handling of the *Ehime Maru* tragedy well before September 11. Tokyo's active support for the war on terrorism, through the dispatch of an Aegis-equipped destroyer to the Indian Ocean, has consolidated gains to the alliance. The U.S. relationship with the Republic of Korea (ROK) remains complicated primarily due to the problems posed by North Korea.

In South Asia, the U.S. continues to pursue "transformed" relations with India—seeking to make it a closer military and economic partner. U.S. relations with Pakistan received a dramatic fillip only after September 11. When India and Pakistan mobilized hundreds of thousands of troops on their border during the December 2001-May 2002 Kashmir crisis, the administration's shuttle diplomacy effectively alleviated tensions. Sitting on the India-Pakistan hyphen, however, is neither easy nor painless, as subsequent Indian and Pakistani complaints about U.S. policies demonstrate. Southeast Asian countries, with the possible exception of Indonesia, became early, important partners in the war on terrorism. High profile visits to the U.S. by President Megawati of Indonesia and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed of Malaysia were indicative of the importance accorded to the region. The October 12, 2002 terrorist attacks in Bali, Indonesia have consolidated Southeast Asian (and importantly Indonesian) interest in cooperation with the United States. This contemporary trend of improved bilateral relations cannot overturn the realities that relations between countries may be simultaneously cooperative and competitive, subject to ups and downs, and differentiated across issues. Hence, these relationships might well change in the future. But, for the foreseeable future, the real challenge to U.S. bilateral relations with Asia-Pacific is not fixing tattered or broken bilateral relations, but sustaining recent improvements in them and managing unusually high mutual expectations.

Finally, regional fundamentals continue to favor the United States. The region shows no signs of developing

either the multilateral institutions or common political culture that would undermine the pre-eminence of the United States or offer an alternative to it. No other individual country or even group or alliance of countries possesses the comprehensive power to challenge American pre-eminence. Trade and investment ties with the region as a whole continue to increase. Attitudes towards American culture, ideology and influence are certainly mixed, perhaps best reflected in the phrase "Yankee go home, but take me with you."

Think Asia

Why are U.S. relations with the Asia-Pacific generally sound? The starting point for any explanation is the interplay between regional conditions and the importance of the United States. And this can best be appreciated by drawing comparisons with Europe, where criticisms of the U.S. have been shriller. First, the Asia-Pacific's security environment after the end of the Cold War is still haunted by unresolved historical, territorial, and, to a lesser extent,

ideological disputes. Europe's is not. The Soviet threat to Europe during the Cold War was direct and adjacent. In Asia it was indirect and distant. Given Europe's comparatively benign security environment, the disappearance of the countervailing power of the Soviet Union allows it more room to maneuver vis-à-vis the United States. Unlike earlier, contention with the U.S. has fewer costs or perils. For the Asia-Pacific, however, the disappearance of the USSR, because it had less funda-

mental effects on the regional security order in the first instance, provides no such luxury. Finally, developments in Europe's institutions and political culture, and significant rapprochements between former antagonists, along with a U.S. presence, have created a mostly unthreatening security environment. In Asia, on the other hand, the lack of institutions, community-building and troubled dyadic relationships plague the security environment. Hence, the United States' presence in the Asia-Pacific, unlike in Europe, provides, not just bolsters, but also security.

Second, Asia-Pacific power potentials as well as nation and state-building needs and capacities are such that the U.S. is essential to fulfilling national interests—both foreign and domestic. Unipolarity inevitably breeds some resentment, but it also argues for accommodation—especially when concrete interests ranging from market access to security cooperation are available. The U.S. is important to Europe's future too, but not so fundamentally.

Third, in the Asia-Pacific, relations with the United States are an effective means of leverage amongst neighbors. In Europe, relations with the U.S. are not a currency that can be used in the commerce of intra-European relations—at least not to substantive effect. Not that states

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do not try. The countries of the “new” Europe (mainly the smaller countries of central and Eastern Europe) have recently demonstrated an appreciation for the importance of relations with the U.S. as a tool for ensuring their position in an expanded Europe. New Europe thus behaves much like “old” Asia—and for much the same reasons—relative weakness and insecurity. Good (or bad) ties with the United States profoundly shape intra-Asian international relations whereas they merely affect intra-European relations.

A fourth reason why U.S. relations with the Asia-Pacific are mostly cooperative is because U.S. security policies as outlined in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and National Security Strategy (NSS) reflect recalibration rather than a transformation in U.S. approaches towards the Asia-Pacific. Asia-Pacific countries, for the most part, can accommodate these recalibrations because they do not mark a fundamental or threatening break in U.S. policy. For example, despite the din about U.S. unilateralism, the Bush Administration’s call for a “distinctly American internationalism” is not a departure from former Secretary of State Madeline Albright’s characterization of the U.S. as the “indispensable nation” or Joseph Nye’s assertion that the U.S. is “bound to lead.” The arrival, by default and design, at this sole superpower status will not be purposely reversed by any administration to make possible a multipolar world for the purpose of establishing a balance of power. This would be an unnatural act. American preponderance is not new to the Asia-Pacific. Far more worrisome to the region would be a substantial U.S. retrenchment.

The Clinton Administration’s emphasis on “enlargement” of the community of democratic states has segued into the Bush Administration’s doctrine of “integration”. The Bush Administration’s call for “freedom, democracy and free enterprise” reflects both American values and the pragmatic end of eradicating weak states susceptible to terrorists. The Clinton Administration sought a community of democracies to avoid war and build better partnerships. The Asia-Pacific region has encountered this aspect of American policy before and understands the American principles and impulses from which it springs. Moreover, as Asia-Pacific countries increasingly embody these values and characteristics, the gaps with the U.S. on this issue are likely to narrow, though management of overall relations might become more complicated.

America’s commitment to multilateralism should not be misunderstood. If the previous administration spoke of “assertive multilateralism”, this administration speaks of “a la carte” multilateralism and acts to create “accountable multilateralism”. These are distinctions with a difference, but they are far from the break with international cooperation that many assert. At least insofar as the Asia-

Pacific is concerned, the Bush administration has to some extent revived flagging interest in multilateralism. Almost no one in Asia views multilateralism as a substitute for a U.S. role. The U.S. doctrine of preemption has attracted much debate, but it should be noted that it is added to deterrence, not substituted for it. And a number of Asia-Pacific countries, rather than rejecting the doctrine outright, have sought to claim it for themselves. The takeaway about U.S. security policies is that they are neither fundamental changes in the U.S. approach to the Asia-Pacific nor entirely inconsistent with policies pursued by Asia-Pacific countries. Hence, accommodation is possible.

Finally, most Asia-Pacific countries have supported the war on terrorism for a mix of pragmatic reasons. To be sure there are difficulties and differences on this score (discussed below), but most Asia-Pacific countries, aside from being horrified by the terrorist attacks on the United States, appreciate the dangers posed to themselves, need U.S. assistance to combat terrorism, and derive a number of tangible benefits from cooperation with Washington.

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The Challenges Ahead

U.S. relations with the Asia-Pacific are not perfect. First and easiest to fix is rhetoric and tone. On all sides they merit more restraint. More serious challenges exist as well. Narrowing the divide between popular anti-Americanism and largely pro-U.S. governments is a priority. Particularly unpopular governments or those in less representative political systems might try to “get out in front” or harness anti-American sentiments to oppose American policies to maintain power or ensure domestic stability. Pro-U.S. democratically elected leaders will also need to be responsive to their constituents lest they lose office. In either case, the effects would be the same: a diminution of government support for U.S. policies and deterioration in relations.

Another danger is failure to meet high mutual expectations. From the Asia-Pacific side, U.S. support for national anti-terrorism efforts and long-term political, economic and security assistance may be regarded as a “test” of relations with the U.S. Using the adjective “global” for the war on terrorism has permitted Asia-Pacific countries to argue that terrorism in their countries is encompassed too. Efforts to reconcile expectations are proving delicate. India, for example, is increasingly doubtful that the U.S. will prevail upon Pakistan to “permanently end infiltration” of what it deems terrorists into Kashmir. Russia is ever watchful of distinctions in American statements about the character of the conflict in Chechnya. As for meeting long-term commitments, Pakistan, is one country that fears that any future diminution in the war on terrorism (as determined by the United States) could cost Pakistan U.S. support. The U.S. must also be wary of excessive expectations of regional partners. In the war on terrorism, for

example, there are differences regarding the priority to be given to military solutions, an asymmetry of resources and capabilities, and divergent and delicate domestic balances required to maintain support for the war on terrorism.

Iraq is not likely to be a “tipping point” in U.S. relations with the region. But the way in which the U.S. handles the issue, including the nature and outcome of possible military action, will certainly shape Asia-Pacific attitudes regarding the United States. And on this issue the interplay between Asia-Pacific public attitudes and government policy could be especially important in shaping responses to the United States. Still, Iraq is not a strategic reset issue for the Asia-Pacific as it might be for the Middle East. Iraq is not an Asia-Pacific flashpoint, though responses of co-religionists in the region will be a serious factor. For the Asia-Pacific region, a war in Iraq, should it occur, will not be like the war in Vietnam—and even that conflict did not fundamentally change U.S. relations with Asia.

The North Korea situation poses a more serious challenge, but most Asia-Pacific countries appreciate that North Korea’s behavior, not America’s, is the source of tensions. Moreover, countries surrounding North Korea rely on the U.S. to take the lead on the North Korean issue and are willing to be supportive of the U.S. The overlap between American, Chinese, Russian, Japanese and South Korean interests is considerable, and there are grounds to expect that a negotiated accommodation as in the 1994

crisis can be reached. Only miscalculation and inflexibility on relatively minor matters such as the mechanism for dialogue stand in the way of positive outcome.

Conclusion: Speculation into the Future

The past two years have been an especially dynamic and even dramatic phase in U.S. relations with the Asia-Pacific region. However, barring any strategic surprise, the generally cooperative character of U.S. relations with the Asia-Pacific will persist. The closing of certain gaps in policies and perspectives during the past two years, the improvement of key bilateral relationships, and sound regional fundamentals from the U.S. perspective outweigh new differences, the din of dissonance regarding Iraq and the Korean peninsula, and the recalibrations in U.S. security policies. Structural factors in the Asia-Pacific such as relatively weak security, economic and political conditions, combined with the importance of the United States, rather than any specific policy initiatives, are primarily responsible for this current state of affairs. One can picture an even brighter future if divergences in U.S. and Asia-Pacific policies and perspectives are minimized. This is a goal worth working towards.

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