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America's Asian Opportunity

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Asia and the Pacific Rim are today in the midst of a transfer of power, as political leadership changes in almost all its major nations. From Japan, South Korea (ROK), and Australia, all of which recently held elections, to Taiwan, which will pick a new president in the coming months, fresh democratic governments in the region will soon face new leaders in illiberal countries such as Russia and, within half a decade, China. In some of these cases, new leadership means a distinct break with recently held positions and therefore offers both challenges and opportunities for American policy. Yet the combined economic and political changes of the past several decades have brought Asia to a turning point, and Washington now must decide how to revitalize the policies that have brought wealth and stability to millions in the most dynamic region of the globe.

Since 1800, Asia has been struggling to maintain, create, or recover a sense of regional order. The Chinese Qing Empire and the Japanese Tokugawa Bakufu were first destabilized by European imperialism, and internal dissension brought down both within a century. For half a century, from 1894 to 1945, the Imperial Japanese state sought to impose order on the nations of East Asia, and since 1945, the United States has sought to maintain peace and stability through a series of defensive alliances. Today, Asia continues to struggle with the question of order: who will provide it, what it will look like, and how durable or intrusive it will be.

Visits to several key allies in Asia in recent months leave a clear impression that looming change is causing qualms about future security in the region. As a result, the next U.S. administration—not to mention the current one—has a real opportunity to deepen relations with its allies and exercise American leadership in Asia. Officials in Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, however, also make it clear that the United States must start paying attention to the region soon or risk losing ground to an aggressive China. In short, it is time for a new American policy in Asia, one that provides a clear vision for the future and commits the United States to maintaining its role of providing security and upholding liberal values throughout the region.

Regional Trends and Long-Term Changes

The trends in several Asian countries indicate more receptiveness to U.S. policies than in recent years. Most striking in this respect is South Korea, where the anti-American president, Roh Moo-hyun, will soon be out of office, succeeded by former Hyundai executive and Seoul mayor Lee Myung-bak of the conservative Grand National Party.[1] Japan, although buffeted by an ongoing political crisis and forced to withdraw its maritime forces from coalition activity in the Indian Ocean, remains eager to play a larger regional role that stresses its liberal strengths. And Singapore lately has shown a willingness to join with the democratic nations of the region, demonstrated by its participation in joint naval exercises with India, Australia, Japan, and the United States last September.

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It remains to be seen, however, what direction Kevin Rudd, the newly elected Labor Party premier of Australia, will take his country. The Mandarin-speaking Rudd has been labeled a Sinophile, although it is difficult to imagine that he will either sever Australia's decades-long alliance with Washington or move dramatically away from the balancing act of his predecessor, the staunchly pro-Western John Howard. Like Japan, Korea, and Singapore, Australia is tightly tied to Chinese markets, especially through China's appetite for Australian natural resources.

The common factor precipitating a potentially more pro-American stance among these countries, not surprisingly, is the rise of China. All nations in the region have benefited on the whole from China's economic rise, and none wants to kill the goose that continues to lay golden eggs. Yet all are quietly uneasy, some more than others, with China's equally impressive military modernization and growing political influence. Even in South Korea, where voters were more immediately concerned with Roh's too-liberal policy toward Pyongyang, a prominent lawmaker recently commented that China remains the only real long-term potential threat to South Korea, thus pushing Seoul to look to Washington out of enlightened self-interest. "We're afraid of getting squashed by the big whale's tail," he says, "so we've chosen to become friends with another big whale who's not located so near to us."[2]

For South Koreans especially, but also for all Asian countries, geography is crucial. China's size is so out of proportion to other nations in the region that Beijing exerts a centripetal force on everything from trade routes to political conferences. Strategically, therefore, it is only Washington that can play the role of counterweight to Beijing, much the way Great Britain did against France and Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in maintaining a balance of power in Europe. The question in the region is whether the United States will commit to playing such a role opposite an ascendant power after six decades of acting as a regional policeman without any real competitor.

What Is a Friend Worth?

What is most disappointing to these allies is the feeling that Washington has been disengaged from Asia, except for the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear program. Fair or not, that is the perception visitors hear often when traveling in the region. "Iraq has sucked all the oxygen out of the room," complained one high-ranking South Korean military officer, "and when you do look toward [Korea], it's only about nukes." Not that Seoul and Tokyo want Washington to give up trying to denuclearize North Korea, but they are increasingly upset by Washington's seeming inability to do more than crisis diplomacy. In addition, Japanese officials are angry over being shut out of the loop by the U.S. State Department, which is giving only lip service to its demand that North Korea fully disclose the fates of a dozen Japanese abducted decades ago. "We are in a very delicate moment now," a senior official of Japan's foreign ministry concluded.

It is this question of alliances that most concerns U.S. partners in the region. All seem to want to know what the United States intends in the coming years. This observer was asked point-blank by senior South Korean military officers if the United States was going to withdraw its troops from the peninsula after 2008, as some Pentagon officials have mused in recent years.[3] What seems to the Pentagon like strategic redeployment of U.S. troops from the ROK is conflated in South Korean minds with the lack of deep political or economic ties with the United States. South Koreans are rightly proud that the combined U.S.-ROK combatant command is considered by many to be one of the finest fighting forces in the world, and they are even more aware that South Korea has dispatched more troops abroad in service of American or United Nations (UN) missions than almost any other nation. But they perceive—and resent—that Washington is not listening to their concerns, which have become more complex as the country has become more affluent. A leading politician notes that younger South Koreans, in particular, are wary of doing anything to challenge the North that could threaten the South's economic progress. "But we think time is on our side, and we don't want to do anything to strengthen Kim's regime," continues the politician, who thinks South Korea should somehow support North Korea's citizens as a way of moving toward regime change.

South Korea's military leadership remains highly pro-American but increasingly dissatisfied with the trend of relations over the past ten years. Many high-ranking officers are willing to make the best out of the proposed dissolution of the Combined Forces Command (CFC), the arrangement by which Korean and American troops are put under American control in wartime. They were bitter, however, that Washington so readily acceded to Roh's demand that ROK forces become more independent, without ensuring that the South Koreans had the necessary capabilities to defend the country. According to interviews, a number of ROK officers wanted to extend the process to 2020 or so and not rush to meet the proposed deadline of 2012. Equally striking, politicians and military officers both were emphatic that if Congress rejects the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS), it would be a highly damaging blow to the alliance and would cause South Koreans to doubt the U.S. commitment to South Korea.

Japan, too, struggles with how to update and revitalize its six-decade-old alliance with the United States. The catch phrases "alliance transformation" and "globalization of the alliance" are heard repeatedly, but they boil down in both Japanese and American minds to military base relocation and greater Japanese contributions to America's operations around the globe. Tokyo already shoulders a hefty burden in supporting U.S. forces based in Japan, and its self-imposed budget limits are strained by contributing to missile defense research and initial deployment.[4] For Japan, though, the underlying issue is China. A new generation of Japanese defense and strategic planners are struggling against what one calls the "cocoon mentality" of older Japanese leaders who are content to let Washington do the heavy lifting, which includes identifying potential threats to Japan. These younger planners are acutely aware that China's navy is growing by leaps and bounds, especially its submarine force, thus implicitly raising the question of the security of Japan's sea lanes of communication. "What is the tipping point," one asks, "when China gets strong enough to make the United States think about accommodation, especially in the security sphere?"

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For a while, it seemed that Japan's two previous leaders, Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe, might have been moving Japan toward a new posture, one that liberal internationalists criticized as aggressive but that realists lauded as forward-looking. Koizumi, who was in office from 2001 through 2006, operated largely from his gut, believing Japan should be more active internationally, and not merely within the UN framework, as had become the norm since the late 1980s. His successor, the much-derided Abe, came up with a clearer articulation of Japan's interests and, with his foreign minister, Taro Aso, stressed Japan's liberal and democratic strengths as a beacon around which other free nations could form a common identity. Critics saw this as a direct challenge to China, and even the other leading Asia-Pacific democracies—India, Australia, and the United States—were not prepared to follow Japan down the path toward a potentially transformative strategic relationship. Japan thus finds itself back at the beginning: tied to the United States but increasingly worried about Washington's intentions toward Beijing.

Even nonallies like Singapore are wondering where the United States has been lately. Singaporean diplomats note with dismay that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has missed two of the last three Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summits, while Beijing—and even Moscow—are busy reaching out to Southeast Asian states. "Every year," one Singaporean official says, "China comes here bearing gifts" like the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which is expected to be implemented between 2010 and 2015.[5] The United States, in their view, is lagging deeply behind, although its participation in massive joint naval exercises last September was a reminder that Washington maintains a sense of the geopolitical importance of the region—just one that seems frustratingly intermittent.

The Singaporean diplomats, as well as some of the Japanese planners, are especially dismayed that Washington has so far ignored the East Asia Summit (EAS), the annual gathering of ASEAN nations and China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, and New Zealand. They believe that the United States has not appreciated the significance of Asian nations coming together for the first time with such a broad scope to begin thinking about common interests and common responses. The Singaporeans reiterated that by not even sending an observer mission, Washington was sending the message that it did not care what the nations in the region were doing to start shaping their future. In that case, it would be China that the smaller states of Asia would naturally begin turning to for leadership, notwithstanding their qualms about China's long-term intentions.

Is There a New Road?

Six decades is a long period for any state to bear the burdens of playing a hegemonic role globally, all the more so if that state is a democratic republic in which foreign policy is made by politicians responding largely to domestic concerns. The loss of strategic consensus in America after the Cold War was only partly replaced by unity in the face of terrorism, which in any case left Asia largely out of the picture of Washington's grand strategists after 9/11.

The lack of a unified China strategy is perhaps the most telling symptom of a deeper uncertainty about America's relationship with Asia, which is a bedeviling mixture of economic gain, unending security burden, and regular political miscommunication. The same issue of an august international relations periodical can without irony print one article on the decline of the United States in Asia and another on our winning strategy.[6] The problem, however, is deeper than one of simple interpretation or semantic games.

For all its pretensions to being an Asia-Pacific power, the United States has never felt fully comfortable in the role, nor have its leaders ever fully articulated what U.S. strategy and interests are, beyond maintaining the peace and stability vital to economic growth. Washington has provided the public goods required for such conditions since the end of World War II, but for most of that period, its Asian strategy was part of a larger Cold War paradigm. This may have provided a clear roadmap for several decades, but it also meant that policymakers dealt with Asia not on its own terms but as a piece in a global puzzle. Ironically, in today's world of "globalization," the United States once again runs the risk of ignoring Asia because of grander geopolitical goals.

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Many nations have seen China as the natural hegemon of East Asia (some would say of all Asia, stretching into Central Asia and even the Indian Ocean region). Yet the emergence of a plethora of Asian nation-states in the past half-century has meant the rise of national political elites concerned about China's traditionally weighty, if not threatening, role in the region. Beijing's control over Tibet, its refusal to recognize Taiwanese independence, its support for North Korea and Burma, and the memory of its war with Vietnam in the late 1970s all combine to make countries in the region concerned about China's commitment to strengthening pan-Asian security. Hence the desire on the part of Asian nations to maintain relationships with the United States while developing increasingly lucrative trade ties with Chinese firms.

What, then, is the opportunity to provide a compelling vision of the region's future, one that will appeal to friends and competitors alike? The strongest U.S. card in Asia is an unambiguous promotion of the freedom agenda. Support for and commitment to liberal regimes, civil and human rights, free trade expansion, and regional security comes primarily from Washington. And only the United States continues to have the national power and natural inclination to invest in each of those goals. Unfortunately, Washington has instead become both overly focused on China and a slave to the six-party talks. Both of these positions take the initiative in Asia away from the United States instead of allowing Washington to set agendas in its own interest and in that of the broader Asian community. In particular, what will spur China to become a "responsible stakeholder," as many hope it will become, is the flourishing of vibrant, prosperous, and free Asian nations increasingly linked in a real community of interests—just like in Europe, where the United States has aimed explicitly at building such enduring links. Similarly, there can be no hope of resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis if Pyongyang is rewarded for missing deadlines and foot-dragging with endless negotiations and removal from the State Department's list of sponsors of terrorism.

A journey through part of the region convinced this observer that many nations in Asia, and not just its allies, are waiting for the United States to take the lead in pushing the freedom agenda. Millions of Asians now take some level of democratic process as a right, and millions more have bettered their lives through participation in the global economy. These precious victories must be protected, strengthened, and built upon. Those nations facing challenges, such as the Philippines or Thailand, will be encouraged by Washington's renewed support for free regimes to join in a movement of liberalizing states, while mature democracies such as Japan should be urged to take more and more of the local initiative in spreading freedom. In contrast, surrendering our long-held universal goals for short-term accommodation of states with few shared values will alienate U.S. friends and embolden antiliberal elements in the region. American interests must remain red lines, even if diplomacy and politics prudently require Washington to make tactical compromises. What will not work is a hectoring or demanding approach that ignores national particularities or interests. Rather, statesmanship tied to firm principles will be paramount.

Thus, Washington needs to take the following four steps to reaffirm its leadership and nurture the continued development of liberalization in Asia:

Know Its Friends. The United States must reinvigorate its alliances for the twenty-first century through recommitment to Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Roles and missions must be expanded, even as capabilities are enhanced. Washington must reassure its allies not only that its military will remain in the region for the long run, but also that it will respond judiciously to challenges and provocations that, if unchecked, could lead to miscalculation and conflict. Similarly, the United States should help its allies purchase the most advanced technology needed to ensure their security, even as it pursues new political dialogues and multilateral coordination to listen to and respond to their concerns.

Win New Friends. Washington must show a commitment to the development of other democratic and democratizing states, such as India, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. It should expand grassroots and cultural exchanges, bring policymakers and intellectuals from the United States together with their counterparts in these nations, and show genuine interest in their development, even as it opens talks with them on common security and economic issues.

Spread Wealth. Regardless of the future of the Doha round, the United States should push forward with trade liberalization, primarily by ratifying KORUS and entering into negotiations with ASEAN and Japan. Encouraging bilateral FTAs may be a shortcut to integrating Asian nations into a larger economic partnership.

Provide Moral Support. Washington should be more involved in the EAS. It currently does not send even an observer delegation to the meetings, thus indicating its lack of interest in a pan-Asian agenda. Japan, Australia, and India are pushing democratic norms and transparency in the meetings, and however fitful that process is, the United States should show its support and interest, eventually by joining the EAS. Otherwise, we run the real risk of having China increasingly set the East Asian agenda.

There undoubtedly are other things the United States can and should do. These four steps, however, will send an important message about its commitment to Asia and the coherence of its goals and will provide a vision for a future that is prosperous and safe. The Chinese will also understand that the United States is serious about upholding long-standing norms of behavior and that it does not seek to let misunderstanding and ill will fester over time. Officials in Japan, South Korea, and Singapore are eager to have Washington show its desire to be involved in Asia. They want Washington to listen to them, but they also believe that we have shared interests that override our differences. These shared interests are manifest indeed, for only by standing with the hundreds of millions of Asians who strive for freedom and opportunity can the United States remain true to its principles and further its own security.

AEI research assistant Jennifer Gregg and editorial assistant Evan Sparks worked with Mr. Auslin to edit and produce this Asian Outlook.

Notes

1. Michael Auslin, "'Caught between Giant Elephants,'" The American, December 11, 2007, available at www.aei.org/publication27213/.

2. All quotations are from interviews conducted by the author in South Korea, Singapore, and Japan during October 2007.

3. See, for example, Richard Halloran, "Phasing Out U.S. Forces in South Korea," RealClearPolitics, July 28, 2006, available at www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2006/07/phasing_out_us_forces_in_south.html (accessed January 2, 2008).

4. For a discussion of weapons systems and budget constraints, see Japanese Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2007*, available at www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/index.html (accessed January 7, 2008).

5. See Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Co-Operation between ASEAN and the People's Republic of China," Phnom Penh, November 5, 2007, available at www.aseansec.org/13196.htm (accessed January 2, 2008).

6. Jason T. Shaplen and James Laney, "Washington's Eastern Sunset," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 6 (November/December 2007); and Victor D. Cha, "Winning Asia," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 6 (November/December 2007).