

Engaging the East

Halting an erosion of influence.

by Michael Auslin

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IN RECENT DAYS, the Bush administration has taken three small steps to shore up America's position in East Asia. While important, these steps are not enough in themselves to stave off our long-term decline in the Pacific. Rather, they should serve as the first salvos in a full-fledged redefinition of our interests and role in the world's most important region.

The Cause of Decline: Losing Focus

Blame for America's decline in Asia cannot be laid solely on the Bush administration, despite the Iraq War's draining attention and resources away from the region. Much of the rationale for America's Asian policies disappeared with the end of the Cold War. While we became paramount in the region after 1945, our policies were informed by an ideology of protecting democracy and deterring threats to peaceful development. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, rather than attempting to shape the region's future, Washington's default goals became expanding trade and maintaining stability in the Pacific. Misguided assumptions by the Clinton administration that China was a "strategic partner" further muddled our policies and understanding of how the region was evolving. By assuming the position of a status quo power, we stood for nothing and became defensive in our response to Asia's economic and political waves.

At the same time, hundreds of American bureaucrats and officials continue to race full speed to keep up with the myriad meetings, summits, agreements, treaties, and problems that absorb us in Asia. Despite this, State Department officials in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs will acknowledge off the record that we are seen as disengaged, particularly at the top levels of government. In short, we have lost ground not because we're absent from the region, but rather because we have become unfocused and lacking in vision. Leadership is a fickle property, and once it begins to slip away, it is hard to recapture. Thus, Washington's recent small steps are helpful, but America must offer a compelling vision of the future of the Asia Pacific region and take the lead in building it.

Small Step No. 1: Redefining and shaping the Asian security environment. During April's summit with the new, pro-American President of South Korea, Lee Myung-bak, President Bush is reported to have discussed a joint regional security "entity" with Japan and Korea. This new trilateral approach should be at the top of the White House's agenda, as it can be the first step towards a larger alignment of democratic nations in the region. It was a mistake for Washington to ignore former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's call for a quadrilateral linkage of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. President Lee is giving Washington a second chance to show that like-minded liberal nations have a natural community of interests that can engage all neighboring nations and positively shape regional affairs.

This small American step is central in reversing a relative decline in America's security capabilities in Asia, which makes our democratic partners nervous. Over the past decade, China has added ever more advanced military platforms, such as the fourth generation Shenyang J-11 fighter, the new Jin-class ballistic missile submarine, and demonstrated direct ascent kinetic kill capabilities. At the same time, U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) finds its resources strained by expanding responsibilities and forces unavailable due to deployment to Iraq. Former top ranking U.S. officers in the region believe that our qualitative edge is declining both in the skies

and under the waters. Add in North Korea's continuing nuclear program and missile capabilities, the reemergence of Russia as a strategic player in the Asia Pacific, and the growing importance of India, and Washington faces a far more complex, challenging, and expensive portfolio of interests than ever before.

As AEI's Thomas Donnelly has put it, the United States needs to move beyond a bilateral-based planning for defending discrete countries, and instead view the western Pacific as "one continuous battlespace." Defense of Taiwan, for example, will require flowing forces from Japan and employing assets based in Australia or possibly South Korea. Similarly, defending Japan from a North Korean missile attack will be much harder if U.S. forces in South Korea are not able to participate. It is thus good news that Seoul is eager to foster a "strategic alliance" for the 21st century with the United States, one that upgrades Korea's ability to buy U.S. weapons under the Foreign Military Sales regulations and maintain a robust U.S. presence on the Korean peninsula.

Much more, however, needs to be done, beyond the dispatch of the nuclear-powered U.S.S. *George Washington* to Yokosuka, Japan this spring, and the upgrade of several Aegis ships in Yokosuka with SM-3 interceptor systems. With the growth in China's naval forces, both the U.S. and Japan need to upgrade anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities, and Japan's aging F-4 fighters have to be replaced soon. In addition, the United States should deploy unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), such as the Global Hawk, to provide surveillance during crisis situations and general coverage of key transit lanes. Repositioning of some U.S. forces off Okinawa continues to bedevil U.S.-Japan relations, and over a decade has passed without significant movement on this issue. At the same time, Washington needs to assure Korean concerns that the drawdown in U.S. forces to 25,000 troops is a floor, and does not presage larger force reductions.

Small Step No. 2: Developing a presence and voice in the development of Asia's multilateral organizations. President Bush last month named Burma expert Scott Marciel as America's first ambassador to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). This long-overdue step should finally begin to elevate the U.S. interaction with ASEAN, and potentially serve as a model for formal U.S. representation to other Asian multilateral organizations.

The United States has largely watched from the sidelines over the past decades as the nations in the region have begun forming multilateral organizations to discuss economic and political architecture. The effectiveness of these groups is limited, and they are unable to play major roles in resolving serious issues, as is clearly shown in the ongoing inability to end Burma's political crisis. Nonetheless, an American presence is a political necessity, because our lack of attention results in these nations turning to China as a more reliable partner on political and trade issues. Friendly nations, such as Singapore, complain that Washington is AWOL on regional issues, while Chinese diplomats visit each year, intent on expanding ties. Marciel's nomination is a recognition that if we want to influence the development of these groups, and help spread liberal ideas of governance, diplomacy, and good economic practices, we have to be supportive in word and deed.

The East Asian Summit (EAS) is a perfect venue for Washington to reestablish its presence in Asian multilateral fora. Our key ally, Japan, pushed for the inclusion of Australia, India, and New Zealand in the formation of the EAS, thereby assuring a democratic counterweight to China, yet America currently does not even send an observer delegation. Japanese Foreign Ministry officials urge their U.S. counterparts to get more involved in the EAS, since it represents the first time that nearly all Asian nations are coming together to discuss common issues and explore ways to solve them. If we want Asia to develop along lines that ensure accountability and involve liberal precepts, then we need to play a role.

Small Step No. 3: Reopening markets and pushing for free trade. Earlier this year, the U.S. Trade Representative began a study of whether Washington should participate in the full Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership of Singapore, Chile, New Zealand, and Brunei, known as the "P-4" group of countries. This small step only amplifies America's lag in pushing for free trade agreements in Asia. Whereas both China and Japan have concluded FTAs or economic partnership agreements with ASEAN, and continue to look at a variety of other pacts, the Democratic-controlled U.S. Congress is suffocating the free trade movement here in the United States.

Washington has concluded only a few, minor trade treaties since NAFTA, but it recently finalized a deal with South Korea, the world's 13th largest economy and America's seventh largest trading partner. It is a significant pact that could pave the way for further major U.S. trade agreements. The Korea-U.S. FTA (KORUS) is now in

the gunships of both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, not to mention House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Failure to ratify the agreement would not only be a major political blow to the U.S.-ROK alliance, but also a signal that the United States cannot live up to its rhetoric on free trade and globalization.

The United States did more than \$2 trillion worth of trade in goods and services with Asia in 2007, and the Asia Pacific now accounts for 37 percent of global economic output. The U.S. needs to lead in shaping emerging trade regimes in the region, and the best way to do that is through broad-spectrum trade and investment agreements. Along with its leading partners, such as Japan and South Korea, Washington must elevate gold-standard trade practices to the norm in bilateral and multilateral agreements. These include transparency, good governance, best practices, and labor and environmental protections among others.

The issue here is whether the guidelines that have nurtured global trade for the past 60 years will now embrace the globe's most dynamic region, or whether substandard and unenforceable trade agreements will become the norm. The United States can shape the trading future only by further opening its markets and working with others to promote Asia's liberal economic development.

The small steps recounted here reflect a nascent shift away from Washington's business as usual approach to East Asia. In its last months, the Bush administration is acting on its recognition that Asia's future is being forged today, in the security, political, and economic spheres. But these small steps, as welcome as they are, fall short of the type of enhanced engagement in Asia that we need. America may have helped keep Asia safe for the past six decades; it now needs to ensure that a liberal vision of democratic growth, robust security cooperation, and economic enrichment continues in the coming decades.

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