

US Security Challenges in Northeast Asia After Bush

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Abstract

The next US administration will need to pursue a vigorous shaping and hedging strategy to manage several adverse security challenges in Northeast Asia. First, many people in the region perceive the George W. Bush administration as excessively preoccupied with the Middle East at the expense of its East Asian interests. Second, North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs remain unconstrained by a formal six-party agreement. Third, China has taken advantage of these trends to bolster its position in East Asia, sometimes at Washington's expense. Finally, developments in North Korea and China have stimulated concerns that Japan might eventually loosen its tight security ties with the United States. American policymakers urgently need to rebalance their energies between the Middle East and East Asia. ASEAN in particular warrants much more attention in Washington. In addition, US officials must reaffirm their commitment and capacity to protect Japan and South Korea. Managing China's rise also requires a more vigorous American engagement with Beijing's neighbors. Finally, the United States should employ more creative strategies to affirm its unique security role in Northeast Asia.

Key Words: Bush administration, China, Japan, six-party, ASEAN

As a new US presidential administration prepares to assume office in Washington in less than a year, one of their most urgent challenges will be to reverse recent security trends in Northeast Asia that have harmed American goals and interests. First, many influential people in the region believe that the United States has become excessively preoccupied with the Middle East and other parts of the world at the expense of American interests in East Asia. Second, the wars in Afghanistan and especially Iraq have diverted Washington from devoting adequate attention to Korean security issues until recently, especially North Korea's resumption of ballistic missile testing and its acquisition of nuclear weapons. Third, China has taken advantage of these trends to bolster its position in East Asia, sometimes at Washington's expense. Finally, developments in North Korea and China have stimulated concerns that Japan might eventually loosen its tight security ties with the United States. The next US administration will need to pursue a vigorous shaping and hedging strategy to manage these new challenges.

Perceived Strategic Myopia

The protracted conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, the tensions within Israel and between Israel and its neighbors, and Iran's unyielding challenge to the nuclear non-proliferation regime have naturally preoccupied American officials and politicians. Many of America's closest allies, however, fear this concentration has resulted in a myopic and self-defeating US strategic vision. In East Asia, public officials and other opinion leaders have openly expressed discontent about the perceived lack of American interest in their region's affairs, except for issues seen as related to the global war on terrorism. Recent US policies have failed to overcome such concerns—and in many cases have inadvertently strengthened these apprehensions.

Throughout East Asia, the September 11 attacks induced widespread support for the US-declared Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and the American military intervention in Afghanistan. Governments, opinion leaders, and many average citizens generally considered these measures a necessary and natural response. Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi called the attacks “extremely vicious and unforgivable” and the South Korean government declared: “we stand ready, as a close US ally, to provide all necessary assistance.”¹ South Korea sent several hundred troops to Afghanistan after the coalition defeated the Taliban government. On November 5, 2001, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) issued a formal declaration expressing solidarity with the United States in the GWOT.² Regional analysts expected that East Asia’s large Muslim populations would guarantee its importance for American strategies aimed at curbing Islamic extremism.

The subsequent US-led invasion of Iraq made it difficult to realize many of these opportunities for enhanced transpacific cooperation, although a number of East Asian countries—including Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—participated in the “coalition of the willing” that invaded Iraq, only a few of these governments contributed meaningful military resources. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad warned that the attack on Iraq would be seen as “being anti-Muslim rather than being anti-terror.”³ Other regional leaders less vocally complained about the folly of the intervention. The governments of Malaysia and Indonesia repeatedly declined American offers, made regularly

1-For official reactions and media reports on the crisis throughout Asia, see UCLA Asia Institute, “A Small Sampling of Asian Comment on the Sept. 11 2001 Terrorist Attacks on the United States,” September 13, 2001, <http://www.international.ucla.edu/eas/web/sept112001.htm>.

2-ASEAN Secretariat, “2001 ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism,” November 5, 2001, <http://www.aseansec.org/529.htm>.

3-Cited in Hannah Beech, “Why Asia Fears Bush’s War,” *Time International*, March 24, 2003, p. 24.

since 2004, to have the US Navy help protect the Malaccan Straits from pirates, terrorists, and other threats.⁴ In combination with local factors, the war in Iraq and the failure to make more progress toward an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord encouraged regional terrorist movements in East Asia.⁵ Polls showed a sharp drop, with only a temporary rebound later, in favorable elite and popular opinion throughout East Asia of the United States after the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom.⁶

Many influential Asian and American security experts have subsequently complained that Washington has neglected Northeast Asia during the last few years. At a summer 2006 senior policy seminar at the East-West Center, Asian and American participants jointly criticized the Bush administration for neglecting Asia.⁷ A January 2007 Congressional Research Service report of Asian perceptions of the United States concluded that, in the face of China's growing power and other region-wide security developments, some Asian countries "are beginning to hedge against what they perceive as an increasingly distracted and insufficiently engaged American power."⁸ Evidence of Washington's Asia neglect was visible when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice missed the August 2007 meeting of the Asian Regional Forum (ARF) in Manila.⁹ They became quite vocal when President Bush cut-short his visit to Sydney during last September's Asia-Pacific

4- Sheldon W. Simon, "US Strengthens Ties to Southeast Asian Regionalism," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (October 2006), pp. 63-73.

5- Swati Parashar and Arabinda Acharya, *Terrorism in Southeast Asia: The Threat and Response* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies and Nanyang Technological University, April 2006), pp. 9-10, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/pubs/ph/details.cfm?lng=en&rid=26564>.

6- Robert G. Sutter, *China's Rise: Implications for US Leadership in Asia* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2006), pp. 30-31.

7- Brad Glosserman (rapporteur), *The United States and Asia: Assessing Problems and Prospects* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2006).

8- Bruce Vaughn, *US Strategic and Defense Relationships in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 22, 2007), p. 2.

9- Philip Bowring, "Neglecting East-Asia," *International Herald Tribune*, August 3, 2007, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/08/03/opinion/edbwinging.php>.

Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit.¹⁰ The new ASEAN Secretary-General, Surin Pitsuwan, has complained that, despite ASEAN's increased importance in Asia, "the US was absent and absent conspicuously." Pitsuwan argued that Washington instead "needs to be present more and needs to be consistent."¹¹

North Korean Neglect

North Korea's authoritarian dictator, Kim Jong-il, has long sought to transform his impoverished country into an internationally recognized regional power, directly engaged with Washington. For over a decade, he maneuvered between policies of nuclear brinkmanship and diplomatic negotiations, exploiting weaknesses in the nuclear non-proliferation regime while extracting humanitarian rewards from the international community. As a result, North Korea edged ever-closer to developing a functional nuclear weapon. American policies appear to have inadvertently contributed to this process.

The initial US-led invasion of Iraq prompted a security clampdown in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), as Kim feared that North Korea would become the Bush administration's next target for regime change. As US problems in Iraq multiplied, however, Pyongyang became emboldened. North Koreans proceeded first to break their moratorium on launching long-range ballistic missiles, which they had maintained since September 1999. Then Kim Jong-il seized the opportunity presented by a

¹⁰- Caren Bohan, "Shortened Bush Trip to APEC Fuels Criticism," *Reuters*, August 31, 2007, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUKN3020340320070831?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>.

¹¹- Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Repositioning US Engagement in Southeast Asia," *International Security News*, March 27, 2008, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=18794>.

distracted and weakened Washington to conduct a nuclear weapons test on October 9, 2006.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States adopted a “forward” national security strategy that had preempting threats rather than reacting to them as its core premise. In his 2002 State of the Union Address, President Bush categorized North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, as a core component of the “axis of evil” whose members threatened American interests and values. Although these three “rogue states” possessed few commonalities, they did share one crucial attribute: they all had reasons to seek weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, to compensate for the overwhelming US advantage in conventional military power. The President defined the crux of his preemption strategy when he warned, “the United States will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.”¹²

North Koreans initially responded to Bush’s warnings with their own threats. The DPRK demonstrated its resolve by removing the seals on its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon placed earlier by technicians from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which oversees the safeguard system embodied in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). On January 10, 2003, North Korea became the first state to withdraw officially from the NPT. Contemporary observers warned that “North Korea has decided nuclear weapons are the best guarantee of security and, with the US preoccupied with Iraq, now is the best opportunity to get them.”¹³ In early March 2003, on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, North Korea elevated tensions by launching missiles into international waters between the Korean peninsula and Japan. South Korean Defense Minister Cho Young-kil

¹²- George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” September 20, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

¹³- Charles Scanlon, “N. Korea Withdraws from Nuclear Pact,” *BBC News*, January 10, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2644593.stm>.

correctly interpreted the behavior as a “brinkmanship tactic’ aimed at pressing for two-way security negotiations with the United States.”¹⁴

At first, North Korea’s history of nuclear provocations, which included a previous effort to withdraw from the NPT, mitigated concerns in Washington about how far Pyongyang was willing to proceed.¹⁵ In any case, the Bush administration largely ignored North Korean actions and proceeded to invade Iraq. The initial effect, at least in Pyongyang, may have been positive. The US invasion apparently shocked the DPRK regime into realizing the potentially disastrous consequences of its nuclear posturing. A terrified Kim Jong-il went into hiding for nearly six weeks after the commencement of Operation Iraqi Freedom.¹⁶ The long-term effect of the Iraq invasion, however, was to solidify Kim Jong-il’s commitment to pursue nuclear weapons. Witnessing the rapid collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime before the Anglo-American onslaught, the North Korean leader evidently reached the same conclusion as many other potential American adversaries: Do not confront the United States militarily without a nuclear deterrent.

North Korea’s growing confidence as America’s Iraq troubles mounted severely hampered international mediation efforts. For months, the six-party talks between the United States, North Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea, which began in August 2003, failed to produce any meaningful solutions. DPRK representatives initially insisted on steep concessions and objected to America’s “hostile policy” toward North Korea. At the end of 2003, Pyongyang demanded a formal bilateral security treaty before returning to talks. Vice President Richard Cheney responded: “we don’t negotiate with evil; we defeat it.”¹⁷

¹⁴ - “North Korea Fires Land to Ship Missile,” March 10, 2003, <http://www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2003/3/10/102016.shtml>.

¹⁵ - John Feffer, “When the Stick Waves, the Hornet Sings,” *Asia Times Online*, October 12, 2006, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/HJ12Dg02.html>.

¹⁶ - Ralph Cossa, “Assessing Blame, Examining Motives,” *Korea Times*, October 23, 2006.

¹⁷ - Hamish McDonald, “Cheney’s tough talking derails negotiations with North Korea,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 22, 2003.

As the US position in Iraq deteriorated and administration officials increasingly recognized their weak hand, American negotiators stopped speaking about North Korea in terms of preemption and focused instead on de-escalation and dialogue. James Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, outlined this new approach, stating: “President Bush is committed to a diplomatic solution and is convinced that multilateral talks are the appropriate diplomatic forum... we will take the time necessary to achieve a fundamental and permanent solution.”¹⁸ After an unproductive second round of six-party talks, the United States returned to the bargaining table in June with an offer of fuel aid to North Korea in exchange for an initial freeze and eventual dismantling of the country’s nuclear program. Weeks later, Secretary of State Colin Powell discussed the nuclear issue directly with the North Korean foreign minister, the highest-level meeting between both governments in two years.¹⁹

The US and South Korean governments soon made considerable concessions in an attempt to entice Pyongyang into accepting a negotiated settlement. The two countries promised large quantities of food, fertilizer, and electricity—as well as a general end to Pyongyang’s isolation—in return for renewed North Korean participation in the six-party talks. Following Chinese mediation, on September 19, 2005, the DPRK said that in principle it was prepared to abandon its nuclear weapons program and rejoin the NPT (with its obligatory IAEA safeguards) in return for substantial foreign economic and energy assistance. The US government affirmed that it had no intention to attack the DPRK or redeploy nuclear weapons on the peninsula.²⁰ The administration hailed the declaration as a major diplomatic victory. US

¹⁸- James A. Kelley, “Ensuring a Korean Peninsula Free of Nuclear Weapons,” February 13, 2004, <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2004/29396.htm>.

¹⁹- Christopher Marquis, “Powell Meets Foreign Minister of North Korea to Discuss Arms,” *New York Times*, July 2, 2004.

²⁰- “Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks,” September 19, 2005, www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/ps/2005/53490.htm.

officials recognized that the failed Iraq War had deprived the United States of any credible military option (or political will) to attack the DPRK. Nevertheless, the talks failed to produce a lasting settlement.

One reason the deal may have collapsed is that North Korean leaders appear to have overplayed their hand in subsequent negotiations by making several new demands. Another cause, however, was the lack of effective interagency consultations within the US government. At the same time that the State Department was trying to entice North Korea to negotiate away its nuclear weapons program, the Treasury Department was imposing severe financial sanctions on the Bank Delta Asia in Macau for allegedly helping North Korea launder counterfeit American currency. The bank responded by freezing millions of dollars in its DPRK account.

Furthermore, various American statements could easily have confirmed the perception of North Korean leaders that the Bush administration still envisioned changing the DPRK regime. During her January 2005 confirmation hearings, Secretary of State-designee Rice rebranded North Korea as one of the world's "outposts of tyranny."²¹ This phrase, reminiscent of President Bush's "axis of evil," enflamed tensions and led the DPRK Foreign Ministry to distribute a statement justifying his country's need for nuclear weapons for purposes of "self-defense to cope with the Bush administration's undisguised policy to isolate and stifle" North Korea. The statement also declared that the DPRK had indefinitely suspended its participation in the six-party talks. The White House made a concerted effort to downplay the announcement. Spokesperson Scott McClellan dismissed the revelation as "rhetoric we've heard before."²²

In addition, administration officials, perhaps to highlight perceived inadequacies in the Clinton-era 1994 Agreed Framework, kept insisting that

²¹- "Opening Remarks by Secretary of State-Designate Dr. Condoleezza Rice," January 18, 2005, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/40991.htm>.

²²- James Brooke, "North Korea Says it Has Nuclear Weapons and Rejects Talks," *New York Times*, February 10, 2005.

North Korea disclose its alleged efforts to develop an atomic bomb through uranium enrichment. DPRK leaders denied having such a program, and the other parties to the talks expressed growing doubts about the credibility of the American accusations. (The US intelligence community has recently revealed its own reservations on this issue.²³)

By the end of 2005, Kim Jong-il had evidently resolved to consummate his nuclear weapons program. After the DPRK launched a half dozen missiles over the American July 4th holiday, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed a resolution denouncing the tests and imposing limited sanctions. But China's threatened veto of any punitive measures adopted under Chapter 7, which could allow for military force, meant that the resulting tepid UN resolution did little to dissuade Pyongyang from proceeding to develop nuclear weapons. Events were proving the disadvantages of the administration's tactic of outsourcing its North Korean policy to Beijing while the White House focused on other regions. On October 9, 2006, North Korea demonstrated unequivocally that it had the will and capacity to develop nuclear weapons by detonating an underground nuclear explosive device.

Although Secretary Rice and other Bush administration officials proclaimed that Beijing and Washington saw eye-to-eye on the issue of North Korean nuclear weapons, the Chinese delegation to the UN successfully insisted that any UN-approved action should aim less to punish North Korea retroactively than to modify its future policies. Chinese leaders were clearly angered by Kim Jong-il's defiance of Beijing's warnings against testing a nuclear weapon. Nevertheless, the Chinese government remains more concerned about the potential collapse of the North Korean state, which could induce a massive influx of refugees into northeast China, than

²³- Glenn Kessler, "New Doubts on Nuclear Efforts by North Korea," *Washington Post*, March 1, 2007; David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "US Concedes Uncertainty on North Korean Uranium Effort," *New York Times*, March 1, 2007.

about the North Korean leader's intransigence on nuclear weapons or other issues. Beijing wanted a change in Pyongyang's behavior but not a change in its regime.

Although the Chinese government did pressure North Korea to moderate its stance, the change in US negotiation strategy following the detonation appears to have had an equal if not greater impact in achieving an agreement at the conclusion of the fifth round of the six-party talks, which ended on February 13, 2007.²⁴ Abandoning its longstanding and fruitless policy of refusing to negotiate directly with the DPRK government, the administration arranged to hold talks with the North Korean delegation at a mid-January 2007 bilateral meeting in Berlin between US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and DPRK Vice Minister Kim Kye-gwan. The administration also backtracked on achieving an absolute North Korean commitment to the "complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement" of their country's nuclear program. Finally, it retreated on the Banco Delta Asia money-laundering dispute and offered to release millions of dollars in frozen funds. These decisions, long advocated by regional security experts—who saw them as self-defeating and self-imposed barriers to progress—proved instrumental in advancing the negotiating process.²⁵

Unfortunately, the parties could probably have achieved a similar agreement five years—and 4-10 North Korean atomic bombs—earlier. In addition, US officials also have yet to address the issue of Pyongyang's testing and sale of ballistic missiles. The Clinton administration had achieved some progress on this question—including securing a DPRK testing moratorium during its last year in office. The Bush administration abandoned these talks but then failed to pursue any initiative of its own, contributing to a renewal of North Korean missile testing. The next administration will need both to

²⁴- Edward Cody, "Tentative Nuclear Deal Struck with North Korea," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2007.

²⁵- Glenn Kessler and Edward Cody, "US Flexibility Credited in Nuclear Deal with N. Korea," *Washington Post*, February 14, 2007.

build on the recent if limited achievements regarding the nuclear weapons issue while also expanding the US-DPRK-Six-Party dialogue to address non-nuclear security issues such as ballistic missile proliferation.

The China Challenge

When they first assumed office, senior members of the Bush administration made clear that they considered China's growing economic and military strength a major strategic issue. Even before Bush's election, his then chief foreign policy adviser, Condoleezza Rice, characterized China as a "strategic competitor" that aspired to weaken US influence in Asia.²⁶ These expressions of concern persisted in several of the administration's early national security documents and were reinforced by the April 2001 collision of a Chinese warplane with a US Navy EP-3 surveillance aircraft in international airspace near China's Hainan Island.

The September 2001 terrorist attacks and the ensuing wars on terrorism and in Iraq derailed this necessary process of reassessing US policies toward China. After 9/11, attention in Washington focused almost exclusively on exposing and extirpating terrorist networks in Asia and elsewhere, and on ending their state sponsorship. Administration representatives ceased characterizing China as a potential adversary or the United States as a balancing power in East Asia. They also professed unconcern about the possible implications for American interests of China's ongoing economic growth, military modernization, and diplomatic initiatives (except in the case of North Korea, where Washington pressed Beijing to assume a *larger* role in resolving the nuclear weapons crisis).²⁷ Beijing readily

²⁶- Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (January/February 2000).

²⁷- Morton Abramowitz and Stephen Bosworth, "Adjusting to the New Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (July/August 2003), pp. 120, 125-127.

exploited the opportunity to expand its influence in the Asia-Pacific region²⁸—continuing their subtle, multifaceted, and long-term grand strategy to accumulate the economic wherewithal, military strength, and soft power resources to secure China’s position as a regional great power.²⁹

China’s economic successes over the past two decades have helped stimulate global commerce and improve the lives of millions of Chinese citizens. Unfortunately, these developments also have disturbing implications for the global balance of political and military power. As China’s economy expands, so do the resources available to its leaders for pursuing diplomatic and military policies that will frequently conflict with American preferences.

With average annual increases of 15% during the past five years, China’s military spending is one of the few sectors to outpace the country’s economic growth.³⁰ Since the late 1990s, the Chinese government has accelerated efforts to modernize and upgrade the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). China’s lack of transparency regarding defense expenditures obscures matters, but most foreign analysts estimate that, since the official Chinese budget figure excludes spending on military R&D, nuclear weapons, and major foreign weapons imports, the PRC probably spends \$90-\$140 billion annually on defense.³¹ The latest Chinese Defense White Paper outlines plans for an ambitious multi-decade effort to modernize all the branches of the PLA, from the Army, Navy, and Air Force to the Second Artillery Forces, which manage the country’s strategic missile forces.³² In

²⁸- Gideon Rachman, “As America Looks the Other Way, China’s Rise Accelerates,” *Financial Times*, February 12, 2007.

²⁹- Chong-Pin Lin, “Beijing’s New Grand Strategy: An Offensive with Extra-Military Instruments,” *China Brief*, Vol. 6, No. 24 (December 6, 2006), pp. 3-5.

³⁰- An extensive description of China’s growing military capabilities appears in the annual US Department of Defense reports to Congress on Chinese military power.

³¹- See for example US Department of Defense, “Military Power of the People’s Republic of China, 2008,” p. 33, http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/China_Military_Report_08.pdf.

³²- Information Office of the State Council, People’s Republic of China, *China’s National*

early March 2008, the Chinese government announced one of its largest military spending increases in years, an almost 18% rise in its declared defense budget.³³

Whatever the true sum of China's defense expenditures, the success of the US-led military operations in the former Yugoslavia and in Iraq during the 1990s clearly prompted the Chinese government to pursue improved capacities for power projection and precision strikes.³⁴ For example, the PLA has emphasized developing Rapid Reaction Forces capable of deploying beyond China's borders. Similarly, the PLA Navy has been acquiring longer-range offensive and defensive systems, including a more effective submarine force capable of threatening US aircraft carriers.³⁵ Chinese strategists have also sought to develop an "assassin's mace" (*shashoujian*) collection of niche weapons that the PLA can use to exploit asymmetrical vulnerabilities in US military defenses.³⁶ Besides allowing the PRC to improve its traditionally weak indigenous defense industry, rapid economic growth has enabled China to become the world's largest arms importer. Russia has been an especially eager seller. China is also devoting additional resources to manufacturing advanced indigenous weapons systems. As a result of these trends, China's massive defense spending is shifting the balance of power against Taiwan, making a coercive solution increasingly attractive to Beijing.

Since the mid 1990s, Chinese authorities have pursued a comprehensive "peaceful rise" public relations strategy designed to assuage

Defense in 2006, December 29, 2006, <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/china/doctrine/wp2006.html>.

³³ "China to Raise Military Spending," *BBC News*, March 4, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7276277.stm>.

³⁴ Chinese ambitions to use a RMA to amplify their military power are documented in Michael Pillsbury, *China: Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2000), pp. 278-304.

³⁵ Lyle Goldstein and William Murray, "Undersea Dragons: China's Maturing Submarine Force," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Spring 2004), pp. 161-196.

³⁶ The Editors, "The Assassin's Mace," *The New Atlantis*, No. 6 (Summer 2004), pp. 107-110.

international anxieties about China's growing power and influence by downplaying territorial disputes, offering trade concessions, broadening cooperative dialogues, and promoting student and other cultural exchanges.³⁷ China's influence within the United Nations has increased considerably due to Beijing's newfound commitment to multilateralism, its consistent pro-UN pronouncements, and its substantial contribution to UN-authorized peacekeeping missions.³⁸ China's quest to reassure its Asian neighbors that its ascent does not threaten them, despite historical reasons to fear otherwise, has proven surprisingly successful. Many Asian leaders profess to see China's rise as more of an economic opportunity than a military threat. They maintain that their own countries' economic health depends heavily on continued Chinese prosperity. Due to Japan's protracted economic stagnation, the PRC has become the leading growth engine for many countries. China's commercial ties with every Southeast Asian country are growing. Few East Asian officials openly call for containing China or taking other overtly defensive measures to prepare for its emerging regional ascendancy. East Asian governments have eagerly embraced Beijing's proposals to reduce trade barriers through arrangements that often bypass Washington.

Japan: New Threats, New Options

Thus far, the situation in Iraq has not resulted in a crisis of confidence over the credibility of US security guarantees or other major harm to the Japanese-American alliance. If anything, ties between Tokyo and Washington have strengthened during the last decade despite Japan's continuous

³⁷ - A good example of the public relations themes can be found in Zheng Bijian, "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 5 (September/October 2005).

³⁸ - Michael Fullilove, "Ban's Debut is Chance for Asia to Step into Spotlight," *Financial Times*, December 18, 2006.

redefinition of its appropriate foreign and defense policies. Nevertheless, worrisome developments have occurred in Japan's environs—especially regarding China and North Korea—whose effects are still manifesting themselves on Japan's security environment and, eventually, could lead to unwelcome changes in Tokyo's response.

For over a decade, Japanese security managers have had to consider a potential nuclear attack from the DPRK. In 1994, the US intelligence community concluded that North Korea possessed a secret nuclear weapons program. The issue became less pressing after American threats, South Korean inducements, and Japanese financial assistance convinced Pyongyang to suspend its program under the October 1994 Agreed Framework. The launch of a North Korean long-range Taepodong 1 ballistic missile over Japanese territory in August 1998, however, produced a Sputnik-like shock effect. Japanese people and policymakers alike were now forced to consider the devastation that even a single North Korean missile, if armed with a nuclear warhead, could inflict on their country. Despite Japanese threats and pleading, North Korea resumed test launching ballistic missiles over the Pacific Ocean in July 2006 and tested a nuclear device in October 2006. North Korea's actions prompted the Japanese government to discuss more openly their country's longstanding decision to refrain from developing an independent nuclear deterrent. Although the Cabinet reaffirmed the government's policy of abstention, its members insisted on their responsibility to debate—and periodically reassess—the nuclear question in light of Japan's changing security environment.

Despite the February 2007 Six-Party Agreement, Japanese leaders have expressed widespread skepticism that North Korea will ever eliminate its nuclear weapons program. In addition, they have made clear that Tokyo will continue to view the DPRK as a rogue regime for its past kidnapping of Japanese citizens. Since it arose in 2002, the abduction issue has impeded substantial progress in the bilateral negotiations aimed at establishing

diplomatic relations and resolving mutual disagreements between the two countries. The depth of these differences became apparent in early March 2007, when the bilateral Japanese-DPRK talks in Vietnam deadlocked after only one brief session. The new Japanese government led by Yasuo Fukuda has continued this hard-line stance on the abduction issue. On April 11, 2008, it renewed its economic sanctions against the DPRK. Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura said Japan would only lift the sanctions when North Korea eliminated its nuclear weapons programs and returned all abductees to Japan.³⁹ The next US administration will need to work closely with Tokyo to manage the growing differences between Washington and Tokyo on North Korean issues.⁴⁰

In addition to the threat from North Korea, the Japanese have become increasingly concerned about China's intentions and capabilities, especially in the maritime domain. Japan adheres to the UN Law of the Sea when claiming that its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extends 200 miles from its shore. China asserts that its EEZ begins not at its coast but from the edge of its submerged continental shelf. Chinese drilling at the Chunxiao/Shirakaba gas fields and Japan's response have highlighted the dangers of these conflicting claims. In May 2004, Beijing authorized Chinese firms to commence exploratory drilling at Chunxiao/Shirakaba. Following a year of futile protests, Tokyo decided to permit Japanese firms to conduct their own explorations in the disputed region. After Chinese warships provocatively patrolled the area, the Japanese Coast Guard boldly assumed formal control over the contested Senkaku Islands south of Japan.⁴¹ Although the fields lie

³⁹ "Japan Extends Sanctions against N. Korea for Six More Months," *Associated Press*, April 11, 2008, <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/04/11/asia/AS-GEN-Japan-NKorea-Sanctions.php>.

⁴⁰ Blaine Harden, "Japan Feeling Left Out as US Talks to Pyongyang," *Washington Post*, May 17, 2008, A14, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/16/AR2008051603920.html>.

⁴¹ For a summary of the dispute see Kent E. Calder, "China and Japan's Simmering Rivalry," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (March/April 2006), pp. 130-131.

just inside China's side of the meridian line separating the two countries, Japanese experts believe that exploiting Chunxiao/Shirakaba would siphon gas from fields that extend under waters claimed by Japan—a situation disturbingly similar to that which Saddam Hussein cited to justify his invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Until now, Japan's close military cooperation with the United States has made exploring alternative security strategies, such as developing an independent nuclear deterrent seems unnecessary. Despite Japan's latent nuclear capacity and the perceived worsening of its security environment, Japanese leaders have until now refrained from developing a nuclear arsenal because of their confidence in American pledges to defend Japan against external threats—with US nuclear weapons, if necessary. Japan's December 2004 National Defense Program Guideline affirms, "To protect its territory and people against the threat of nuclear weapons, Japan will continue to rely on the US nuclear deterrent. At the same time, Japan will play an active role in creating a world free of nuclear weapons by taking realistic step-by-step measures for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation."⁴² The continued deployment of substantial US military forces on Japanese territory reinforces the credibility of US security guarantees.

Even so, the US decision to revise America's global military posture has already engendered anxieties in Japan and other East Asian countries about US staying power.⁴³ If American forces were to withdraw from the Korean peninsula as a result of a decision by the government of either South Korea or a newly reunified Korea, the Japanese government would find it hard to justify Japan's position as the sole Asian country hosting American

⁴²- Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, "National Defense Program Guideline, FY 2005," December 10, 2004, http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/policy/2004/1210taikou_e.html.

⁴³- The rationale for the deployments is presented in "Testimony As Prepared for Delivery by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld," Senate Armed Service Committee, Washington, DC, September 23, 2004, <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2004/sp20040923-secdef0783.html>.

military bases. But a major reduction in the US military presence in Japan could leave that country vulnerable and stimulate Japanese interest in developing nuclear weapons.

Conclusion: New Directions

The next US administration will need to adopt new policies to limit the adverse repercussions of recent developments for American interests in Northeast Asia. First, US officials urgently need to re-balance their energies and devote more attention to East Asia. American stakes in Asia are already enormous and will likely increase in coming decades. To take only one example, projections show that, in 2020, approximately 56% of the world's population will reside in Asia (with some 19% in China and 17% in India) while only 3% will live in the Middle East.⁴⁴

The growing importance of the US-Japan security relationship represents another reason American policymakers should consider devoting more attention to East Asia. Japanese leaders' continued confidence in Washington's pledges to defend Japan against external threats—with US nuclear weapons if necessary—explains why Tokyo continues to decline to acquire nuclear weapons. Sustaining a strong bilateral alliance will require US policymakers to reaffirm their commitment and capacity to protect Japan. In the near term, American reassurances will likely focus on the perceived threat from North Korea. Over the long term, managing the China challenge will probably assume priority. The deployment of substantial American military forces on Japanese territory should continue as a very visible and effective demonstration of the credibility of US security guarantees.

Any American strategy for managing Beijing will require the support

⁴⁴ - National Intelligence Council, *Mapping the Global Future* (Washington, DC: December 2004), p. 48, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/2020/2020.pdf>.

of most of China's neighbors to be effective. The United States will continue to benefit from underlying regional anxieties about the implications of China's rise. At a minimum, Asians would want to sustain ties with Americans to provide them with negotiating leverage with Beijing. Some Asians also worry that China's growing capabilities could provide it with a kind of "existential hegemony," with Beijing dominating Asian affairs even in the absence of a deliberate policy objective. Concerns about the longer-term growth of Chinese military power, as well as Beijing's stubborn commitment to an authoritarian political system, sustain broad Asian support for retaining a robust US military presence in the region, as well as a grudging tolerance for Japan's more activist security policies.⁴⁵

Sino-American relations will continue to entail a complex mix of cooperation and competition. For example, Beijing and Washington share an interest in countering terrorism in Southeast Asia, which has become a major battleground for hearts and minds between moderate Muslims and Islamic extremists. The accelerated development of the undersea energy resources in the East China Sea would also enhance the ability of both countries to hedge against further disruptions in Persian Gulf oil supplies. The persistent dispute between China and Japan over their contested maritime claims has impeded progress on this issue. American policies can help moderate tensions in this and other areas by encouraging Chinese and Japanese leaders to focus on current opportunities rather than past differences.

In addition, the need to respond to the DPRK's nuclear program has created opportunities for improved relations between China and both Japan and the United States. Perhaps the most important difference between the 1994 Agreed Framework and the February 2007 Denuclearization Accord

⁴⁵- Michael J. Green, "America's Quiet Victories in Asia," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2007; Sheng Lijun, "Beijing's Soft Power in Southeast Asia," *International Herald Tribune*, January 17, 2007.

is that the Chinese government has been considerably more involved in supporting the more recent negotiations. From Beijing's perspective, a successful outcome to the six-party process would both eliminate the problems that a North Korean nuclear arsenal presents for China (for example, by stimulating Japanese interest in developing missile defenses and perhaps nuclear weapons) and help reinforce perceptions of Beijing as a committed and influential regional security stakeholder.

In addition, any sustained effort to integrate North Korea into the region's security and economic structures—an essential step in the short term for preventing Pyongyang's nuclear recidivism and in the long term for transforming its regime into a less threatening foreign policy actor—will require effective multinational burden-sharing. No single country can provide North Korea with unilateral security assurances sufficient to induce the DPRK leadership to halt its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons development programs. Similarly, the costs of reforming the North Korean economy are so great as to require a comprehensive multinational rescue effort. In the absence of integration and reconstruction, an impoverished and isolated North Korea would likely seek nuclear weapons again—and engage in other disruptive and illicit activities—to gain international attention and money as well as deter foreign threats against it. US intelligence analysts recently claimed that monetary considerations likely motivated Pyongyang to help Syria build the nuclear reactor that Israeli warplanes destroyed in September 2007.⁴⁶

More generally, the Asia Pacific countries appreciate that their economic development requires a stable regional security environment, with as few disruptive crises over disputed territories or commercial activities as possible. The level of commercial interdependence between

⁴⁶ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Background Briefing with Senior US Officials on Syria's Covert Nuclear Reactor and North Korea's Involvement," April 24, 2008, http://dni.gov/interviews/20080424_interview.pdf.

South Korea, China, Japan, and the United States has become so great that any security-induced disruptions would seriously damage the global economy. All four governments appreciate in principle that achieving regional peace and prosperity requires tolerably good relations among them, but clashing views on specific issues sometimes distract them from this goal.

Looking beyond the six-party talks and the North Korean nuclear issue, the most fruitful mode of promoting security cooperation in East Asia during the next few years will probably consist of less formal coordinating mechanisms involving only the most interested and influential governments. The six-party talks, as presently organized, demonstrate the value of minimally formalized, moderately inclusive structures created to address discrete issues. For example, the six-party mechanism has proved sufficiently flexible to enable the United States to deal with North Korea bilaterally (meeting a key DPRK demand) within a multilateral framework that encouraged compromises among governments whose representatives feared being outnumbered or seen as an obstacle to progress.

Rather than attempt to extend the existing six-party talks to encompass new issues, however, it would probably prove easier in most cases to organize a new structure tailored to the specific subject at hand—whether curbing nuclear non-proliferation, promoting energy cooperation, or some other issue area warranting multilateral attention. The institutional mechanism should include only those countries most interested in—or important for—addressing the specific issue. Their exclusive nature should accelerate progress since they would require the consent of only a limited number of governments to act. South Korea, with one of the world's most powerful economies and expanding regional security interests, would likely be a member of many of these “institutions of the willing and able.” The DPRK, except when its behavior itself constituted to the problem, would probably not.

Finally, the United States can use more creative strategies to re-establish its security credentials in East Asia. For example, the substantial support provided by the American military to the international humanitarian relief and recovery operations following the December 2004 Asian Tsunami generated widespread popular approval for the United States in the region. In Indonesia, polls showed a sharp drop in public support for Al Qaeda and violent terrorist attacks. In contrast, Chinese government representatives were visibly defensive when asked about their own miserly financial assistance to the devastated regions. American policymakers should seek out other opportunities and mechanisms to demonstrate how the United States can make unique, meaningful contributions to the security and welfare of the Asian Pacific community.

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