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The United States and the Asia-Pacific Region: National Interests and Strategic Imperatives

by James J. Przystup

Key Points

Notwithstanding the 2008–2009 financial crisis, East Asia today remains the home of the world's most dynamic economies. In 1990, the region's share of global gross domestic product (GDP) amounted to 26.5 percent; in 2006, that figure stood at 37.5 percent. In 2006, the GDP growth rate for Asia's economies averaged 5.1 percent, compared to a world average of 3.9 percent.

Driven in large part by China's economic resurgence and benefiting from an open international trading system, Asia has become an engine of global economic growth.

Meanwhile, U.S. trade with the region grew from $300 billion in 1991 to $900 billion in 2006, much of it in higher value-added manufactured goods and services.[1] In all likelihood, restructured and revived economies in Asia and the United States will lead the world out of the current global recession.

In addition to its longstanding commercial links to the region, the United States maintains treaty alliance relationships with Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand. For over a half century, this bilateral alliance structure has formed the region's informal security architecture. The alliances remain of critical importance in addressing the hard security challenges of the East Asia region and provide a firm foundation for multilateral efforts to address the nontraditional security issues there.

In addition, the growing number of Asian-Americans has reinforced the long history of cultural interaction across the Pacific, marked by art, architecture, literature, music, and today, manga.

The totality of these commercial, cultural, and security ties reflects the enduring nature of U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific and argues for an active American role in shaping the future of this region. Key to this engagement is a clear understanding of U.S. interests in Asia and the strategic imperatives that will confront the Obama administration's policymakers.

U.S. Interests

From its earliest days, the United States has been engaged in trade with East Asia. In February 1784, the *Empress of China* left New York harbor, sailing east to China, arriving at Macau on the China coast in August of that year. The ship returned to the United States the following May with a consignment of Chinese goods, which generated a profit of $30,000. In 1844, China granted the United States trading rights in the Treaty of Wanghia.

The U.S. interest in trade with Asia and the protection of American merchantmen took Commodore Matthew C. Perry to Japan. The Treaty of Kanagawa of 1854 granted access to the markets of Japan, opening the ports of Shimoda and Hakodate to trade with the United States, and provided for the protection of shipwrecked American sailors.

Benefiting from unhampered access, U.S. trade with East Asia rapidly expanded, with China in particular defined as the "market of the future." But in the last decade of the 19th century, China's internal weakness, combined with the activities of the imperialist powers, threatened to segment the China market into exclusive spheres of influence. The U.S. response, in the form of Secretary of State John Hay's Open Door Notes, defined U.S. interests in China as unimpeded access to its markets and, later, support for China's territorial integrity as the means of assuring that access. Hay's definition reflected historic American interests in the larger East Asia region dating to the *Empress of China* and the opening of Japan.

Taking into consideration the nearly 225-year history of U.S. engagement with East Asia, this essay defines U.S. interests as the following:

- Defense of the homeland and U.S. territories and protection of U.S. citizens. Today, U.S. forces are engaged across the Asia-Pacific region dealing with terrorist threats to the United States and its citizens.
- Access to regional markets. The United States has supported efforts in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum to open and secure market access and has promoted efforts to expand trade by creating an Asia-Pacific Free Trade Area and by signing free trade agreements with Australia, Singapore, and South Korea.

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■ Freedom of the seas to assure access. The U.S. Navy, operating from the West Coast, Hawaii, and bases in Japan and through access agreements with Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries, is positioned to assure freedom of the seas.

■ Maintenance of a balance of power to prevent the rise of any hegemon or group of powers that would impede U.S. political and economic access to the region. The system of bilateral U.S. alliances with Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand maintains a stable balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region.

■ Preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missile delivery systems. The United States, along with China, the ROK, Japan, Russia, and North Korea, is engaged in the Six-Party Talks aimed at the denuclearization of North Korea. At the same time, the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) enjoys broad support across the region.

the ability of the United States to protect and advance its interests will depend significantly on the reassertion of active leadership and engagement from the new administration in Washington

■ The promotion of democracy and human rights. For successive U.S. administrations, this has been an enduring element in policy, with notable successes in the Philippines, the ROK, and Taiwan.

Over the course of its relations with East Asia, the United States has adopted multiple approaches to protecting and advancing its interests:

■ The Open Door policy represented a unilateral U.S. initiative that evolved into a structure of multilateral cooperation aimed at ensuring access to and equality of commercial opportunity in the China market.

■ Theodore Roosevelt worked to balance Imperial Russia's efforts to develop an exclusive sphere of influence in northern China by aligning the United States with Japan during the Russo-Japanese War.

■ At the Washington Conference of 1920, the United States supported multilateral efforts to preserve the postwar status quo in the Asia-Pacific region and to ensure the territorial integrity of China through great power cooperation.

■ Following World War II and throughout the Cold War, the United States relied on a series of bilateral alliances with Japan, the ROK, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand to secure its interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

Strategic Imperatives

Based on an understanding of U.S. interests in the region, the Obama administration will have to address a number of strategic imperatives that should guide the evolution of policy. These imperatives include developing a statement of purpose and vision for the region that reaffirms U.S. commitment and leadership; strengthening alliances; supporting the peaceful resolution of disputes; integrating rising powers in ways compatible with U.S. interests; preventing WMD proliferation; and participating in the region's multilateral economic, political, and security structures and addressing nontraditional security threats.

Developing a Statement of Purpose. Looking ahead to the coming decade, the ability of the United States to protect and advance its interests will depend significantly on the reassertion of active leadership and engagement from the new administration in Washington. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's February 2009 visit to Japan, Indonesia, the ROK, and China, followed by the visit of Japan's Prime Minister Taro Aso to Washington, DC, stands as an early indicator of the Obama administration's intent to assert active leadership and engagement in the Asia-Pacific region.

Whether accurate or not, a number of our closest allies and friends across the region have come to see the United States as preoccupied with the global war on terror and having a regional tunnel vision focus on Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, and the greater Middle East. The failure of President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to attend various regional meetings has been viewed as a barometer of U.S. interest in the region—and often contrasted with the attention paid by China's leadership.

Not only will the Obama administration have to reassert active leadership and engagement, but it also will have to reaffirm U.S. commitment to the region and articulate a vision toward which policies will be ordered. In doing so, the new administration would do well to internalize the vision set out by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in his remarks to the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on May 31, 2008. He defined the United States as "a Pacific nation with an enduring role in East Asia," one standing "for openness and against exclusivity" and committed to "mutual prosperity." Noting that American territory in the Pacific Ocean extended from the Aleutian Islands to Guam, Secretary Gates characterized the United States as a "resident power" in the region.

Since the time of the Open Door Notes, the United States has championed an open international trading order. This practice has advanced living standards in the United States and across the globe. At a time when answers to the current financial and economic crisis are not fully understood and remain open to debate, U.S. policy should aim to avoid what history has demonstrated does not work. To retreat to the protectionism and beggar-thy-neighbor policies of the 1930s would be to repeat a mistake of historic proportion, forfeit U.S. international leadership, and put at risk recovery of the global economy, with unknown consequences for stability and security in the Asia-Pacific region.

Strengthening Alliances. The United States bilateral alliance structure remains the foundation of regional stability and prosperity and the starting point for U.S. security engagement with the region. The alliances allow the United States to maintain a significant forward-deployed presence, and the basing structure in Japan and South Korea,

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reinforced by access agreements with nonallied Asian friends, makes credible the U.S. security commitment to the region. Operating from bases in Asia, U.S. forces are able to extend their operational reach to the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. It is noteworthy to recall that the first U.S. forces to reach the Persian Gulf in 1991 and in Operation *Enduring Freedom* in 2001 were based in Japan.

During the Cold War, the alliance structure stood as a vital link in the U.S. global containment strategy. Success in the Cold War did not put an end to interstate tensions and rivalries in East Asia. In the decade that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, the area experienced a series of challenges to regional stability and security—the 1994 nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, the 1996 Taiwan Strait missile crisis, and North Korea's Taepo Dong missile launch over Japan in 1998—that affected the security interests of the United States, its allies, and friends.

Today, Cold War legacy issues in East Asia—China-Taiwan relations and a divided Korean Peninsula, with North Korea now possessing a demonstrated nuclear capability—continue to pose challenges to U.S. security interests and commitments. In dealing with the hard security challenges facing the region, the alliance structure is irreplaceable. This will remain true for the foreseeable future.

However, as instruments of national policy, alliances are dynamic elements that are in a constant process of evolution, adjusting roles, missions, and capabilities to adapt to a fluid international environment. At times, changes in the international environment, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, are transforming events, requiring a restructuring of alliance relationships.

The war on terror accelerated the transformation of the Asian alliances. In addition to the existing alliance commitments to the defense of Japan and the ROK, and a nontreaty commitment to the security of Taiwan, U.S. forces now would also be tasked with operations relating to the war on terror. At the same time, transformation is requiring the allies to do more in their own defense and in support of international order.

In this regard, the war on terror has extended alliance cooperation beyond the Asia-Pacific region. Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force is engaged in refueling operations in the Indian Ocean in support of Operation *Enduring Freedom* in Afghanistan; its Air Self-Defense Force participated in transport operations in Iraq; and the Ground Self-Defense Force contributed to postwar reconstruction in Iraq. The ROK has deployed forces to Iraq and Afghanistan. And Australia, under former Prime Minster John Howard, deployed forces to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The process of alliance transformation focused on the two key Northeast Asia countries, the ROK and Japan, where the U.S. military presence is concentrated. In both the ROK and Japan, relocation and concentration, leading to a more readily deployable force structure, defined the transformation process. In the ROK, U.S. forces are redeploying from bases along the demilitarized zone and concentrating in two major hubs south of the Han River. Meanwhile, wartime operational control is being transferred to the ROK, moving the United States from a leading to a supporting role in the country's defense. In Japan, a similar process is under way, with collocation of bilateral army and air force headquarters, the establishment of a bilateral joint operations center, and a reduction in U.S. Marine bases on Okinawa, featuring a significant redeployment of 8,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam.

The Obama administration must continue the process of alliance transformation. While there is a clear understanding of the strategic importance of the alliances among our partners, there is a gap between strategic consensus and on-the-ground performance, notably on the relocation of the Marine Corps Air Station at Futenma, Okinawa, and the redeployment of Marines from Okinawa to Guam. While realignment issues are operational in nature, they are strategic in consequence and will be central to the political health of the alliances over the next decade.

Challenges to international security are likely to increase over the coming decade, while U.S. capabilities to meet a diversity of threats will be constrained as it recovers from the financial meltdown of 2008–2009. The Obama administration will be asking more of its allies and friends, in terms of not only hard security contributions but also security broadly defined, such as postconflict reconstruction and the development of the instruments of good governance. At a time when U.S. alliance partners and friends will also be facing budgetary constraints, the task of working out appropriate roles and missions will challenge alliance managers in the years ahead.

Supporting the Peaceful Resolution of Disputes. The administration will also have to manage two Cold War legacy issues: the future of the Korean Peninsula and the resolution of cross-Strait issues between China and Taiwan. Both are issues in which diplomacy, backed by a treaty alliance commitment to the security of the ROK and legal structure governing U.S. relations with Taiwan, offers the best hope of a peaceful resolution of outstanding differences.

today, Cold War legacy issues in East Asia continue to pose challenges to U.S. security interests and commitments

The consistent policy of successive U.S. administrations has been to support unification of the Korean Peninsula under the ROK government. Toward this end, the U.S.–ROK alliance has successfully deterred the outbreak of a second Korean war. Meanwhile, diplomacy, through the ongoing Six-Party Talks aimed at the denuclearization of North Korea, has also committed "the directly related parties" to "negotiate [a] permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at an appropriate separate forum."[2]

Creating a permanent peace regime requires the realization of a number of diplomatic objectives that will result in a regime that ratifies and supports a preexisting, de facto state of peace.

The first step down this path is the denuclearization of North Korea, without which peace on the peninsula is unattainable. Other steps include agreement to replace the 1953 armistice, to which the United

States, North Korea, and China are parties, with either a political agreement or a peace treaty that would add the ROK to the signatories; and implementation of the 1991 South-North Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, and Cooperation and Exchange, a document that stands as a prototype peace regime. Meanwhile, North Korea's denuclearization would open the door to the normalization of U.S.–North Korea relations. The realization of such a peace structure would foster reconciliation and ultimately create conditions for a peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula.

With respect to Taiwan, the Taiwan Relations Act of April 10, 1979, states that it is the policy of the United States:

to declare that peace and stability in the area are in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States; to make clear that the United States decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China rests on the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means; to consider any effort to undermine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means . . . a threat to the peace and security of the Western [P]*acific and of grave concern to the United States; to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character; and to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security or the social or economic system of the people of Taiwan.*

This statement of policy has served U.S. interests well over the past 30 years by preserving stability in the Taiwan Strait and providing a secure environment in which Taiwan's economy and democracy could develop. The United States should continue to support Taiwan's democracy as well as uncoerced peaceful resolution of the issues between Taiwan and China, including unification if it is achieved on terms acceptable to the people of both Taiwan and China. In this regard, given China's accelerating buildup of military capabilities across the Taiwan Strait, it is critical that the United States remains steadfast in its commitment to supply Taiwan with the defensive arms necessary to assure its ability to resist coercion or attack.

Integrating Rising Powers. Over the past three decades, since Deng Xiaoping initiated China's market-opening reforms, successive American administrations, Democratic and Republican alike, have pursued a broad and deep engagement strategy aimed at integrating a rising China into the existing international order. President Bill Clinton, with the support of a Republican Congress, worked to advance China's entry into the World Trade Organization. The administration of President George W. Bush worked to further China's integration and to have China act as a "responsible stakeholder" in support of the international economic order.

Today, China's booming economy and increasingly sophisticated diplomacy are transforming economic and political relationships across the Asia-Pacific region.

In 2006, China stood as a top three trading partner with Japan, the ROK, Taiwan, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and India, the leading source of Japanese imports, and the second-place export market for Japan. For the ROK and Taiwan, China is the leading export market and ranks second as a source of imports. At the same time, China has become the focus of production networks that span the region. This is particularly true with regard to high technology. In 2005, China was not only the third largest exporter of electronics products and components, but also the second largest importer of high-tech components.

the Obama administration should define and specify what it considers China's legitimate interests in the Asia-Pacific region

China's diplomatic activism is reflected in its pursuit of bilateral free trade agreements, in its proposal for a China-ASEAN free trade agreement, and in its active participation in the region's various multilateral structures and security dialogues. China has subscribed to the Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which commits signatories to a peaceful resolution of disputed maritime boundaries, and is the first non-ASEAN government to sign the association's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. China has also played a catalytic role in assembling and sustaining the Six-Party Talks on the denuclearization of North Korea.

At the same time, China's military power has increased significantly over the past decade, with double-digit increases in defense spending for over 20 years. This has allowed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to accelerate its modernization program and acquire advanced weaponry. Much of this arsenal appears focused on deterring possible U.S. intervention in a Taiwan contingency, but elements also appear to enhance PLA capabilities to project beyond Taiwan into the broader Asia-Pacific region.

The challenge China represents is thus multifaceted. In his "Responsible Stakeholder" speech, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick stated that the United States "respects China's interests in the region." While tacitly recognizing the reality of China's growing influence and cautioning against efforts to "maneuver toward a preponderance of power," Zoellick did not take a position on China's long-term intentions in Asia and avoided specifying which of its interests the United States considered legitimate and would respect.

The starting point for the Obama administration's approach to China should be an internal effort to define and specify what it considers China's legitimate interests in the Asia-Pacific region. In this regard, it will also have to consider whether the United States can accept China's imminent status as the dominant power in East Asia (if it is not already), provided that China respects historic U.S. interests, based on access to the region. In this regard, China's efforts to develop access-denial capabilities with regard to a Taiwan contingency and toward areas of broader East Asia would strategically challenge U.S. interests in assuring access.

Preventing WMD Proliferation. Averting WMD proliferation is a global strategic imperative of U.S. policy. Its focus in the Asia-Pacific region

is North Korea. The challenge presented by North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs is twofold: the first is the threat of a nuclear attack on U.S. territory or on the territory of U.S. allies in Northeast Asia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea; the second is the threat of WMD proliferation from the Korean Peninsula.

The Obama administration will be the fifth to try its hand at denuclearizing North Korea. The efforts, dating back to the 1989–1993 George H.W. Bush administration's successful efforts to persuade North Korea to allow International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors to inspect the operating records of the Yongbyon facility, have been bilateral as well as multilateral in nature. The current Six-Party Talks, involving the United States, China, the ROK, Japan, Russia, and North Korea, have produced the diplomatic agreements of September 2005 and February 2007, which present a three-stage roadmap to denuclearization. Implementation, however, had not moved beyond the second stage as of December 2008.

To address the issue of WMD proliferation, the Bush administration launched the PSI in 2003. The initiative represented a multilateral effort to interdict and defeat WMD-related trade. PSI exercises in the Asia-Pacific region have been hosted by Japan and Singapore and have involved the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand as participants.

Multilateral Engagement and Addressing Nontraditional Threats. The bilateral nature of the alliances should not be viewed as a constraint on U.S. multilateral engagement with the region. This should start with the trilateral security dialogues now taking root among the United States, Japan, and the ROK, and the United States, Australia, and Japan, which are focused on expanding the areas for alliance-based cooperation. A quadripartite strategic dialogue among the United States, Japan, Australia, and India has been under consideration and may yet materialize.

The alliances also should be seen as the building blocks for multilateral coordination with nonallies to deal with myriad nontraditional security issues confronting the region, ranging from disaster relief to climate change, from nonproliferation to containing the spread of infectious diseases. The habits of cooperation and coordination developed over the years within the alliances can provide a firm foundation for initiatives aimed at dealing with contemporary issues of common concern on an ad hoc basis.

Across the region, efforts to forge multilateral structures for economic and political cooperation and coordination have accelerated since the end of the Cold War—ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus 3, APEC, the Changmai Initiative, the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the East Asia Summit are representative of the region's interest in shaping its future. Some, such as the EAEC and initially the East Asia Summit, aimed to exclude the United States; U.S. opposition to such efforts was based on its historic interest in being included in the region. Conceptually and in terms of policy, the United States has favored trans-Pacific forums, such as APEC, as opposed to pan-Asian ones (the EAEC).

the immediate challenges facing the Obama administration should not deflect attention from addressing the strategic imperatives that will shape the contours of the Asia-Pacific region

Inclusion should continue to guide but not predetermine U.S. policy toward multilateralism. The United States need not participate in every multilateral initiative advanced in the region, but it should take advantage of opportunities to demonstrate U.S. commitment and engagement. Consistent high-level participation in the region's multilateral dialogues along with signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and participating in the East Asia Summit would signal U.S. interest in and commitment to the region's efforts in building multilateral structures for cooperation. Properly managed participation would in no way compromise the alliance structure but would only reinforce it at the diplomatic level.

The immediate challenges facing the Obama administration—Iraq, Afghanistan, and stability in the greater Middle East—should not deflect attention from addressing the strategic imperatives that will shape the contours of the Asia-Pacific region in the decades ahead. As the administration moves to engage the region, the pursuit of historic interests, openness, inclusion, and mutual prosperity should guide its policy choices. This will both promote U.S. leadership and advance regional stability and security.

Notes

[1] Deputy U.S. Trade Representative Karan K. Bhatia, "U.S. Trade Relations with Asia," remarks before the Washington International Trade Association, July 24, 2007.

[2] Article 4 of the Joint Statement issued in Beijing at the conclusion of Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks, September 19, 2005.

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