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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The United States as an Asian Power: Realism or Conceit?

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INTRODUCTION

The long history of U.S. foreign policy is punctuated by axiomatic truths that have bordered on conceit—e.g., the virtues of isolation, America’s manifest destiny, and our benign, democratizing presence in world affairs. Strategists have lurched from truth to truth across the centuries, often without sufficient reflection and learning. Today the United States is operating with an axiomatic idea about its place in and of Asia. U.S. foreign policymakers—and U.S. foreign policy wonks—intone the mantra: “The United States is an Asian power.”

In the latter half of the 1990s, concerned that U.S. policy had tilted too far in the direction of trade and economics, policy planners sought to reassure our Japanese and Korean allies that we were both in and of the region. The U.S. government pledged to maintain 100,000 troops in Asia and to strengthen our bilateral alliances there in the wake of the Cold War. Successive DoD East Asia Strategy Reports, issued both by the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations, began with the claim that the United States is an “Asian power.”¹ George W. Bush’s National Security Strategy and Quadrennial Defense Review, as well as the 2002 DoD Report to the President, all make the same claim: the United States is an indispensable source of regional stability, provider of security for the sea lanes of communication, deterrer of a North Korean invasion of the South, defender of Taiwan, and guardian of democracy.²

U.S. rhetoric has been consistent and bi-partisan. In June 2002, then Secretary of State Colin Powell told the Asia Society that “the U.S. is a Pacific power and we will not yield our strategic position in Asia.”³ Mitchell Reiss, then Director of Policy Planning at the Department of State, proclaimed in November 2004 that “America is a Pacific power, firmly rooted in this region. We are determined to play a vital role in the Asia of tomorrow that is taking shape today.”⁴ In her first trip to Asia as Secretary of State,

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continued from page 1 — Condoleezza Rice noted that “the United States...plays the role of guarantor of stability in [the] region.”⁵

There is certainly reason to believe this to be so. The Asia Pacific has emerged as the world’s fastest growing region and its international relations are among the most consequential for the security and prosperity of the United States. There are today some 97,000 U.S. soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines in East Asia alone.⁶ Asian customers consume close to 30 percent of all American exports and imports from Asia comprise 42 percent of total U.S. imports in manufactured goods.⁷ In December 2004, Japan, China, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan were four of the top eight U.S. trade partners, and trade with China and Japan each ranked ahead of trade with any single European country.⁸ Asian central banks are today the biggest foreign investors in U.S. bonds. China, Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong owned a combined total of nearly \$700b of U.S. Treasury bills at the end of June 2003—more than 10 percent of the total outstanding.⁹ Moreover, nearly three quarters of the U.S. current account deficit in 2003 was financed by Asian central banks.¹⁰

There is no question but that Asia matters for the United States. But is our widely accepted understanding that “America is an Asian power” accurate? Is the United States the Asian power it claims and wishes to be?

U.S. Economic Clout Reduced

If little has changed in American rhetoric, a great many facts have changed on the ground in Asia. Despite the increasing dependence of the United States on Asian finance and on commodity trade, an Asian regional trade and financial system is emerging without U.S. leadership or, in some important cases, even without U.S. participation. Although the United States seeks, in Reiss’ words, “a regional architecture that allows states to build partnerships with each other, as well as partnerships with the United States,”¹¹ most of the partnerships exclude the United States altogether—and more are being formed every year.

There was a time when it was quite clear that the United States would not put up with Asian states excluding it from the table where the rules are set. In 1993, when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad announced plans for his East Asian Economic Caucus, the United States responded quickly and forcefully. The idea was dropped. And again, in 1997, when Japan responded to the financial crisis by proposing an Asian Monetary Fund, the United States intervened to kill the idea in its cradle.

But those days are gone. While the United States has spent blood and lucre on fighting terrorism, the tectonic plates of Asian institutions have started to realign in unprecedented—and, possibly, undesirable—ways. For their part, the Japanese are in the midst of what one analyst, Saadia Pekkanen, labels an “FTA Frenzy.”¹² Japan has concluded Free Trade Agreements with Singapore (2002) and with Mexico (2004), and is negotiating a similar pact with the Republic of Korea. In Pekkanen’s judgment, “Japan’s bilateral and region preferential FTA agreements are the building blocks to genuine, ground-up, and made-for-and-by Asians institutionalism...,” a process that she says “will affect not just our relationship with our most important ally in Asia, but also our role in shaping the geopolitics of the region.”¹³

These geopolitics—and the economics that engender them—are in rapid transition. In 2004 Beijing displaced the United States as Japan’s leading trade partner, and is stealing the regional trade show. In October 2004 it won agreement for an FTA with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that potentially could integrate two billion people and \$2 trillion of commerce by 2010, its target date. Meanwhile, ASEAN has effectively expanded into an “ASEAN Plus Three,” an arrangement by which China, South Korea, and Japan have joined the conversation. A “Joint Statement on East Asian Cooperation,” issued at ASEAN’s Manila Summit in November 1999, established broad areas for regional cooperation. Regular meetings at the ministerial level are now held among member states on such security policy issues as piracy, AIDS, drugs, and illegal immigration. Economic ministers meet annually to discuss trade promotion, industrial standard setting, information technology, skills training, disease control, environmental protection, and small business development. Dr. Mahathir crows that his East Asian Economic Caucus is alive and well.¹⁴

Even if “ASEAN Plus Three” is underdeveloped as compared with the European Community, even if its leadership is still marked by competition between Japan and China, and even if the eventual knitting together of the region’s economies is on balance a benign event, the emergence of its active diplomacy portends the decline of U.S. influence in the region. Next year there will be an “East Asian Summit,” an event that Japan—America’s most important ally in the region—will co-host. Japan, which in deference to the United States has been more cautious than any of its other ASEAN partners, has already declared this summit an important step toward establishing an East Asia Community. From the perspective of a United States that insists it is an Asian power, it is important that none of this institution-building involves U.S. participation. Francis Fukuyama credits China with skillfully elbowing out the United States from the region, noting: “It is not clear that the [Bush] administration even realizes how successful Beijing has been in displacing U.S. influence, or has ideas for how to stop this from happening.”¹⁵ But Japan and Korea have eagerly joined with China, and all three have eagerly joined with their other neighbors. U.S. spokesmen are left to express “concern” that the East Asian Community meeting scheduled for Kuala Lumpur next year does not include the United States:

*While we encourage greater integration, greater economic development, greater dialogue among all the countries of this region, we don't want to be excluded from that conversation... The United States is a Western Pacific power. We believe we are a force for stability and security among all the countries of this region. We have equities, we have interests in East Asia... We think that we have played an important role in the prosperity and success of all of Asia for the many decades since World War II. We think we have a role to play in the coming decades as well.*¹⁶

We are inclined to be skeptical about this claim and agree with Pekkanen, who argues that these new economic institutions “will eventually redraw the regional-institutional and political map of Asia—one in which the U.S. may be an outsider.”¹⁷ First, however, we wonder if the same sort of progressive exclusion is occurring in the institutions that provide military security.

U.S. Military Clout Uncertain

Make no mistake, with close to 100,000 troops stationed in the region, the United States is the pre-eminent military power in Asia today. In addition, the U.S. remains committed to maintaining a strong presence in Asia going forward.¹⁸ Nevertheless, its decreasing participation in emerging institutions in the economic arena and the coming transformation of overseas troop deployments might together carry the unintended consequences of decreased U.S. influence in the region and increased friction with current allies.

Since the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review, Pentagon planners have moved to reconfigure the existing structure of troop deployments around the world. Their Global Defense Posture Review (GDPR) was designed, in the words of President George W. Bush, to “deploy a more agile and more flexible force.”¹⁹ This will be accomplished by restructuring the network of overseas bases to increase the U.S. ability to respond rapidly to unforeseen contingencies anywhere the world.²⁰ U.S. force transformation has particular relevance in Asia where, as one senior State Department official put it in August 2004, “the U.S. is better able to carry out its commitments than ever before, as a consequence of technological advances, military advances and lessons learned, and the quality of our cooperation with countries throughout the region.”²¹

One theme of the GDPR is “places, not bases.” In this view, the large, fixed bases of the Cold War with significant numbers of ground troops are outdated and too rigid for managing future threats.²² Instead, the GDPR envisions a network of more numerous and geographically dispersed facilities. Main operating bases around the world will be maintained, but consolidated and supplemented. “Forwarding operating sites,” mostly with current allies, would maintain a much smaller permanent presence but facilitate rapid response through the prepositioning of materiel and scalable infrastructure. “Cooperative security locations” with other states would provide temporary access to key ports and airfields, covering a much broader operational footprint than the current system of bases. These changes will reduce the number of troops needed permanently overseas and will allow resources to be shifted more efficiently as needed. More than 70,000 soldiers currently stationed abroad would return home in the process.

In Asia, this transformation of the U.S. military posture has already begun. In October 2004, the United States and South Korea reached an agreement to

reduce the number of U.S. troops by 12,500, to approximately 25,000, by 2008. Many of the remaining troops will be relocated from a sprawling complex in and around Seoul to a series of bases outside of the city and south of the Han River. While decreasing the vulnerability of U.S. troops to North Korean artillery, one apparent result of this change is to increase the ability for these troops to be deployed off the peninsula as the need arises elsewhere.²³ Indeed, one battalion from Korea has already been transferred to Iraq. In Tokyo, similar changes are being discussed. No decision has yet been announced, but rumors circulate about the transfer of the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force from Okinawa, perhaps to the northern island of Hokkaido, and other efforts to consolidate U.S. forces based in Japan.²⁴

In conducting this review, the Pentagon insists that the U.S. commitment to the region remains unwavering. The mantra in these briefings is “capabilities, not numbers,” as the United States will

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keep much of the same firepower in Asia, especially through the placement of additional bombers and submarines on Guam.²⁵ But—however superficially—numbers matter. Fewer troops, especially near key hotspots, are apt to be seen by many as a sign of declining U.S. commitment to the region's security and stimulate apprehension by some of abandonment. A few commentators raised fears that America was “marching out of Asia.”²⁶ The logic of capabilities over numbers may not be compelling to Korean or Japanese allies, and can feed the growing sense of weakening U.S. influence already perceived in the economic arena.

The GDPR also hopes to create more “balanced and symmetric” alliance relationships. In addition to reducing tensions by lowering the visibility of U.S. forces in-country, Pentagon planners seek to increase the interoperability of regional forces with the United States. However, American allies may fear that such interoperability will reduce the autonomy of their own militaries—or, even worse, draw their countries into U.S. conflicts that they would rather avoid. In some cases, allies like Japan that have cautiously navigated between the shoals of entanglement and abandonment may opt to hedge against both by enhancing their independence. After all, U.S. allies are not likely to wish to see facilities in their country used in ways that might undermine their other foreign policy interests; they have an interest in being strong enough to “just say ‘no.’” In early 2005 Japan both reaffirmed its alliance with the United States and announced its intentions to reduce host nation support for U.S. forces.²⁷ Likewise, the South Korea government has considered requiring its agreement for the deployment of U.S. forces in Korea off the peninsula. In March 2005, President Roh Moo-hyun assured his public that “our citizens will not become embroiled in Northeast Asian conflicts without our consent.”²⁸

Paying a Price on the Peninsula?

In many ways, the current nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula provides a critical test case for the health of U.S. influence in Asia. It is one of the two central security issues in the region, intertwined with the global focus on preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and key to stability in Northeast Asia. Yet, more than two years after the current crisis erupted, the United States has been unable to make much progress towards eliminating the North's nuclear potential. Indeed, in February 2005 North Korea declared it was a nuclear power and broke off the Six Party Talks.²⁹ While this latest shot across the bow might be no more than posturing by Pyongyang, it nevertheless underscores the limits of U.S. influence in the region.

After Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly's October 2002 visit to Pyongyang, the United States pushed for multilateral talks. By proceeding in concert with neighboring states, U.S. policy sought to increase pressure on North Korea to make concessions or even create conditions for regime change by tightening the noose of international isolation. Nevertheless, despite the multilateral format, scant progress has been made toward denuclearization of the peninsula. American negotiators have been unable to lead the other participants to its preferred solution to the problem—or to any solution at all—an outcome that is worrisome for American influence in Asia. While all sides agree on keeping nukes off the peninsula, they disagree over how to achieve this goal. The lack of progress is striking because the

other parties are either U.S. allies or declared great power “partners” of the United States, the very countries that should be most likely and willing to assist America in reaching its goals.

If anything, the North might have achieved its goal, and may now even have the upper hand. As the talks dragged on, Pyongyang bought precious time to continue to develop its nuclear weapons program. Moreover, North Korea has used the talks, and the invariable extended diplomacy between each session, to undermine the very isolation that the U.S. hoped to impose through the multilateral format. Pyongyang's recent decision to suspend its participation in the talks will only give it more time. As the crisis brews with the North's latest admission, it is hard to avoid concluding that this stalemate symbolizes a decline in U.S. power and influence in the region.

Conclusion

The economic and military calculations of the region's great powers, China and Japan, seem animated by the view that geopolitics follows economics. While these states remain wary of each other's political and military ambitions, the economic developments that are driving them toward cooperation have also empowered them to act with greater confidence and independence diplomatically while keeping the United States increasingly at arm's length. If the United States is really an Asian power, it is by no means a preeminent one. America's presumed primacy in the region is clearly at odds with the converging strategic calculations of its Asian partners in both the economic and military arenas.

These trends are not necessarily inevitable. Indeed, the U.S. military played a critical role in providing timely relief supplies to victims in Indonesia and Sri Lanka after a tsunami struck in late 2004. Nevertheless, in recent years, U.S. strategic attention has focused intensely and overwhelmingly on Afghanistan, Iraq, and terrorism. American officials seem to view Asia through this prism—and this prism only—seeking to limit the potential for events in the region to complicate U.S. efforts elsewhere.

We are neither predicting America's decline in absolute terms nor advocating a return to the “declinist” literature of the 1980s.³⁰ Indeed, we are not even convinced that the relative decline of U.S. power in Asia is necessarily bad—for Asia or for the United States. Here we are making a more modest claim: U.S. declarations of its power in Asia are increasingly at odds with the facts on the ground there. A major shift in the region's balance of power continues apace, and when America does increase the attention it pays to Asia, it will encounter a very different neighborhood.

At some point, either U.S. policy will have to adjust to meet its lofty rhetoric, or else the rhetoric will have to be scaled back to match realities in Asia.

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article footnotes

¹ Michael McDevitt, Director, Center for Strategic Studies. "U.S. Security Strategy in East Asia" November 6, 2002, at <http://web.mit.edu/ssp/fall02/mcdevitt.htm>

² Admiral Dennis C. Blair, former Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, and his successor, Admiral Joseph W. Preuher, each repeatedly made some combination of these claims. See for example: http://www.navyleague.org/seapower_mag/Dec2000/blair.htm

³ Powell quoted in Michael McDevitt, op.cit., "Implementing the National Security Strategy: A View from the United States," Paper delivered to the 2003 NDU-Pacific Command Conference, Honolulu.

⁴ Remarks by Mitchell B. Reiss, Director of Policy Planning, U.S. Department of State delivered to the Japan Institute of International Affairs, Tokyo, 30 November 2004. p9.

⁵ "Rice's Trip to Asia-Pacific To Focus on Global Security Relations," 18 March 2005, WashFile, U.S. Department of State (<http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/>).

⁶ This is the official figure. (<http://www.info-please.com/ipa/A0883073.html>). According to the DoD's Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, the actual number of troops deployed in Asia as of September 2004 was 89,846. See <http://web1.whs.osd.mil/mmid/military/miltop.htm>

⁷ U.S. Department of Commerce, 2005.

⁸ Canada and Mexico were numbers one and two. China was third, Japan fourth, Korea was seventh and Taiwan was eighth. See: <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/top/dst/2004/12/balance.html>

⁹ *Financial Times*, 11 September 2003.

¹⁰ *Financial Times*, 24 January 2005.

¹¹ Remarks by Mitchell B. Reiss, Director of Policy Planning, U.S. Department of State delivered to the Japan Institute of International Affairs, Tokyo, 30 November 2004, p. 5.

¹² Saadia Pekkanen, "Japan's FTA Frenzy," Unpublished Paper, Seattle: Jackson School of International Affairs, University of Washington, 2005.

¹³ Pekkanen, 2005, op.cit., p.5,17.

¹⁴ ABC Radio Australia News, 10 September 2003.

¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, "Bush Needs to Soften Hard-Edged Foreign Policy," *Daily Yomiuri On-Line* 19 December 2004.

¹⁶ Mitchell Reiss, Director Policy Planning, U.S. Department of State. *Kyodo* 30 November 2004.

¹⁷ Pekkanen, 2005, op.cit., p.19.

¹⁸ See, for example, *Testimony Of Admiral Thomas B. Fargo United States Navy Commander U.S. Pacific Command Before The House Armed Services Committee United States House Of Representatives Regarding U.S. Pacific Command Posture*, March 31, 2004

¹⁹ "President's Remarks to Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention," (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/08/20040816-12.html>)

²⁰ See http://www.defenselink.mil/home/features/global_posture/gp-index.html

²¹ <http://hongkong.usconsulate.gov/ustw/state/2004/081601.htm>

²² For an excellent review of the GDPR process and its implications for Asia, see Evan S. Medeiros, "The U.S. Global Defense Posture Review and Implications for the Security Architecture of the Asia Pacific Region," annotated outline, December 2004

²³ Medeiros 2004

²⁴ Eric Talmadge, "U.S. Pushing Japan To Boost Military Role," *The Boston Globe*, 8 April 2005.

²⁵ Jim Garamone, "In Korea, Think Capabilities, Not Numbers, General Says," *American Forces Press Service*, 24 September 2004.

²⁶ Susan V. Lawrence and David Lague, "Marching Out Of Asia," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 26 August 2004. For a Japanese military analyst's view of the problems that may accompany transformation, see: Ugaki, Ohnori. "Bei Taiheiy gun Toransuf meeshiyon no Zenb" (The Full Picture of the Transformation of US Pacific Forces in the Pacific). *Gunji Kenky* December 2004, pp.38-49.

²⁷ *Japan Times* 12 February 2005 and *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* 12 February 2005. In addition, Ishiba Shigeru, a former Director-General of the Japan Defense Agency, announced his hope that Japan would take ownership of U.S. bases there. *Mainichi Shimbun*, 15 February 2005.

²⁸ *Chosun Ilbo*, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200503/200503080028.html>

²⁹ *New York Times* 11 February 2005.

³⁰ The most prominent among them was Paul Kennedy. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, New York: Vintage, 1989. See the review of this literature in Samuel P. Huntington. "The U.S.-Decline or Renewal?" *Foreign Affairs* Winter 1988/1989.



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