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Recent American Asia Policy: A Critical Review

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After 9/11, Asia was eclipsed in the worldview of American foreign policy makers by the Middle East. But as the unhappy American engagement in the Iraqi insurgency winds down, nearing the limits of domestic electoral tolerance, Western eyes turn again to the part of the world on which the Bush administration first sought to focus upon its accession to power in January 2001. Based on well-known statistics, one would think this priority would be self-evident: the world's largest and most populous continent has been growing more rapidly than any other, from 5.5% of global output in 1950 to ca 24% (US$9 tr illion) in 2002, and the U.S. now does 50% more commerce (and processes more le gal immigrants) from the Pacific than across the Atlantic. First Japan surged to high-speed industrialization via an export-oriented growth strategy in 1955-1975, followed by the four "Asian tigers" in the 1965-1985 period, then China's fifth of mankind since launching "reform and opening" in 1978, and finally India's 1991 opening. Or, from the strategic vantage point preferred by the incoming George W. Bush administration, the U.S. had fought two major wars in Asia since World War II (none anywhere else), the most recent new entrants to the nuclear weapons "club" and (more to the point) the most likely prospective challengers to America's post-Cold War global hegemony are all in Asia. Except for the U.S. itself, Asia spends more on defense than any other region (two of the biggest spenders being Japan and China), and the American fleet guards the straits through which nearly half the world's maritime trade passes. Before being understandably diverted by the September 11 terrorist onslaught, the new administration began to implement its security vision by announcing plans for a major force redeployment from Europe to East Asia, followed by agreements with Japan to help develop a Theater Missile Defense network and with Taiwan to transact the largest arms sale package since Sino-American normalization. Upon returning to its original concerns in its second term, having become a major "stake-holder" in policy priorities (viz., the 'global war on terror," hereafter GWOT) adopted after 9/11, the Bush administration's new Asia policy has emerged as something of a rhetorical hybrid.

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In its response to the unprecedented challenge, the Bush administration is said to have launched a "revolution in foreign policy." If so, what does this mean for Asia? The purpose of this essay is to explore the ramifications of this question in terms of how current American Asian policy grows out of and yet distinguishes itself from American Asia policy traditions, and to attempt a very preliminary evaluation of how effective and suitable it is to the problems emergent in the region.

Historically, the American push to the western frontier stopped at the Pacific, acquiring colonies only in Guam and the Philippines as a windfall of the Spanish-American War in 1898, later (1945) giving independence to the latter. Why? While Americans looked back to Europe as their ancestral home, they looked upon Asia as something alien, to which the response was split: On the one hand were those convinced that the aliens could be converted, leading to a quite massive Christian missionary effort across the Pacific, with varying rates of success in Korea, China, Japan (South and Southeast Asia were more or less ceded to European imperialism).[2] On the other were those (such as the "Asianist" wing of the pre-McCarthyite Republican Party, led by Robert Taft, William Knowland et al.), who accepted Asia as immutably, other, deriving from this a sense of cultural superiority, "Oriental" exoticism, or racist dread (the "yellow peril," "blue ants," etc.). Common to both was the premise that East is east and West is west, lacking any shared cultural heritage. Meanwhile American moralism and commercial interests were simultaneously engaged by the Open Door Policy, focused on keeping market access open, which may have had some impact on imperialist ambitions at the margin (but if so far less than inter-imperialist competition).

After World War II, the defeat of Japan and the decolonization of Southeast and South Asia created a power vacuum that the U.S. was uniquely qualified to fill. Yet the continuing hiatus in East-West collective identity evoked a quite different response in Asia than in the West.[3] Whereas in Europe the Americans proceeded to construct a North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the role of *primus inter pares*, the Asian equivalent, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (only two members of which, Thailand and the Philippines, were actually Asian), was a more loosely organized and far less effective organization, in which Washington retained the discretion to define its responsibilities with each constituent independently. Absent a defense community with shared command of a standing army, SEATO quietly faded into insignificance as the U.S. articulated what has become widely known as the "hub-and-spokes" system of bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and the Republic of China on Taiwan, in each of which Washington retained asymmetrical dominance. While keeping the China-Taiwan confrontation

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2 For a relatively recent discussion of this experience, see Richard Madsen's excellent *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

3 See Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Why Is There No NATO in Asia: Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism," *International Organization*, 56: 3 (2002), pp. 575-607.

frozen, this system failed to deter civil wars in the ideologically divided nations of Korea and Vietnam or in geographically divided Pakistan. This loosely reticulated security framework is no doubt one of the reasons multilateral economic integration in Asia lags so far behind the construction of a European Union, which Washington encouraged. Clear target of this network during the Cold War was the "Communist bloc," yet this bloc was less rigidly defined than in Western Europe, giving way a decade after the Sino-Soviet split to a "strategic triangle" in which China's participation was welcomed, initially as a strategic "card" to trump the Soviet threat. The eventual consequence is that the splintering of the Communist bloc was reflected in a corresponding disintegration of the iron (or bamboo) curtain ten years earlier in the East than in the West, as China, Vietnam, and even to some extent North Korea became absorbed into world markets. But although Soviet evacuation of its base in Da Nang was echoed in 1991 by Philippine termination of the American lease on Subic Bay and Clark Air Force Base, the American alliance system like NATO survived the end of the Cold War (except of course for Taiwan, sacrificed in 1979 to diplomatic normalization with the PRC).

The end of the Cold War was hence less sharply defined in the East than in the West, as the post-Soviet Russian Federation retained its friendship with India and continued its reconciliation with China, while post-Mao China pursued political detente and economic opening at all azimuths without ever repudiating Maoism and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) clung to its neo-Stalinist *juche* system to the bitter end. The immediate American response to the collapse of the Soviet bloc was a heightened confrontation with China, partly in response to the well-publicized crackdown on the protest movement in Tiananmen Square and partly on the assumption that Asian communism could not long survive the collapse of its European counterpart. When the spectacular post-Tiananmen Chinese economic recovery proved that assumption decidedly unfounded, Clinton's attempt to redefine American "free world" anti-communist rhetoric in terms of human rights wilted, giving way in 1994 he to a definition of most-favored nation status (and later, Chinese WTO membership) on strictly commercial criteria. Thus the U.S. joined and added its momentum to post-Cold War "globalization," adopting market-opening as a central pillar of American foreign policy (while giving it somewhat selective emphasis designed to further American interests – as in the fierce Japanese-American negotiations to redress the trade imbalance, or the U.S. focus on "big emerging markets" rejecting Thailand's plea for a loan when its currency collapsed in 1997).

While globalization has hardly been a panacea, contributing to the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis and typically exacerbating domestic income differentials, its reception in Asia has been on the whole hospitable, measurably accelerating GDP growth in China after 1978, in India after 1991, and in Southeast Asia before 1997. Security concerns were by no means abandoned (despite the collapse of its sole peer competitor, U.S. arms spending continued to rise steadily amid a technological "revolu-

tion in military affairs," and Clinton abandoned plans to downsize the American fleet further or to reduce American forward-based forces in the Pacific below the 100,000 level), but neither did they inspire noticeable emphasis or policy innovation. The hub-and-spokes pattern was retained, while at the same time the U.S. cautiously opened itself to Asian multilateralism, as Clinton elevated the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation forum by introducing chief-of-state summit meetings at Seattle in 1993 and pushed for the adoption of early free trade deadlines in the Bogor Declaration the following year. At the same time the "open" character of APEC and its inclusion of non-Asian economies were consistently emphasized, and in principle the WTO and IMF were favored over regional economic organizations (e.g., the proposals for an exclusively East Asian Economic Community or an Asian Monetary Fund were successfully blocked).

The Bush transformation of American foreign policy, unheralded by its campaign rhetoric (in which Bush famously called for a more "modest" U.S. world presence),

talks (obligingly assembled by the PRC) on North Korean nuclear proliferation, and the ad hoc group that responded to the devastating December 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami. The main advantage of this form of action is control and efficiency, facilitating an extraordinarily prompt response while retaining almost unilateral freedom from institutional constraints. The second impact of the GWOT is the doctrine of preemptive war, as most clearly articulated by Bush in his 2004 speech at West Point emphasizing the need to strike first if clearly threatened, not only at the terrorists themselves but to any government that harbors them, further extended in the case of Iraq to any state believed to be developing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) that terrorists might conceivably try to access. The Bush administration presumably chose to articulate this doctrine rather than mutely apply it as a warning to other rogue states, but while that may have worked in the case of Libya, it has not made the North Korean regime notably more complaisant or even more rhetorically restrained.

In its second term the Bush administration shifted course somewhat more subtly. Condoleezza Rice has given greater emphasis to conventional diplomacy, but with three new nuances. First, though administration spokesmen began to take more critical views of China's development (e.g., repeatedly calling attention to Beijing's decade-long series of double-digit arms budget increases), an overtly confrontational stance has been largely avoided, and bilateral communications remain intact at both ambassadorial and summit levels. Second, the administration's neo-containment policy ("hedging") in anticipation of conceivable future threats from China is now usually cloaked in the rhetoric of the GWOT – thus the establishment of new bases surrounding China in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are all thereby justified. Third, while still clearly determined to retain national freedom of action, the administration has resorted to a more multilateral approach, as in the introduction of terrorism (an unwonted security issue) to the 2002 Mexican APEC summit, and on a more sustained basis via the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI, both to be discussed below).

In this very preliminary and tentative assessment of recent trends in U.S. Asia policy, we turn consecutively to three geographical points of chronic tension (in Northeast, Southeast, and South Asia) and two broad issue areas (security and development). In Northeast Asia, the administration's consistent focus has been on the development of nuclear weapons and delivery missiles by the DPRK, an issue intertwined with an older problem of the division of the Korean peninsula into ideologically opposed states. While the Kim Dae Jung administration (1998-2004) had attempted with initial American collusion to overcome the nuclear issue with a "sunshine" reunification policy, the Bush administration spurned this approach from the outset to focus on the current nuclear and past terrorist threat, categorizing the DPRK in January 2002 as part of an "axis of evil." Announcement in August that Pyongyang had been engaged in nuclear weapons development through a parallel

heavily enriched uranium (HEU) program served to justify the administration's ongoing suspicions and triggered mutual repudiation of the 1994 Agreed Framework, North Korea's exit from the nonproliferation treaty and IAEA inspections, and perhaps eventually helped stimulate the PRC to arrange the 6-power talks in Beijing in 2003, where both sides could return to the drawing boards.

But for the next two years there was no perceptible progress in these talks;not until August 2005 did the Chinese hosts manage to force an agreement in principle that turned out to be amazingly similar to the 1994 agreement, consisting of a freeze on DPRK development of nuclear weapons (insured by resumed IAEA inspections) in return for U.S. security guarantees and various economic and political concessions, which then however promptly fell apart over issues of relative priority and timing. Without getting into the evidentiary questions of whether a credible HEU program actually existed (as subsequently denied by the DPRK) and whether vitiation of the Agreed Framework was hence justified, it seems clear that profound mutual distrust, plus an administration determination not to repeat the alleged errors of the previous administration, have polarized the situation and escalated the difficulty of reaching a successful solution, gradually distancing the other three participants in the talks from their initial support of the administration's position. Even Japan was moved to attempt an (unsuccessful) unilateral approach to Pyongyang in 2002, but Japan's otherwise impeccable loyalty to the Bush administration, in the six-power talks and in sending token military support to Afghanistan and Iraq, has not helped endear the Koizumi administration to its most important Asian neighbors and trade partners. Even Washington has vacillated about Japan's role, on the one hand frequently urging greater military burden-sharing (as in the October 2005 Japanese-American security agreement for more efficient U.S. forward-deployed base structures, which broadened joint defense responsibilities to include Taiwan); on the other hand, whenever Japan assumes an autonomous leadership role (as in its 1998 proposal for an Asian Monetary Fund) the U.S. has reacted adversely.

The administration spurned Chinese overtures for some sort of trade-off between North Korea and Taiwan, Northeast Asia's other festering geographical wound, but the administration's position on this old issue shares with Korea the problem of unnecessarily aggravating an already delicate situation with bold rhetoric. By repudiating the old position of "strategic ambiguity" and announcing in 2001 he would do "whatever it takes to defend Taiwan" (a statement he immediately sought to qualify), Bush gave license to a fresh DPP administration long dedicated to Taiwan independence to think it could push its agenda with impunity. While becoming more and more deeply engaged since the late 1980s in the burgeoning mainland economy Taiwan's quest for national identity has ironically pushed its electorate in the opposite direction, creating recurrent friction with the mainland's unenforceable claims to sovereignty. By now overcommitted in Iraq, the administration was ultimately forced into an embarrassing public repudiation of Chen Shui-bian in December 2004 in order to forestall further provocations. This brought the

administration to cloak its commitment to Taiwan in greater uncertainty, withdrawing to a position of "strategic clarity and tactical flexibility" differing only semantically from its antecedent.

In Southeast Asia, the Bush administration has relied chiefly on its hub-and-spokes system to strengthen strategic relations and anti-terrorist efforts as the national case warranted. American troops were stationed in the Philippines in support of the Arroyo regime's pursuit of the Abu Sayeff band and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), negotiating joint military training arrangements and aid packages with the Philippines, moving towards a revival of bilateral security cooperation with Thailand and the Indonesian military (the TNI), even approaching Vietnam about developing mutual security cooperation. The reception has varied, as hub-and-spokes permits, meeting a cooler reception in Indonesia than in the Philippines, for example, particularly after Iraq, though the terrorist problem has been taken more seriously since the Bali bombing. The leading U.S. strategic partner in Southeast Asia is now Singapore, which deepened its docking facilities at its own expense to make Changi Naval Base the only port in the area able to accommodate an American aircraft carrier. But all of these countries have tended to hedge in all directions, joining the ASEAN+ FTA with China, hosting Japanese investment and bilateral FTAs, responding positively to India's "look east" policy, and generally refusing to be drawn into a hard choice between patrons.

In South and Central Asia, the administration's strategic position seems paradoxically to have been enhanced by the GWOT. South Asia teetered dangerously close to nuclear conflagration shortly after both India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in May 1998, first in Pakistan's spring 1999 Kargil incursion, from which the Clinton administration forced prompt Pakistani withdrawal (resulting in the fall of the democratically elected if otherwise problematic Nawaz Sharif regime), then in the even more portentous mobilization of some one million troops in response to the December 2001 assassination of New Delhi parliamentarians by terrorists originating from the Lashkar e Toiba and Jaish e Mohammed gangs headquartered in Pakistan. In the context of the crushing U.S. attack on the Taliban regime in fall 2001, Musharaff felt constrained to throw his support to the GWOT, which in combination with the administration's pursuit of the Indian-American détente initiated in the last year of the Clinton administration and early renunciation of the post-nuclear sanctions brought the Americans into a positive relationship with both rivals for the first time in many years. The administration has since managed to maintain a delicate balance between the two, offsetting New Delhi's outrage over the designation of Pakistan as a "major non-NATO ally" with "next steps in the strategic partnership" (NSSP) and a nuclear cooperation package for India designed to give that country a legitimate position in the nuclear "club."

Meanwhile, though low-level insurgency continues, the situation in Kashmir has also improved, particularly after Musharaff began to monitor his side of the Line of

Control to interdict terrorist gangs more effectively, followed by the historic 2003 Vajpayee-Musharaff summit initiating bilateral talks. Since 2004 there have been several summit meetings between India and Pakistan and a series of composite dialogues concerning the Kashmir dispute as well as seven other important bilateral issues. The main problem attached to the recent Indo-American nuclear deal (if it is finally approved by Congress) is the lingering question of the adequacy of the safeguards designed to prevent the program from facilitating nuclear weapon development, thereby stimulating Indo-Pak (and Indo-Chinese) strategic arms races. Suspicions on this score are aroused by the otherwise pervasive Bush emphasis on military aid as well as his long-standing interest in making bilateral arrangements to balance China. In Central Asia as well, the U.S. attack on the Taliban provided a useful pretext to acquire basing rights in countries boasting rich sub-surface energy resources bordering both Russia and China in which the U.S. has had no previous presence. The American military intrusion was initially welcomed, though both Russia and China already have competing interests in the host republics. But the administration's January 2004 shift from its vain search for WMDs to the expansion of democracy as a foreign policy legitimating rationale has complicated the relationship with these post-Soviet dictatorships, and Washington's motives have been further muddled by its avid interest in oil and pipeline projects, as manifest in the recent visit to the region by Vice President Cheney. Thus the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) asked Washington in 2005 to set a date for evacuation of its bases.

With regard to security, the American mantra since 9/11 has of course been GWOT, though as we have noted this rhetoric masks a second agenda, to forestall the emergence of any peer competitor to American hegemony. The form of random terrorism by loosely organized, fanatically committed groups that spawned the terrorist attacks on 9/11 has emerged primarily in the Southeast and South Asian theaters, and in no case has an existing government been found to have been sufficiently complicit to justify another application of the Bush Doctrine. In Northeast Asia, U.S. security policy has focused almost exclusively on the DPRK, against which GWOT rhetoric and consideration of "regime change" have polarized relations, causing South Korea subtly to distance itself from its ally and pushing Japan into an isolated position while eliciting little more than shrill invective from Pyongyang. Southeast Asian Islam has been conventionally deemed politically moderate and the indigenous regimes have preferred not to polarize relations, either with domestic constituents via the GWOT or with their booming neighbor to the north. Aside from bilateral cooperation to strengthen anti-terrorist measures the administration has resorted to ad hoc multilateralism via the PSI and RMSI, as noted above. In Asia the PSI, conducted by what is clearly a "coalition of the willing" (neither South Korea nor China are actively involved), seems chiefly designed to mobilize support to blockade North Korean nuclear proliferation. An Asian offspring of the PSI, the RMSI, has focused since 2004 on the proliferation of piracy around the Straits of

Malacca, a narrow passageway (only 1.5 miles at its chokepoint) through which most of Northeast Asia's energy supply passes. Neither of these organizations seems to have been spectacularly effective, though a definitive verdict would of course be premature: Malaysia has been particularly sensitive about the infringement of sovereignty American Strait protection would entail, and there has been hesitancy among all but Singapore lest high-profile U.S. leadership make the area a target of terrorist attack rather than protecting it.

With regard to economic development, American policy has shifted since the Cold War from a "hegemonic stability" pattern of targeted developmental aid and open American markets in exchange for anti-communist political solidarity to the virtual disappearance of American developmental aid and promotion of open markets and human rights in step with U.S. commercial interests. Although substantial progress towards open regionalism was achieved in the 1990s, the resolution of the Asian financial crisis by the IMF disappointed many Asians, and neither the WTO nor APEC have made much progress since the WTO conference collapsed in Seattle. This seems to have resulted in the devolution of regional leadership to newly-established all-Asian multilateral fora such as ASEAN3 (Japan, Korea, China), the ASEAN1 FTA, the annual Asian Summits, and the SCO (to which India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia have just been added as observers), while American economic initiative has dissipated in a series of bilateral FTA deals.

Conclusions

Recent changes in American Asia policy have left many skeletal elements intact: the hub-and-spokes security system, maintaining a delicate balance between irreconcilable adversaries in North and South Korea, China and Taiwan, Pakistan and India, continuing emphasis on the expansion of democracy and open markets. New since 9/11 are the strong focus on military coercion (preferably via threat, potentially via application of force), the Bush Doctrine of preemptive or preventive war, and the strong moral tone, both in the rhetorical packaging and the disdain for diplomatic niceties, which in turn inspires a will to decide issues of war or peace unilaterally or with ad hoc support, and a tendency to invoke one set of (say, counter-proliferation) policies with regard to "the good guys" (allies) and quite a different set in the case of the "bad." This new look in American foreign policy, much of it stylistic rather than substantive (e.g., while previous administrations defined U.S.-Asian strategy as the prevention of any single power from gaining regional hegemony, the Bush administration has since 2002 defined it as preventing any nation from becoming powerful enough to challenge U.S. hegemony – a purely semantic distinction given the balance of power), though not jibing too well with "Asian values," is not without its success stories. The GWOT seems to have most dramatically improved the situation in South Asia, precipitating "regime change" in one problematic country (Afghanistan) and helping to mediate the old Kashmir imbroglio by and Indo-Pak

relations generally by more fully engaging American power and prestige in these issues. In Central Asia, too, the GWOT has created new strategic opportunities for Washington. In Southeast Asia, the result has been more mixed, owing to a combination of a widespread Southeast Asian preference for peaceful, nonintrusive solutions and an active if subtle rivalry from China, which has offered leadership in the area of international political economy largely vacated by the U.S. In Northeast Asia the Bush doctrine seems to have been almost completely flummoxed by a situation in which force can neither be safely applied nor credibly threatened, while the administration adamantly refuses to resort to positive incentives without iron-clad guarantees of compliance.

It is difficult to generalize about such a mixed picture. Without at all denying the essential importance of efforts to prevent terrorism, it seems that the administration needs more than the GWOT to provide inspiring regional leadership in competition with multilateral efforts aimed at growth and mutual economic benefit. In the absence of such leadership the region's collective identity may be transitioning via such multilateral groupings as SCO or the APT to a more exclusively Asian regional self-concept. Terrorism, at least the way the administration has defined it, is basically a negative issue involving diligent military and police efforts, which are perhaps more usefully engaged in a less public way. Raising the GWOT to the political level admittedly seems to help win elections in the United States, but in an international, interdenominational context the issue can lead to misunderstandings, particularly when the most appropriate approaches to implementation are still in dispute. In this context GWOT rhetoric lends itself to policies covertly designed (or at least easily confused with) neo-containment policies designed to intimidate or coerce other states not visibly engaged in terrorist-related activities, though they may be objectionable to Washington for other reasons. It may justly be argued that hedging is normal in a dynamic political context in which some countries (and arms budgets) are growing more rapidly than others, and that China also hedges.[4] It is certainly true that China has been spending a large, annually escalating sum on modern weaponry and force modernization and that such behavior may fairly be deemed provocative. But with the conspicuous exception of Taiwan (which it seeks to isolate as a purely domestic issue), China has with its "new security concept" emphasizing "peaceful development" been moving out into the world without engaging in preemptive invasions, competitive base-building or coercive diplomacy. The question is thus not so much which country is hedging so much as which is doing so more effectively and less provocatively.

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[4] Evan S. Medeiros, "Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability," *The Washington Quarterly*, 29: 1 (2005), pp. 145-167.