

EAST ASIA'S RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES UNDER A NEW LEADERSHIP¹

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I. Introduction

1. There is the notion that political succession and leadership change are likely to bring about change in foreign and security policy, as well as bilateral relations with states, organizations, and regions.
2. Because the US remains the ghost in East Asian regionalism, the likely impact of a new leadership in Washington upon its relations with East Asia is a worthy and legitimate topic for academic and policy discussions such as the one we are having today.
3. To what extent a change in leadership in Washington will impact on US relations with East Asia is the focus of this brief presentation.
4. The main argument of this presentation is that even with a new US leadership - whether a Republican or a Democratic administration - US policy towards East Asia will be driven largely by the triangular relationship between the US, Japan, and China. The US is likely to sustain its focus on the bilateral security relationship with Japan, the management of stable relations with China, and the goal of sustaining its beneficial bilateral relations with other East Asian states, including those in ASEAN particularly Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia.
5. East Asia of the East Asia Summit (EAS) is likely to continue being regarded as a work-in-progress that needs to be watched, but not

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significant enough to bother about as far as US policy makers are concerned

II. US Policy towards East Asia

1. During the Cold War, US policy towards East Asia formed part of its strategic competition with the former USSR for global leadership. It was driven by its goal of containing the spread of communism beyond mainland China, North Korea, and the former Indochinese states (now Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Viet Nam), maintaining and strengthening its security relations with Japan for this purpose, keeping its bilateral military alliances with the Philippines and Thailand, and promoting friendly relations with other states in the region.
2. US military presence and commitment in East Asia is seen as the cornerstone of the region's security and stability which provided the environmental condition for peace and prosperity and enabled the economic rise of East Asia (Japan, ASEAN tigers, and China) during the last decades of the Cold War.
3. With the end of the Cold War and the foundation for regional security it engendered, the US remained a critical player in East Asia because of its unparalleled power that could neutralize attempts to alter the regional status quo thereby serving the interest of regional stability.
4. However, the shift in US policy focus since the 9/11 attacks where counter-terrorism became the main thrust and yardstick of its policy, the economic decline of Japan, and the rise of China amidst the crippling Asian financial crisis restructured intra-regional relations in East Asia which impacted on the bilateral relations of the US with the region as a whole. East Asian perceptions that the US and international financial

institutions it controlled did not help the severely affected economies in the region and the beneficial role played by a rising China to stabilize the regional currencies and to stimulate economic recovery contributed much to improved relations among the East Asian states and a decline in US influence in the region. New East Asian nationalism particularly in China as well as in American allies Japan and South Korea also contributed to a diminished US influence in the region.

5. Attempts on the part of ASEAN public intellectuals and policy advocates to persuade the US to participate in the emerging East Asian regionalism centered on the East Asia Summit have yet to reach receptive ears in Washington, including among strategic thinkers associated with the Democratic Party and others not so closely tied to either political party. These policy advocates in the US fail to appreciate (i) the value of the personal attendance by either the US President or the Secretary of State in key ASEAN and East Asian events, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), or the bilateral dialogue between ASEAN and the US; (ii) the importance for the US to be present and participating in the evolving regional security architecture of the EAS by acceding to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC); and (iii) the implication for US core interests of the strong attraction to and role increasingly being played by China in this evolving regionalism which could mean an exclusion of the US from the evolving East Asian security architecture.

III. New US Leadership and Implications for East Asia

1. An idea of what a new US leadership portends for East Asia's relations with the US might be had with succinct answers to the following questions:
 - 1.1 What have the presidential candidates in the US said about their views regarding US relations with East Asia?

- 1.2 What do East Asians seek from a new US leadership in terms of US relations with East Asia?
 - 1.3 What has been America's track record in terms of its self-definition of its role in East Asia?
 - 1.4 Are these likely to produce material change in US relations with East Asia?
2. It is highly likely that however these questions are responded to, US relations with East Asia even after the 2008 US presidential elections would be shaped largely by (i) the triangular relationship between the US, Japan, and China; (ii) the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, and (iii) by US calculation of the direction East Asia regionalism will take.
 3. The triangular relationship between the US, Japan, and China will be shaped by the structure of regional and global power with spaces for cooperation *a-la* the neorealist view. Competition for regional leadership between China and Japan, or between China and the US is not likely to come to an end even with a new US leadership in Washington. However, because a stable regional and global environment is critical for China's successful peaceful development, China is unlikely to rock the regional environmental boat. A new leadership in Washington seeking to reverse the disastrous consequences of the Bush administration's Iraq War and related issues would spend time to sort out problems in Iraq, Iran, and the larger Middle East and would most likely not spend enough time to craft a new East Asia policy. One other factor that is important in this regard is the perception that East Asia is not such a problem for US policy, so "if it ain't broke why fix it?"

4. The nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula appears to be managed relatively adequately by the Six Party Talks. A new US administration would continue have a keen interest in this issue and is likely to respond to new developments on the Peninsula.
5. The US calculation on the likely direction of East Asia regionalism will inform its East Asia policy. So far, some of the most serious challenges to East Asia regionalism such as competition for regional leadership between China and Japan which the regional structure of power is likely to sustain, historical animosities in Northeast Asia that refuse to go away, an ASEAN that continues to behave in the usual fashion despite Bali Concord II and because of a Charter that does not command respect and credibility for the grouping, etc. do not lend confidence that it is headed for success. In this sense, the US might continue to think that East Asia regionalism is “much ado about nothing”, or so much “sound and fury” but nothing else besides.

IV. Concluding Remarks

1. That said, this writer is of the view that it is in the interest of East Asia and the US to improve their relations with each other. The US has many friends in East Asia; there are still many East Asians that remain uncertain about their future with a fully risen China and would feel less insecure were the US be a part of the evolving regional security architecture; and US interest would not be served by an East Asian security architecture where it is absent.
2. However, it takes two to tango. While many in East Asia would like to dance with the US, the problem lies in Washington and its bevy of policy advisers who appear to be stuck in old images of international relations driven largely by the West, from either side of the Atlantic. Should they

persist, a rising East Asian regionalism could become fully realized before they wake up to a new reality in this region.