

Regional Overview: Autopilot Is Not Good Enough!

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There is a natural inclination in Washington during a presidential election year to want to put Asia policy on autopilot. Some disturbing trends emerging in the first quarter of the year argue against a policy of benign neglect, however. Concerns about U.S. unilateralism continue to be raised in Asia, not just by America's critics but by its closest allies as well, even as others still question Washington's interest in the region. Apprehensions about significant shifts in American foreign policy, always evident during an election year, also appear to be rising due to uncertainty about the views of both presumed presidential candidates on key issues that impact upon Asian security. Added to this, of course, is the impending transfer of power in Taiwan to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and its implications for cross-Strait, Sino-U.S., and U.S.-Taiwan relations and for broader regional security. Meanwhile, ASEAN's growing disunity is ringing alarm bells, while raising concerns about its broader regional leadership role. Also of concern are the unintended consequences of President Clinton's visit to India and Pakistan. There are, of course, countervailing positive trends and the negative ones are for the most part manageable. But they will require careful attention; autopilot is just not good enough.

U.S. Unilateralism

The prime critic of U.S. unilateralism in Asia continues to be the PRC. Beijing commentators continually proclaim that America's intervention in Kosovo points to an increased U.S. willingness to apply force unilaterally and arbitrarily and outside the confines of the United Nations structure (where China enjoys a Security Council veto). The U.S. move to pursue both theater and national missile defense (TMD/NMD) is also seen by many in Beijing as further evidence of a U.S. move to neutralize or contain China. This is especially true when combined with suspicions (as outlined below) about America's support for Taiwan and the ulterior motives behind President Clinton's overtures toward India. This bodes ill for long-term Sino-U.S. relations.

Sino-Russian pronouncements also continue to warn against the dangers of a unipolar world, although these seem to have been toned down somewhat in the wake of President Yeltsin's early retirement -- it remains unclear how loudly, or even if, President Putin will continue to play this tune. Nonetheless, concerns about U.S. unilateralism continue to provide some of the glue that binds the Russia-China "strategic partnership" together in ways that do not complement American security interests.

More disturbingly, even America's allies seem increasingly worried about Washington taking unilateral actions inimical to their interests without full consultations. At a recent Pacific Forum conference on U.S.-Japan relations, Japanese interlocutors were quite vocal in their concerns about the lack of strategic dialogue on issues of importance to Japan (see PacNet No. 12). Differing views over global economic issues, disagreements over how best to deal with China

(especially but not exclusively regarding Taiwan), and concerns about continued American leadership of the arms control and non-proliferation movements highlight the need for closer consultations in order to keep the alliance firmly on track over time.

Japanese and South Korean officials, while generally pleased with the continuing close and constructive dialogue with Washington on policy initiatives regarding North Korea, remain concerned about future U.S. willingness to engage with Pyongyang, given the increasingly hardline comments emanating from the Republican Congress. They are likewise apprehensive about too hard a policy toward China post-November, regardless of which U.S. presidential candidate wins. Some in the Bush camp are thought to be too sympathetic toward Taiwan and too confrontational toward Beijing. Meanwhile, Vice President Gore's waffling on Chinese accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO) has raised concerns that he might not closely pursue Clinton administration policies, especially on issues related to China and globalization.

I believe that many of these worries have been blown out of proportion. American national interests will dictate a continued attempt to engage China and North Korea although, in the latter case, much will depend on Seoul's continued commitment to its Sunshine Policy and on Pyongyang's behavior. As regards China, it is hard to believe that the phrase "building toward a constructive strategic partnership" will survive the Clinton administration -- nor, in my view, should it. But, if a policy of confrontation develops with China, it will be dictated more by actions taken in Beijing than in Washington. It is Beijing, more so than either the Clinton administration or the presidential candidates, that appears the most confrontational. Nonetheless, the current administration needs to do a better job of talking with, and listening to the concerns of, America's Asian neighbors. Senior campaign staff from both parties need to at least be mindful that our Asian neighbors are listening with great care and some concern.

Taiwan Elections

The biggest challenge to regional stability in the past quarter has been the Taiwan elections or, more accurately, the behavior of many of the involved parties both prior to and after the outcome was known. In the near term, cross-Strait relations seem to have suffered most, especially in light of Beijing's heavy-handed, unsuccessful attempt to influence the outcome. This had made overtures to the new DPP government politically difficult.

The good news is that, since the election, Beijing has refrained from making matters worse. "We have no choice, we must learn to deal with Chen Shui-bian" was a common refrain during my own post-election discussions with Chinese officials and security analysts, who also acknowledge that "even Chen Shui-bian is an improvement over Lee Teng-hui." (see PacNet No. 13.) President-elect Chen is waving olive branches in Beijing's direction. However, both sides have limited flexibility and neither side seems quite sure how best to proceed.

One thing is clear; future progress in cross-Strait relations will require a new formula. Leaders in Beijing are now being forced to confront the reality that almost everyone in Taiwan has long recognized; namely, that "one country, two systems" -- the formula used to incorporate Hong Kong and Macau back into the mainland -- will never work for Taiwan. What is needed now is

a new construct that permits Beijing's "one-China" policy and Taipei's quest for negotiation equality or even "special state-to-state" relations to coexist.

Once again the U.S. is caught in the middle. Some Chinese believe that Washington (and Lee Teng-hui) wanted a DPP victory, even though this complicates U.S. relations with Taipei almost as much as it does with Beijing. China is publicly warning Washington not to meddle in China's internal affairs (i.e., don't sell arms to Taiwan or approve the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act) while at the same time pleading with Washington to "keep the DPP in line," which sounds like the ultimate form of meddling. Washington wisely is calling on both sides to exercise restraint, advising against any unilateral change in the status quo (i.e., no declaration of independence from Taiwan and no use of force by the Mainland). A less ambiguous American statement of support to Taiwan might embolden the more radical DPP elements that Chen has thus far held in check and further undermine Sino-U.S. relations and should thus be avoided.

ASEAN Unity

Voices continue to be raised about ASEAN's ability to play a leadership role in East Asia or even to get its own house in order (see PacNet No. 9). This has manifested itself most directly in ASEAN's dealing with continuing tensions in the South China Sea. ASEAN has struggled to find agreement within itself, much less with other claimants, on devising a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. What's worse, some members are openly complaining that others among them have failed to live up to the long-standing ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea -- Malaysia is most frequently singled out. As one ASEAN participant at a recent Pacific Forum conference on the South China Sea noted, "how can we expect China or others to honor their pledge to respect the ASEAN Declaration when ASEAN members are increasingly ignoring it." Senior ASEAN statesmen, such as former Philippine National Security Advisor Jose Almonte, have made impassioned pleas for ASEAN to speak with one voice on this issue (see PacNet No. 11).

Many had predicted that ASEAN's expansion in recent years from six to ten members would inevitably affect its unity and effectiveness. Few, if any, foresaw that growing schisms within the original members would be the greater problem. Tears in ASEAN's fabric have been caused by other factors as well: disagreement over who should fill the leadership vacuum caused by Indonesia's internal turmoil over the past several years (Dr. Mahathir saw himself as the logical candidate but few others did); the Asian financial crisis, especially the impact disruptions in one state have on the economic well-being of others; the growing debate over what constitutes "interference in internal affairs," with criticisms of Dr. Mahathir's handling of the Anwar trial being one of many cases in point; and disagreements on how best to deal with growing Chinese assertiveness; to cite but a few.

Added to these and to traditional concerns about "haves versus have-nots" and "continental versus littoral" outlooks within ASEAN is a potentially new divisive break between democratic societies and those considerably less so, or even outright undemocratic. Since no one is more religious than the newly converted, we can expect to see Indonesia speak out more forcefully on the need for democratic reform throughout the region. This was already evident at a recent workshop on Indonesia's Future Challenges sponsored by the non-governmental Council for

Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) in Jakarta. That regional scholars and officials could be invited to an ASEAN state to discuss its own internal affairs was already a dramatic departure from previous norms. The candor that permeated the discussions shows the vigor with which democracy has taken hold. However, the meeting also underscored just how fragile Indonesia's new political system is and the depth and extent of current and future challenges to this pivotal ASEAN state.

Getting ASEAN's house in order is a task that its members alone can achieve. The United States and others must provide full backing for such efforts, however, and must be especially supportive and patient toward Indonesia's efforts to bring about simultaneous political and economic reform while still holding the Indonesian state together. Indonesia's political good health seems an essential prerequisite to a revitalized ASEAN.

President Clinton's Trip to South Asia

Also of concern are the unintended consequences of President Clinton's visit in late March to India and Pakistan. I will leave it to others to explain why, from a South Asia perspective, the trip was or was not beneficial to U.S. national security interests. But the visit raises some concerns for East Asia, if not globally.

Shortly after India's May 1998 nuclear tests, Indian officials predicted that the West's protests would be short-lived and that Washington would soon come around to accepting India's *de facto* entry into the world's nuclear club. Mr. Clinton's visit has proven them right. This could send a dangerous signal to other nuclear wannabes that going nuclear may be a low cost method of gaining greater international attention if not respect. Pyongyang no doubt watched the visit with a certain amount of interest.

The visit to Pakistan also sent the message that America was willing to turn a blind eye toward the use of military coups as a means of removing inefficient or corrupt (even if democratically elected) governments. What kind of signal does that send to the armed forces in countries like the Philippines and Indonesia, where democratically elected governments are struggling?

True, President Clinton was openly critical of Pakistan's coup and both India and Pakistan's nuclear aspirations, but the symbolism of the visit was more powerful than his recriminating words, especially since the visit did not result in significant concession on nuclear issues or a promised date certain for a resumption of civilian rule in Islamabad.

Clinton's four-day visit to India (as opposed to his five-hour stopover in Pakistan) is also being heralded as the beginning of a strategic shift toward India and away from Washington's long-standing Cold War ally, Pakistan. Any shift in basic relations makes other long-term allies nervous, especially if Washington does not better define the nature of its South Asia relationships. The view from China, especially among leaders who tend to view the world in zero-sum terms -- and that's just about all of them -- is that U.S. overtures ("strategic shift") toward India are aimed at further containing China.

None of this argues against the overall wisdom of better U.S. relations with either India or Pakistan. But the downside of this South Asia initiative needs to be recognized and dealt with effectively in order to prevent or at least limit the negative consequences elsewhere in the world.

Now for some Good News!

This is not to say that all is gloom and doom in Asia. As this quarter's dozen thoughtful reviews of the region's key bilateral relationships document, there is plenty of good news and there are positive trends and developments as well. The U.S. and China are at least on speaking terms again; even military-to-military contacts have resumed. While Sino-Russian relations continue to display anti-Western overtures, it appears that President Putin is less eager than his predecessor to magnify this tendency.

America's alliance relations also remain strong; even the rocky U.S.-Philippine alliance has progressed with the resumption of the "Balikatan" joint exercise for the first time since 1995. The sudden change in Japanese leadership a few days after this quarter's close, brought about by Prime Minister Obuchi's incapacitating stroke, has done little to change the positive direction in Japan's relationships with all its neighbors while quietly extolling one of the many virtues of democracies; namely, the peaceful, relatively uneventful transition of power.

Meanwhile, ASEAN officials recognize the problems and challenges ahead in rebuilding ASEAN unity and reestablishing ASEAN leadership and appear committed to taking on this challenge. Developing (and observing) a unified ASEAN Code of Conduct for the South China Sea is another way to build and demonstrate ASEAN unity.

The challenge for the U.S. -- for the Clinton administration, for the Congress, and for both presidential candidates and their teams of advisors -- is to listen more intensely to our Asian allies and avoid partisan bickering over major foreign policy and national security interests. More strategic dialogue is needed; simply putting U.S. Asia policy on autopilot will not work this year.

Regional Chronology January - March 2000

Jan. 1, 2000: Vladimir Putin becomes acting Russian President following Boris Yeltsin's surprise New Year's Eve resignation.

Jan. 10-15, 2000: Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi embarks on a Southeast Asia tour, visiting Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia.

Jan. 17-18, 2000: Acting President Putin and Defense Minister Sergeev meet with PRC Defense Minister Chi Haotian in Moscow.

Jan. 19, 2000: The U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security turns 40 amid Japanese calls for "more ownership" of the alliance for Japan.

Jan. 19-23, 2000: Chi Haotian visits the ROK, the first such visit by a PRC defense chief since the Korean War.

Jan. 22-28, 2000: U.S.-DPRK talks in Berlin led by Ambassador Charles Kartman and Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan, reach an agreement regarding a high-level DPRK delegation visit to the U.S.

Jan. 24, 2000: PRC Lt. Gen. Xiong Guangkai visits Washington, the first high-level U.S.-PRC military contacts since the accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.

Jan. 28, 2000: PRC Vice Minister Qian Qichen states, “. . . Taiwan independence can only mean war between the two sides of the (Taiwan) Strait . . .”

Jan. 28, 2000: U.S.-Philippine five-week joint exercise “Balikatan” begins in the Philippines, involving 5,000 forces.

Feb. 1, 2000: The U.S. House of Representatives votes 341-70 in approval of the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act.

Feb. 1, 2000: U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meets in Seoul.

Feb. 8, 2000: U.S. and ROK officials gather in Hawaii to discuss missile development issues.

Feb. 9, 2000: Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov visits the DPRK and signs a new friendship treaty with the Kim Jong-il government.

Feb. 10, 2000: Indonesian President Wahid meets with ROK President Kim Dae-jung.

Feb. 11, 2000: The first of two new Chinese Russian-built Sovremenny class destroyers sails through the Taiwan Strait while en route to its home port in the East China Sea.

Feb. 11, 2000: Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi and Foreign Minister Kono meet with Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov in Tokyo.

Feb. 13-17, 2000: Admiral Kosei Fujita, Commander, Japanese Navy, makes an official visit to Russia.

Feb. 15-18, 2000: A high level delegation led by U.S. Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott embarks on two days of talks in Tokyo to be followed by a visit to Beijing to urge restraint in dealing with the presidential elections in Taiwan.

Feb. 16, 2000: Japan decides to work with the PRC, the ROK, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore on maritime cooperation to prevent piracy.

Feb. 19-20, 2000: Foreign Minister Kono travels to Washington seeking compromises on host nation support, deregulation, and other issues.

Feb. 21, 2000: Beijing issues a White Paper that broadens the circumstances under which the PRC would use force against Taiwan.

Feb. 21, 2000: Indonesia and the DPRK sign a trade and investment treaty.

Feb. 22-26, 2000: Australian diplomats visit the DPRK for the first high level talks since 1975.

Feb. 26-27, 2000: Japan, the ROK, and the PRC sign a joint communiqué on environmental protection.

Feb. 27, 2000: Japan and China sign a fisheries agreement.

Feb. 29, 2000: PRC Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan visits Moscow for talks with his Russian counterpart, Igor Ivanov.

Feb. 26-30, 2000: Admiral Dennis Blair, commander-in-chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, visits Beijing and meets with top level civilian and military leaders.

Mar. 7-15, 2000: North Korea and the U.S. hold preliminary talks in New York regarding the removal of the DPRK from the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Mar. 8, 2000: President Clinton submits China Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) legislation to Congress.

Mar. 8, 2000: Japan and the U.S. agree to establish a joint arms control and disarmament commission.

Mar. 10, 2000: U.S. Secretary of Defense Cohen begins a four-country Asian tour, which includes stops in Hong Kong, Vietnam, Japan, and South Korea.

Mar. 13, 2000: ROK Foreign Minister Lee Joung-binn and Secretary Albright meet in Washington.

Mar. 16, 2000: UN Ambassador Richard Holbrook travels to Japan to discuss bilateral approaches to UN reform.

Mar. 18-22, 2000: DPRK Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun visits the PRC, meeting with Prime Minister Zhu and others.

Mar. 18, 2000: Taiwan elects Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as its next president.

Mar. 20-21, 2000: Ambassador Holbrook visits Beijing and urges restraint in the wake of the DPP victory in Taiwan.

Mar. 20-24, 2000: President Clinton begins a four-day visit to India.

Mar. 22, 2000: Former U.S. Congressman Lee Hamilton visits Taiwan as a presidential envoy to meet with President-elect Chen.

Mar. 23, 2000: Secretary of State Madeleine Albright condemns China's "widespread denial" of basic freedom in a speech to the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva.

Mar. 25, 2000: President Clinton conducts a five-hour visit to Pakistan.

Mar. 26, 2000: The Russian Federation elects Vladimir Putin President.

Mar. 29, 2000: National Security Advisor Samuel Berger meets with leaders in Beijing.

Mar. 30, 2000: TCOG meets in Tokyo; "Shanghai Five" (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) defense ministers meet in Kazakhstan.