



Regional Overview: **Seattle Wake-Up Call: Will Washington Answer?**

by Ralph A. Cossa

The city of Seattle seems destined to go down in history as the site of one of President Clinton's finest hours in his administration's management of U.S. relations with Asia . . . and as the venue of one of America's worst moments as well.

Unfortunately, the finest hour came more than six years ago, when Mr. Clinton hosted the first ever Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Meetings, raising hopes that his administration would be focusing its attentions constructively on the Asia-Pacific region. However, the smiles and kudos in abundance in Seattle in 1993 have been transformed into scowls and complaints in the wake of the recent Seattle mis-adventure, the ill-fated World Trade Organization meeting, which ended in disarray both inside the conference halls and out on the streets as the past quarter and old millennium were fast drawing to a close.

As we noted last quarter, the schisms evident in the August 1999 APEC meeting in Auckland did not bode well for Seattle. Where many once saw APEC as a force for inspiring or instigating change in the global economic arena, this year it was a bellwether of things to come. While the embarrassment was global, many Asian countries--including some of our closest allies within ASEAN--were particularly upset by America's handling of the meeting; Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister (and WTO heir-apparent) Supachai Panitchpakdi could only hope that Seattle would serve as a "wake-up call for the West that the interests of developing countries must be seriously taken into account."

As Sheldon Simon points out, the failure of the Seattle WTO meeting was just one of a series of events that signaled a downward slide in U.S.-ASEAN relations this past quarter. Nationalistic reactions to the Visiting Forces Agreement in the Philippines and U.S. pressure on the Indonesian government to hold its military accountable for Timorese atrocities created frictions for Washington in other ASEAN capitals as well. (The latter could prove counterproductive. Of greater concern today is the Indonesian military's future cohesion and ability to effectively deal with a myriad of internal security issues within present constitutional constraints.)

Meanwhile, just as the U.S. Senate's earlier rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) had raised questions about America's desire and ability to lead the global non-proliferation movement, so to has Seattle raised questions about America's economic leadership. This has led many in Asia to conclude that there is little to be gained from serious negotiation with the current lame duck administration. The one consolation: those who keep lamenting about America's unilateral control over global events as a result of its "sole superpower" status should rest a bit easier.

Two of the states most concerned about perceived American unilateral tendencies, China and Russia, have shown little indication of resting easy, however. This was very much in evidence during then-President Boris Yeltsin's visit to China in early December when he once again proclaimed that "a multipolar world is the basis of everything. It will be as we agreed with Jiang Zemin. We will dictate how to live, not [Clinton]." Toby Trister Gati predicts that this strong nationalistic undercurrent and commitment to a strong Sino-Russian strategic partnership will continue under Yeltsin's chosen successor, Vladimir Putin, although she sees some hope of a less contentious U.S.-Russia relationship if Putin, as expected, wins the March Presidential election.

Yu Bin agrees that the China-Russia strategic partnership will continue to deepen under the new Russian leadership as it has during the past quarter, which marked the 50th anniversary of Sino-Russian/Soviet relations (as well as China's 50th anniversary as a communist state). He believes that many in the West underestimate the depth and breadth of the evolving partnership, one that appears destined to deepen further given their mutual concern over "unrestrained and unopposed" U.S. power. (This, despite the fact that both must realize that neither can afford an openly antagonistic relationship with Washington.)

The third leg of this strategic triangle, U.S.-China relations, remains the most unstable. True, some progress has been made in smoothing over contentious issues during the past quarter: the U.S. and China finally agreed to the terms of China's accession into the WTO and settled the compensation issue relating to damage to their respective diplomatic properties (which has been a thorn in both sides since the May accidental bombing of China's Belgrade Embassy and its violent aftermath). However, as Bonnie Glaser points out, this progress has been made amidst persisting deep suspicions on both sides.

The U.S. Congressional debate over granting China permanent normal trade relations (as called for under the WTO agreement) is likely to be even more contentious during an American election year, especially if attempts are made to tie this legislation to the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act. And, while Washington is eager to move beyond Kosovo-induced frictions, Beijing is still calling for a "satisfactory account" of the incident and punishment of the "perpetrators." As long as China continues to use this tragic incident as a vehicle to promote Chinese nationalism and anti-Western sentiments, real rapprochement between the two sides will be impossible.

The news has not been all bad for the U.S. during the past quarter. Relations with its two most important Northeast Asia security allies, Japan and the Republic of Korea, remain on steady ground, as the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) process has helped to keep all three countries generally in synch when dealing with their most contentious common concern, North Korea. As I have argued elsewhere, this bodes well for the development of a "virtual alliance" among the three states, characterized by strengthened U.S. bilateral ties with the ROK and Japan and a closer, more trusting, cooperative relationship between Tokyo and Seoul.

Michael Green notes that, in terms of the U.S.-Japan leg, there are actually unexpected signs of strength in the bilateral relationship. Witness a recent *Yomiuri Shimbun*/Gallop poll which, for the first time in 12 years, showed that more than 50 percent of respondents in both countries believe bilateral relations are good. An even greater percentage expressed faith in the

credibility of the U.S.-Japan security alliance. Some rough spots loom on the horizon, however, both over the working out of the fine details regarding Okinawan base issues and over the impending debate about Japan's funding support to U.S. bases. The U.S. could, of course, take the moral high road and agree in advance to a symbolic one percent cut in what the U.S. calls host nation support in recognition of Japan's economic difficulties (and our own continuing boom), but what are the odds of the Pentagon being that forward thinking?

There is another trend in Washington that is sure to put future strains on the U.S.-Japan Alliance. The Senate's October rejection of the CTBT and the administration's treats to abandon the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty if Russia does not agree to significant revisions are ringing alarm bells in Tokyo, where the commitment to nuclear disarmament and arms control runs deep. Vigorous U.S. pursuit of national missile defense (NMD) -- which is seen as undermining the ABM Treaty -- could threaten Japanese support for the less contentious (to them) theater missile defense (TMD) program. A growing tendency to lump the TMD and NMD programs together is further complicating Washington's and Tokyo's relations with both Moscow and Beijing, as well as potentially with one another.

Meanwhile, U.S.-Korea relations, according to David Brown, have never been better. Both sides have done amazingly well in defusing several potentially explosive issues: revelations regarding the apparent killing of Korean civilians by American soldiers during the early, confused days of the Korean War; controversy over the reported use of Agent Orange in the DMZ in the late 1960s; disagreements over the ROK's desire to develop an enhanced offensive missile capability that could exceed Missile Technology Control Regime range limitations; and such old stand-by issues as the U.S.-ROK status of forces agreement and the U.S. military's use of prime Seoul real estate. In addition, trade disagreements were generally submerged in the broader multilateral WTO negotiations. However, this is no time for complacency. Any of the above issues could turn ugly and the current coincidence of views regarding pursuit of a generally soft approach toward North Korea could change, either due to domestic politics in either country or as a result of future North Korean behavior.

The good news is that Pyongyang has been on its best behavior (relatively speaking), as North Korea apparently attempts to mend diplomatic fences and forge new relationships worldwide. As Aidan Foster-Carter notes in his guest commentary on DPRK relations, however, progress in this area is expected to be limited and slow and there are no signs yet that the leopard has truly changed its spots. While Pyongyang may be testing the diplomatic waters, opening ties does not equate to opening up in a deeper sense. Nonetheless, there is at least some hope that North Korea's current diplomatic activities represent a small step in the right direction.

Nowhere has North Korea's diplomatic activity been more dramatic in the past quarter than with Japan. As Victor Cha notes, steadily improved Japan-ROK relations, and President Kim Dae-jung's continued encouragement for Japan (and others) to move more aggressively in improving relations with Pyongyang, have helped open the door for the most recent round of cautious diplomacy. The December visit by a suprapartisan delegation headed by former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama is a small but significant step down what is sure to remain a long and torturous road toward eventual normalization of relations. Japan and North Korea have been down this path three times before, however, and there is no reason yet for exuberant optimism. For the time being, however, at least there is hope.

There continues to be good and bad news for Japan when it comes to relations with its two larger neighbors as well. While the rest of the world seemed to breath a collective sigh of relief when Mr. Yeltsin suddenly announced his resignation on New Year's Eve, Joseph Ferguson points out that this was seen as one more (final?) nail in the coffin as far as Tokyo's dying hopes of achieving some kind of peace agreement with Moscow during the year 2000 are concerned. Acting President Vladimir Putin's strong pronouncement that he would not allow a fragmentation of Russia under his rule, while directed at Chechnya, no doubt also signals a lack of flexibility on the Northern Territories issue, the treaty agreement's primary stumbling block.

Japan-China relations, meanwhile, remained generally cordial, with both sides pursuing diplomatic initiatives aimed at improving their always-difficult relationship. But, as James Przystup points out, there are growing suspicions in some quarters in Japan that Beijing's recent "softening" is part of a larger Chinese strategy to involve Tokyo in its efforts to constrain the U.S. while fostering multilateralism. This is a game that Tokyo will be careful not to play, even as it seeks the obvious benefits of better ties with Beijing.

The most potentially significant Sino-Japanese contact of the past quarter was the unprecedented trilateral breakfast meeting in Manila involving Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, Premier Zhu Rongji, and President Kim Dae-jung. This meeting--and the ASEAN Plus Three gathering that brought the three leaders together--was highly touted in the Asian and international media, but largely ignored by the U.S. press; Americans apparently being too preoccupied with Thanksgiving weekend football results to pay it much heed.

The three-way meeting was apparently an Obuchi initiative that Kim enthusiastically embraced and Zhu reluctantly agreed to as long as it was not designated a summit and covered economic issues only, the latter caveat ostensibly to keep Korean Peninsula developments off the table in order to avoid further stressing Beijing's bilateral ties with Pyongyang. Despite its unofficial nature and limited economic agenda, the meeting marked a significant step forward in establishing trilateral cooperation among these three Northeast Asian states. I have long argued that a similar breakfast meeting approach, in the shadows of either an APEC or ASEAN Regional Forum meeting, and including the U.S., Russia, and perhaps Mongolia and Canada as well, could serve as a stimulus for a broader Northeast Asian security dialogue forum.

The Manila minilateral non-summit also served to underscore the steady progress in China-ROK relations over the past quarter. Scott Snyder notes that the ROK and PRC foreign ministers decided to take "shirt sleeve diplomacy" (as previously practiced by President Yeltsin and Prime Minister Hashimoto) to the next level, engaging in "spa diplomacy" during Tang Jiaxuan's December visit to Seoul. Tang also visited Pyongyang earlier in the quarter (presumably fully clothed), demonstrating some Chinese shuttle diplomacy aimed at carefully balancing PRC relations with both Koreas. Beijing also welcomed the return of South Korean direct foreign investment (and tourists) to China, while relaxing visa restrictions in order to make Chinese visits to the ROK easier as well.

For its part, Seoul has aggressively pursued improved relations with Beijing. However, President Kim has wisely avoided being drawn into any zero-sum game while simultaneously improving relations both with Beijing and Washington (as well as with Tokyo and Moscow). In this light, I would argue that steadily improving Sino-Korean relations serve American security interests as well. I would further maintain that it is America's continued security commitment with

South Korea today (and with a reunified Korea at some unpredictable date in the future) that makes it possible for Seoul to simultaneously seek improved relations with all its neighbors, rather than having to choose sides to avoid being swallowed up.

China has also worked hard at improving its various bilateral relationships throughout Southeast Asia during the last period, as evidenced by Premier Zhu's four nation swing through ASEAN in conjunction with the ASEAN Plus Three meeting. Carlyle Thayer points out that, while concern over Chinese intentions and inflexibility in the South China Sea remain in the back of most ASEAN minds, Zhu's trip must nonetheless be deemed a success as China reinforced its image as a major power who cares about Southeast Asia.

Unfortunately for China (and for the rest of us), the bilateral relationship that matters most in terms of immediate regional security saw no improvement in the last quarter, as continued disagreements over "special state-to-state" relations kept China-Taiwan tensions high. President Jiang added some heat during the Macao handover ceremony in December when he proclaimed that "the Chinese government and people are confident and capable of an early settlement of the Taiwan question and complete national reunification." Fortunately, both sides have refrained from overly harsh rhetoric in recent months, and Beijing thus far has avoided the type of heavy-handed actions (including missile launches) that proved so counterproductive in advance of the 1996 Taiwan elections. Nonetheless, there are fears in Beijing (and Washington) that President Lee Teng-hui may have another "shock" in store as the March 2000 Taiwan presidential election draws closer.

My own view is that President Lee will be increasingly preoccupied between now and election day (March 18) with domestic politics -- his number one priority being to keep ruling party defector James Soong from becoming President. The next "shock" is most likely to come if Soong is elected, as the ruling Kuomintang (most likely with Democratic Progressive Party support) will no doubt try to institutionalize Lee's "special state-to-state relations" dictum prior to inauguration day (May 20) to reduce Soong's flexibility in cutting a deal with the Mainland. This could bring a harsh PRC response.

In short, this is no time for complacency or benign neglect when it comes to addressing continuing Asia-Pacific foreign policy challenges. The United States needs to make a concerted effort to recover ground lost as a result of the debacle in Seattle; Washington must convincingly demonstrate its willingness and ability to address or contain some of the negative trends surrounding its bilateral relations with many states in the region. First priority, as always, should go to alliance maintenance, a task made easier in Northeast Asia through the continued effective functioning of the TCOG. Insulating U.S.-China and U.S.-DPRK relations from partisan politics will be even more challenging, especially if Beijing or Pyongyang (or Taipei) takes steps that add fuel to the fire. The big question: will Washington answer the wake-up call?

Regional Chronology

October - December 1999

Oct 1: The People's Republic of China celebrates its 50th anniversary.

Oct 2: U.S. and Russian energy officials sign an agreement on cooperation in the monitoring and safeguarding of nuclear materials.

Oct 3-4: General Henry H. Shelton, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, spends two days meeting with Foreign Ministry, military, and defense officials in Japan.

Oct 5-9: PRC Foreign Minister Tang Jiuquan visits the DPRK.

Oct 13: U.S. Senate votes 48 to 51 against ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Oct 18: Vietnamese Vice Defense Minister Tran Hanh visits his counterpart, Park Yong-ok, in the ROK and the two agree that three ROK warships will travel to Ho Chi Minh City in November.

Oct 20: Russia rejects a U.S. proposal to amend the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.

Oct 20: Indonesian parliament elects Abdurrahman Wahid president.

Oct 21: Indonesian parliament elects Megawati Sukarnoputri vice president.

Oct 23: ROK Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi meet.

Oct 25: Japanese Foreign Minister Kono meets with ROK President Kim Dae-jung in Seoul.

Oct 26-29: Thomas Pickering, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, visits Mongolia and China.

Nov 1: The USS O'Brien moors in Hong Kong, the first U.S. warship to do so since the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade.

Nov 2: Russian President Yeltsin sends President Clinton a warning of "extremely dangerous consequences" if the U.S. proceeds with its antimissile plans.

Nov 4-10: Mongolian Prime Minister Rinchinyamiin Amarjargal makes official visits to the DPRK, China, and the ROK.

Nov 3: Secretaries Albright and Cohen host their Australian counterparts Ministers Downer and Moore in Washington.

Nov 7: Meeting of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) in Washington with representatives from the U.S., ROK, and Japan.

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- Nov 8-15:** Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov visits the DPRK.
- Nov 12:** Indonesian President Wahid meets with President Clinton in Washington.
- Nov 14:** U.S. and Chinese negotiators reach a tentative agreement on China's ascension into the WTO.
- Nov 15:** U.S. CINCPAC Adm. Dennis Blair hosts the Asia-Pacific Chiefs of Defense Conference featuring the heads of the military from 16 Asia Pacific nations.
- Nov 16:** U.S. Special Envoy for the Korean Peninsula Talks, Ambassador Charles Kartman, meets with his DPRK counterpart Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye Gwan in Berlin.
- Nov 17:** Russian President Yeltsin states he will not visit Japan this year, prompting criticism from the Japanese government.
- Nov 19:** U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Kurt Cambell begins a visit to the PRC.
- Nov 22:** China's Premier Zhu visits Malaysia.
- Nov 23:** U.S. Secretary of Defense Cohen and ROK Defense Minister Cho Seong-tae meet in Washington.
- Nov 26-27:** Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji makes official visit to the Philippines.
- Nov 28:** An informal ASEAN leaders' summit gathers in Manila, including meetings with their dialogue partners-Japan, ROK, and China. China declines support of a draft code of conduct for the Spratly Islands.
- Nov 28:** Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi, South Korean President Kim, and Chinese Prime Minister Zhu meet for breakfast in Manila.
- Nov 29:** Philippine President Estrada and South Korean President Kim meet in Manila. President Kim expresses his support for renewed contact between the DPRK and the Philippines.
- Nov 29 – Dec 1:** Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji makes official visit to Singapore.
- Dec 1-3:** A Japanese delegation led by former Prime Minister Murayama visits the DPRK and the two sides agree to resume bilateral negotiations to normalize diplomatic relations.
- Dec 1:** Japanese Foreign Minister Kono and U.S. Secretary of State Albright meet in Seattle in attempt to narrow differences on WTO agenda.
- Dec 1-4:** Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji makes official visit to Vietnam.
- Dec 3:** Indonesian President Wahid visits Beijing on a state visit.

Dec 7: President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea meets with Hong Kong SAR Chief Tung Cheehwa.

Dec 8: President Yeltsin meets with various Chinese leaders in Beijing, including President Jiang.

Dec 9: Joseph W. Prueher, the new U.S. ambassador to the PRC, arrives in Beijing.

Dec 20: Macao reverts to Chinese rule under the 'one country, two systems' arrangement.

Dec 31: President Yeltsin resigns and names Prime Minister Putin as Acting President.