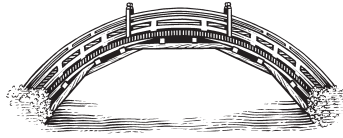


SPECIAL ROUNDTABLE  
Advising the New U.S. President



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*“Our allies may be frustrating at times, but we must give them precedence until China becomes what former deputy secretary of state Bob Zoellick called a ‘responsible stakeholder’—or, as Zoellick suggested, a democracy. Former deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage had it right: to get China right, we have to get Asia right.”*



## Get Asia Right

*Michael Green*

The new president is inheriting a U.S. strategic position in Asia that is stronger than many realize. Polls taken in Japan, China, India, and Korea suggest we are more popular today than four years ago. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that Asians rank the United States number one in the region in terms of “soft power” and believe that U.S. influence in Asia has increased over the past decade. We have both strengthened our alliance ties with Japan and broadened trust and cooperation with China simultaneously for the first time in U.S. history. Moreover, the new president is inheriting an array of important new multilateral mechanisms from the six-party talks to the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue with Australia and Japan and the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Energy and Development.

Nevertheless, we still face major challenges in Asia. It would be a mistake to think that U.S. policy in the region can run on autopilot while the new administration focuses on immediate problems like Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Middle East—that is precisely the mistake that the Bush administration has made over the past year, and as a result the new president has some work to do in shoring up our position in certain areas. And to be candid, as excited as much of the world was about the election of Barack Obama to the presidency, our Asian friends are looking for reassurance from him on some issues that made them nervous during the campaign.

The first task is to set the right tone with North Korea. After North Korea’s October 2006 nuclear test, the UN Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passed a resolution imposing sanctions and promising more to come if Pyongyang did not immediately come into compliance with commitments it made in the September 2005 six-party talks to verifiably dismantle all of its nuclear weapons and programs. But we never implemented any of the

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approved UNSC sanctions or threatened new ones when North Korea balked at implementing denuclearization commitments. Once Pyongyang realized there would be no consequences for delay and deception, the North refused to move at all without new inducements. In the end, we managed to reach an agreement that only covers the North's plutonium facilities at Yongbyon. That is certainly a step forward, but one that would only be credible if the North's declaration on its facilities can be verified. In fact, President Bush made it clear in June that the United States would not go ahead with the final delisting without a credible verification protocol. That condition was all the more important because Pyongyang had successfully excluded from the agreement any measures on its clandestine uranium enrichment program, its existing nuclear weapons, or its dangerous transfer of nuclear know-how to Syria. Yet when North Korea balked and threatened to begin reprocessing or testing again in October, we lifted the sanctions anyway, in exchange for vague commitments to follow up on verification procedures later.

This diplomatic process has done real damage to our credibility with key allies like Japan. It has also taught Pyongyang the wrong lessons. Still, it would be a mistake to give up on the six-party talks at this point. The critical thing will be for the new president to convince Pyongyang that there will be consequences for failure to live up to its commitments just as there will be incentives for denuclearization. Just as important, the new administration will need to do a great deal of reassuring to Japan and South Korea, where thoughtful observers are beginning to question whether the United States is moving to accept a nuclear North Korea as long as proliferation can be reasonably contained. It is not enough for the new president to just state that a nuclear North Korea is unacceptable. Three past presidents have said that and it is now a reality anyway. The new administration needs to take more concrete steps, like revitalizing the U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), enhancing the credibility of our nuclear umbrella in words and deeds, and showing a readiness to use both carrots and sticks to keep the process moving. And the new president should avoid talking about meeting directly with Kim Jong-il at this point, since this would undercut all the reassurance we need to do in the region.

The second thing the new president needs to do is to demonstrate a commitment to building an open and inclusive regional order. Barack Obama's opposition to the KORUS FTA was smart domestic politics, but now it would only weaken our hand in a region where there are competing visions of trade liberalization and most of the scenarios do not include us. Our best future lies in an Asia-Pacific free-trade area centered on APEC.

Fortunately, the next three APEC summits will be in Singapore, Japan, and then the United States. But the new president will have to find a way early on to get his political base behind free trade and to convince the region that we are serious about trans-Pacific economic integration. Key is to also make sure he attends every APEC Summit and that his secretary of state attends every ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting. It is a long trip, but it has to be done (and if the new secretary of state balks, he or she should be reminded that past secretaries of state have on average taken three times as many trips to Europe than Asia, even though the center of international relations is shifting to the East). I do not believe that the new president needs to move quickly on participation in the East Asia Summit, but he may wish to keep options open for the future both by signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and by sending a senior observer to the meetings.

The third thing that is long overdue in our Asia strategy is a sustained engagement of Southeast Asia. The “ASEAN Way” of lowest-common-denominator content in meetings can be frustrating, but there are also new reasons to step up U.S. efforts. One is the reemergence of Indonesia as a strategic heavyweight in the region, and this time one that champions many of the democratic values we share. We also need to find a way to narrow the gap with ASEAN on Burma, where U.S. sanctions and ASEAN engagement have been working at cross purposes. Sanctions are an important part of our toolkit and should be continued, but our overall strategy will not succeed until Burma’s neighbors are using their leverage on the junta as well. China and India are unlikely to take the lead in increasing pressure, but ASEAN members might. First we will need to engage these Southeast Asian countries more seriously, and committing to a regular U.S.-ASEAN summit early on would lay the groundwork for that. ASEAN will insist that Burma attend too, and the new president should agree, since this will only increase the opportunities to put the issue on the table.

Finally, it will be important for the new administration not to ignore the basic power politics of Asia. Barack Obama’s campaign appropriately highlighted new 21st-century transnational challenges such as climate change, and, indeed, we will need to work with China more than any other nation to make progress on that issue. But some of his supporters and advisors have eschewed traditional state-to-state balance of power strategies as irrelevant in today’s world. In Asia, however, these strategies remain highly relevant. Nobody is talking about containing China, but the new president must ensure that his national security team stays focused on continually