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Country Studies

The United States and Asia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter evaluates U.S. policy toward Asia and suggests policy options for the next administration.

MAIN ARGUMENT:

- A new president will inevitably focus first on the Middle East and the war on terrorism and second on North Korea's nuclear weapons, but relations with major powers in Asia are ultimately more important.
- The future of Chinese power is the overriding issue for the U.S., yet policymakers remain ambivalent over optimistic and pessimistic models that stress economic interests and the balance of military power, respectively.
- The constant pressure to address immediate concerns in North Korea and Pakistan will challenge the development of long-term strategy in Asia.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

There is no need for immediate major revision of strategies toward Asia, but a few changes of course could buffer policy against long-term risks:

- Washington would benefit from maintaining the U.S.-Japan alliance and expanding security relations with India while remaining mindful of the need for Pakistani cooperation against the Taliban and al Qaeda.
- Revising U.S. military strategy to rely on air power in the early phase of a war on the Korean Peninsula would allow removal of the U.S. ground forces that provoke negative public sentiment and undercut the basis of the alliance.
- Toning down pressure on Moscow and reducing U.S. involvement in Central Asia may assist in discouraging strategic Russian-Chinese cooperation against Washington.
- Clarifying but limiting plans for defense of Taiwan could reduce chances of Chinese miscalculation in a crisis and limit U.S. liability.

The United States and Asia

Richard K. Betts

The biggest challenges facing the United States in Asia are in the longer term and will come from evolving conditions in the balance of power. The principal unresolved question here is whether (and how) the United States will accommodate the rise of China or strive to keep the prerogatives of primacy in East Asia to which Washington has become accustomed. Although U.S. political leaders may not be forced to confront the question directly for a long time, trends could bring the issue to the fore in the 2013 presidential term—or a catalytic event could do so even sooner.

With few exceptions, the immediate strategic issues are not pressing and can be managed more or less without significant departures from long-standing policies. The exceptions, the two pressing strategic questions on Asia, come from the fringes of the continent: North Korea in the east, where a weak, poor country manages to exert tremendous leverage on the world's only superpower, and Pakistan in the west, where Asia bleeds into the maelstrom of the Middle East. These two nations will inevitably preoccupy official strategists, given that dealing with near-term problems always crowds out long-term planning. As long as nuclear weapons use in these peripheral areas can be prevented, however, relations with the major powers in Asia are ultimately more important.

U.S. strategy for managing the national security aspects of the relationship with Japan—one of the United States' most important allies—does not need revision. A firm U.S. commitment to defend Japan, and Tokyo's subsidization of the basing costs for doing so, should remain the essence of the strategy. The main challenge is to fend off demands that Japan do more to share U.S. military burdens in Asia. Such calls might have made

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sense during the Cold War, given the magnitude of the Soviet threat. Today, however, the material benefits would be outweighed by the political and diplomatic disruption that would follow were Japan to become a militarily “normal” country.

Given its size and new economic dynamism, India should naturally be more important to the United States than it has been in the past. Washington’s approach to dealing with New Delhi also requires no drastic change. Moves to improve relations with India face fewer complications as U.S. relations with Pakistan have worsened. The awkward but viable triangular relationship Washington maintained with New Delhi and Islamabad during the Musharraf government’s cooperation in the war against al Qaeda and the Taliban will become less complicated if the new Pakistani government makes a separate peace with those enemies. In the more hopeful eventuality that Islamabad continues to cooperate on counterterrorism with the United States, there is still reason to move further in U.S.-Indian security relations. If the Pakistani government and army continue to develop the view that India now poses less a threat than does internal decay, state failure, and terrorism, U.S. cooperation with New Delhi will become less of a problem. U.S. policy should strengthen outreach to the moderate middle of Pakistani society and encourage the country’s authorities to focus on domestic stability. Meanwhile, the United States should expand ties with India to the extent that the domestic political situation in India permits. In any case, dealing with Pakistan—seeking renewed support in counterterrorism campaigns and preventing the government’s radicalization or collapse—will be at the top of the new administration’s agenda for the near term.

Russia is regaining importance in the global power game, but Russia’s posture toward Europe is of more concern to the United States than are its dealings with Asia. In regard to Asia, Russia’s significance will depend on whether the country’s relations with China move more decisively toward either opposition or alliance.

China is the dominant concern for U.S. policy and the only potential source of conflict that could lead to major war. Such conflict is by no means inevitable. Developing a strategy to keep the danger low, however, may require modification of U.S. objectives. Conventional wisdom mistakenly relies on projecting the current status quo indefinitely into the future and implicitly assumes that China’s priorities and demands will not change as its power position changes. Few if any rising powers in history have blithely continued to accept indefinitely a status with fewer prerogatives than were exercised by the previously dominant power, and it would be reckless to assume that China will break with precedent. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the United States can strive either to control the strategic equation

in Asia or to reduce the odds of conflict with China. It will be a historically unusual achievement, however, if Washington manages to do both.

The first of the following sections discusses the evolution and implications of the balance of power in Asia. The second section explains why China must be the focus of U.S. strategy and presents contrasting assumptions over what measures will keep China peaceful. The third section looks at potential changes in U.S. security policy toward several parts of the region, and the final section lays out reasons for the United States to adjust in advance to long-term developments rather than coast forward with policies that have succeeded so far.

Context for Strategic Adjustment: System Structure and Trends

Since September 11, U.S. policy in Asia has been dominated by economic, political, and counterterrorism interests but has placed little emphasis on conventional military issues. The economic problems of greatest relevance to U.S. national security policy are the effects of U.S. budget and trade deficits combined with dependence on China to help fund the U.S. debt. The solutions to these problems lie more in U.S. domestic politics and decisions on hard choices at home than in negotiations with Asian powers. Issues of Asian security policy are currently refracted through U.S. preoccupation with political instability, war, and terrorism in the Middle East. U.S. concern with suppressing movements like Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia or the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines is more a matter of the war on terrorism than of U.S. strategy toward Asia.

This distraction from Asia is abetted both by the surface stability of most of the region (apart from North Korea) and by the easing of relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) after September 11. There has been no impetus to force basic reconsideration of strategy in the region east of Pakistan. Questions of how to deal with a full-grown China in the future lie beyond the short-term horizons of the highest level policymakers. Recent elections seem to have reversed trends of worsening relations both between Taipei and Beijing and between Seoul and Washington. Developments in Asia are not likely to force a shift of focus away from the Middle East during the four years of the next U.S. administration—aside from aspects of the Afghanistan-Pakistan imbroglio linking this region to Asia and from the regime in Pyongyang, which continues to fight far above its weight. Distraction from the remainder of Asia while resting on an assumption of continuity, however, is a recipe for surprise. The biggest shocks to U.S. national security policy since