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Between two worlds: U.S. Northeast Asian strategy in transition

by

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*The opinions in this paper are my own, and should not be attributed to the Naval War College, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Between Two Worlds: U.S. Northeast Asian Strategy in Transition

After decades of relative quiescence bordering on inertia, American defense strategy in Asia and the Pacific (especially in Northeast Asia) and the bilateral security alliances underpinning this strategy are on the cusp of far-reaching change. The Bush Administration asserts that it is seeking to disentangle U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy from its Cold War legacies, and there is ample substance in this claim. American preoccupations with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the broader struggle against Islamic radicalism also explain recent policy developments. However, the underlying impulses that motivate major change in U.S. strategy run deeper, reflecting two different (and potentially competing) strains in long-term American defense planning. In the near to mid-term, the U.S. is focusing on what it sees as the growing dangers of terrorism and the potential for the further development and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missile systems, with a primary regional focus on North Korea. In the longer term, the United States seeks to enhance the military capabilities and responsibilities of Japan and India, with both major powers serving as presumptive balancers of China, without precluding closer Sino-American political, economic, and institutional relations, including military to military relations.

Notwithstanding events in Iraq and Afghanistan, Northeast Asia remains a pivotal focal point in U.S. strategic deliberations. American defense planners hope to prevent a major regional crisis, obligate regional states to security responsibilities previously assumed by the United States, and reposition American military forces for the longer term, with particular attention to China's political-military ascendance. Few doubt that American military power (especially its air, maritime, and information capabilities) will

remain dominant for many years to come, with an undiminished capacity to project power in a major regional crisis. U.S. policy makers believe that such unequivocal military superiority will inhibit any state from challenging America's vital strategic interests, while providing most regional actors with continued incentives to enhance collaboration with the United States.

The tests of such a strategy have yet to occur. American policy seems weighted disproportionately to the military component of U.S. power, with a particular focus on operational military requirements in the event of deterrence failure. However, such capabilities cannot by themselves legitimate the U.S. regional role, or address the larger transition underway within the Asia-Pacific region that includes China's renewed rise but extends well beyond it. Manifestations of enhanced nationalism are evident across the region, simultaneous with ever burgeoning increases in trade, investment, and societal interaction. In Gilbert Rozman's apt characterization, Northeast Asia labors under "stunted regionalism." Thus, the institutional underpinning of regional security is still based on preexisting arrangements. In addition, American military resources and political energies are predominantly directed at Iraq, South and Southwest Asia, and the Greater Middle East; the United States will be preoccupied by such "out of area" challenges for the indefinite future. As a result, various states across the Asia-Pacific region are increasingly recalibrating their defense needs and power relationships apart from existing security ties with the United States. Thus, the U.S. faces the paradox of coercive dominance, but without commensurate political influence, except possibly in the event of acute instability or overt major power rivalry.

The most immediate manifestation of change in America's Asia-Pacific strategy concerns U.S. regional military deployments. For the first time since the early 1990s, major American combat units have been withdrawn from the Korean peninsula, with an additional third of extant forces scheduled to depart the peninsula between now and the end of 2008. In Japan, increased integration between American and Japanese forces amidst a realignment of U.S. capabilities is in the offing, with Tokyo contributing far more explicitly to U.S. strategy in the West Pacific. Japan's security involvement will entail an increased emphasis on counter proliferation, missile defense, and (potentially) logistics support for American forces in the event of a renewed crisis in the Taiwan Strait. The United States Pacific Command is also augmenting U.S. air and naval capabilities in Guam and prospectively in Hawaii. In addition, American military planners are seeking enhanced access in Southeast Asia against a range of potential threats to maritime security. The Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a multilateral activity intended to interdict transfer of equipment, technology, and materials for WMD programs, has also been undertaken; Japan, Australia, and Singapore are members of this arrangement. There is a parallel focus on what the U.S. Navy terms "maritime domain awareness" oriented against unconventional threats, but also potentially relevant in a range of potential contingencies.

U.S. planners are therefore endeavoring to reinforce America's maritime dominance across the region as a whole, while diminishing the U.S. profile in continental East Asia, thereby seeking to reduce the vulnerabilities of U.S. military forces in a future Korean crisis. America's maritime missions have begun to encompass security roles well beyond the traditional emphasis in U.S. regional strategy. These new missions are far less encumbered by

existing alliance arrangements, and do not constitute formal institutions or regimes. For example, PSI is described by U.S. officials as "an activity, not an organization." American policy makers believe these arrangements will confer maximum flexibility for the future U.S. security role. Washington's evolving regional strategy is neither bilateral nor multilateral, except in so far as regional actors are prepared to facilitate U.S. policy goals. With the conspicuous exception of Japan, America's primary policy innovations seem designed to enlist security partners when and where needed, not to develop an integrated strategy based on a continuous mutuality of interest. In so doing, American security goals will be advanced, but it remains to be seen whether this will provide a sustainable basis for longer term policy collaboration between the United States and its regional partners, as distinct from episodic or contingency-driven requirements.

Sources of Change

The looming changes in U.S. policy derive from the Bush Administration's efforts to realign its global military deployments and to move toward a "transformed" military strategy, and by a parallel conviction that the Asia-Pacific region will very likely encompass some of the primary challenges to U.S. security interests in the coming decade and beyond. U.S. strategists argue that American capabilities must focus on the presumed requirements of the post-September 11 world, especially operations against terrorist groups and the need to counter the potential threat of WMD proliferation. A new defense policy, to be enshrined in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) scheduled for submission to the Congress in early 2006, will postulate the need for far more flexible, rapidly deployable forces capable

of surging in response to a diverse range of threats. But administration officials perceive a simultaneous need to augment U.S. regional capabilities to counter potential challenges posed by an ascendant China, directed either against Taiwan or (in the words of the Pentagon's 2005 report on China's military power) "beyond Taiwan." Though the end point of these strategic changes is far from certain, the implications are clear. Some of America's long-standing bilateral security partnerships, most notably that with South Korea, will matter much less, and at least one, the relationship with Japan, will matter far more.

By disentangling U.S. policy from the some of the lingering vestiges of the Cold War, American policy makers hope to move toward a very different but as yet unlabeled regional strategic concept. This future approach will entail markedly different roles for U.S. forces, and parallel changes in Washington's expectations of various regional actors. U.S. defense planners believe that the United States (given severe manpower challenges posed by protracted instability in Iraq) cannot allow major American units (especially ground forces) to "sit" in locales, in service of military strategies that the administration believes have long outlived their utility. At the same time, there is an explicit expectation that U.S. allies will assent to a reconfigured American security strategy, potentially encompassing U.S. "out of area" operations as well as military contingencies within the Asia-Pacific region. But much remains unspoken about American policy, especially related to the longer-term Sino-American political and security relationship. This leaves various U.S. security partners uneasy about the underlying priorities in U.S. regional strategy, and the role of long standing allies in this emergent strategy.

Presence vs. Power: Can less be more?

From the outset of the George W. Bush presidency, senior officials have argued that US. global military strategy was overly wedded to Cold War practices, with particular reference to largely static force deployments in the Northeast Asian and European theaters. In the administration's view, future security requirements necessitated a major revamping of U.S. policy, both to exploit the advantage of new technologies in warfare (especially "netted" information technologies and breakthroughs in intelligence and surveillance) and to limit the vulnerabilities of American forces either to ballistic missile or terrorist attack. These goals have been greatly reinforced since September 11, with the Asia-Pacific region at the forefront of many of these changes. In the U.S. view, the primary threat to regional security no longer derives from large scale conventional aggression across national borders, but from the increased vulnerability of modern societies and economies (including national military forces) to longer-range attack or disablement, and to a growing capacity of potential adversaries to deny U.S. forces access into the Asia-Pacific littoral. American officials therefore argue that U.S. security commitments should no longer be predicated on specific force levels. In the West Pacific, the forward deployment of approximately 100,000 U.S. military personnel became a virtual shibboleth during the 1990s, and was repeatedly identified in U.S. strategic reviews as a presumed guarantor of regional stability. Bush administration officials have challenged this assertion, arguing that the viability of U.S. policy depends on whether decisive American capabilities can be brought to bear in a major crisis, not the precise end strength or location of U.S. forces.

In August 2004, the Pentagon leadership, preoccupied by the Iraqi insurgency and growing shortfalls in available U.S. forces, completed the transfer of the 2nd Combat Brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division from the ROK to Iraq. During the same month, DoD announced the results of the Global Posture Review, with more than 70,000 US. forces to be withdrawn from their Cold War locales. Though the brunt of these withdrawals will take place in Germany, U.S. end strength on the Korean peninsula will decline to approximately 25,000 over the next four years, a reduction of approximately 12,500 from the onset of the Bush administration. Senior U.S. officials continue to insist that these shifts will not erode the credibility of the U.S. security commitment to the ROK or the U.S. capability to intervene in a major crisis on the peninsula. This claim was underscored by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's public reference in May 2005 to U.S. nuclear deterrent capabilities, as U.S.-North Korea tensions continued to mount.

Despite these assurances, Korean defense officials see reduced U.S. force levels and American preoccupations in Iraq presaging diminished U.S. attention and priority to ROK security. Increased North Korean claims of a nuclear weapons capability have evoked ample if largely private consternation within ROK defense circles about U.S. withdrawals and redeployments. Though a statement of principles on a potential Korean denuclearization accord was signed in mid-September 2005 by all the states involved in the Six Party talks in Beijing, the document largely constitutes a composite statement of expectations, and is not a road map to a negotiated settlement. The outlook for the talks thus remains problematic; the diplomatic process will likely prove protracted, contentious, and destined to fall well short of the Bush Administration's maximal expectations.

Barring a dramatic policy breakthrough or fundamental internal change in Pyongyang, the persistence of a major North Korean military threat (and U.S. unwillingness to accord unambiguous legitimacy to the DPRK) will continue to characterize the administration's strategy toward the peninsula. Pyongyang has three predominant goals in long-term relations with the United States: validation, assurance, and compensation. As suggested by the Six Party declaration, Washington links its readiness to advance these goals to the North definitively foregoing its nuclear weapons potential. Under prevailing circumstances, realization of all three objectives remains problematic, with neither state prepared to enter into a genuine normalization process without definitive prior moves by the other. Despite Chinese efforts to orchestrate at least preliminary steps to a larger breakthrough, continued stalemate seems the most probable near to mid-term outcome. This will leave the political-military confrontation between Pyongyang and Washington largely intact, but with the U.S. focused far more on coercion short of war (i.e., interdiction and missile defense), in contrast to its long-standing emphasis on peninsular deterrence. But these measures do not preclude further efforts by the ROK to achieve political and economic accommodation with the North, highlighting the growing divergence in U.S. and South Korean strategies toward the DPRK.

The U.S. increasingly defines its peninsular defense planning requirements in ways that are distinct from decades of confrontation. The Pentagon argues that enhanced intelligence and surveillance capabilities will enable American and ROK commanders to far more effectively target North Korean forces, thereby blunting any prospective major attack. But Pyongyang's capability to reach much deeper into ROK territory with its

ballistic missile forces and long-range artillery redefines the security equation. American officials have yet to convince its ROK ally how and why a diminished U.S. presence in the context of heightened North Korean WMD capabilities will enhance ROK security. For added measure, the political leadership in Seoul increasingly opposes threat-based strategies directed against the North. Without question, the U.S. is opting for more of an offshore strategy. The capability for intervention in a major crisis remains an important indicator of U.S. commitment, but Korean officials do not exhibit much confidence or enthusiasm for U.S. policy, thereby prompting an enhanced search by Seoul for alternatives to a threat-based strategy.

Revisiting Alliance Bargains

The reduction in U.S. force levels on the peninsula is symptomatic of a larger shift in U.S. regional priorities. American policy makers are seeking the concurrence of U.S. allies to longer term shifts in U.S. defense strategy, but the results thus far are mixed. In Korea, the Pentagon has conveyed its intention to create air and sea hubs designed for unspecified regional contingencies. This has left Korean defense planners doubly uneasy: first, because American forces would be increasingly focused on non-peninsular missions; and second, because many in Korea believe that the U.S. is seeking to envelop the ROK in contingency planning against China, which Seoul deems wholly contrary to South Korean strategic interests. In the eyes of many Korean policy makers, this growing divergence in alliance goals is eroding the strategic underpinnings of the alliance.

Seoul is also discomfited by more coercive approaches to curtail the North's nuclear weapons activities, and comparably wary of any presumptive

containment strategy directed either against North Korea or against China. President Roh Moo-hyun's declared pursuit of a "balancer" role for the ROK in Northeast Asian security highlights the major erosion of shared purpose that has long animated the U.S.-Korea alliance. With the ROK still maintaining an arms-length policy toward U.S. counter proliferation strategy and toward heightened collaboration in missile defense, the prospects for longer-term security ties between Seoul and Washington are increasingly problematic.

U.S.-Japan security relations are headed in an entirely different direction. Tokyo has exhibited no comparable equivocation in aligning with US regional strategy; it is ever more intent on reinforcing its status as America's avowed partner of choice in Asia-Pacific security. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, arguably the Japanese political leader most closely identified with the United States since Yasuhiro Nakasone in the mid-1980s, has availed himself of every opportunity to strengthen alliance ties with Washington. In the post-September 11 environment, Koizumi appreciably broadened the scope of Japanese security involvement, including deployment of supply ships to the Indian Ocean in support of operations in Afghanistan, the assigning of Japanese peacekeepers to Iraq in early 2004, the involvement of the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) in tsunami relief operations in Indonesia in late 2004 and early 2005, and Tokyo's first ever participation in the annual Cobra Gold military exercises in Thailand in May 2005. Though all such activities were justified as part of Japan's multilateral obligations (and hence distinct from its obligations under the U.S.-Japan alliance), the practical implications of these measures were incontestable, and vigorously endorsed by U.S. policy makers.

From a U.S. perspective, the biggest and most welcome changes in Japanese policy concern Tokyo's increased readiness to contribute to regional contingencies. Japan's more elastic definition of security policy (though still not extending explicitly to collective security obligations, in view of ongoing internal debate on Constitutional revision) point increasingly in the direction of a more activist Japan. At the February 2005 meeting of the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee, the four senior foreign affairs and defense officials of the two countries voiced agreement on common security objectives, including explicit reference to "peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait through dialogue," which Chinese officials sharply criticized as extending the U.S.-Japan alliance beyond its bilateral purposes.

In a follow-on "2+2" meeting in late October, the fuller dimensions of the provisional understandings announced in February were detailed for the first time. The October meeting coincided with the end of a long-standing logjam on a host of security issues, including Tokyo's consent to the forward deployment of a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier (the U.S.S. George Washington) in Yokosuka following the retirement of the U.S.S. Kitty Hawk in 2008; the realignment of U.S. military forces on Okinawa (including the relocation of the Headquarters of the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force to Guam and a reduction of the Marine presence on Okinawa from 18,000 to 11,000); and a compromise on the relocation of the Marine Corps Air Station on Okinawa to accommodate to local concerns about proximity to urban areas and potential environmental consequences. In return, both governments announced a consensus on bilateral roles, missions, and capabilities and identified fifteen separate areas of defense cooperation and seven measures to enhance policy

and operational coordination. These latter steps encompassed the strengthening of bilateral contingency planning (including enhanced use of Japanese airports and seaports by U.S. forces); increased information sharing and intelligence collaboration; strengthened interoperability; and increased coordination of ballistic missile defense activities. The joint statement also specified preliminary agreement on long-pending U.S. proposals that would entail far closer operational coordination at various Japanese facilities, including collocation of air command and control at Yokota Air Base; enhanced U.S. Army command and control arrangements at Camp Zama; and deployment of a U.S. X-band radar for ballistic missile defense.

But Japan is venturing into uncharted waters with the United States. Reaffirming and enhancing security ties with Washington will draw Tokyo into progressively greater obligations to the United States, quite possibly encompassing involvement in major military operations, even if Japan would not be a direct participant in combat. In contrast to the major withdrawals of U.S. forces from Korea, the centrality of Japan in U.S. regional defense strategy will be reinforced. Japan would be ever more tethered to future U.S. defense strategy across the region, at the same time that political debate within Tokyo proceeds on constitutional revision, based on a draft document tabled by the Liberal Democratic Party in November 2005 that proposes to move Japan much more definitively toward "normal power" status. These revisions would constitute the first legal changes in Japanese policy since the U.S. occupation authorities promulgated and imposed a constitution in late 1946. Japan would then constitute an American ally like no other in the Asia-Pacific region. However, the singularity of such a prospective relationship, all the more so in light of Japan's highly problematic, emotionally charged relations

with China, both Koreas and still festering differences with Russia, ought to give both Washington and Tokyo pause.

For the United States, ties to other core Asia-Pacific allies are hardly irrelevant. Long-time partners such as Australia and Singapore have a profound and enduring stake in close relations with the United States, ones that Washington has neither incentive nor reason to diminish. These include heightened U.S. access agreements with Singapore (including the capability to berth an aircraft carrier) and enhanced coordination of counter-terrorist and counter-proliferation measures with Canberra. But such interdependence does not imply automatic assent to all dimensions of U.S. strategy, particularly in relation to a possible future crisis over Taiwan. For various regional actors, geography and national interest dictate an abiding commitment to non-adversarial relations with China, an outcome that senior U.S. officials also endorse, most recently in Deputy Secretary of State Zoellick's calls for China to assume a "responsible stakeholder" position in collaboration with the United States. But the largest and most consequential uncertainties in future American strategy concern Sino-American relations; whether both states are able to achieve a sustainable, collaborative relationship over the longer term; and the implications of U.S.-China relations for America's regional alliances, especially the future security role of Japan.

The China Factor

The renewed U.S. debate about longer-term Sino-American relations reflects the contradictory, unresolved tensions in U.S. policy toward Beijing, in particular the strategic implications (as perceived by Washington) of

China's renewed rise as a major power. These issues were largely set aside in the aftermath of September 11 and the resultant Sino-American accommodation, but they have assumed renewed salience in the context of China's enhanced military modernization, Taiwan's incapacity or unwillingness to undertake heightened defense efforts in the face of China's increased coercive capabilities, and deliberations within the European Union on the lifting of post-Tiananmen sanctions on military sales to China. The very multiplicity of Chinese roles stymies articulation of a consistent American strategy. Beijing is simultaneously a major interlocutor in deliberations over the North Korean nuclear issue (some observers argue that the Six Party declaration reflects the "outsourcing" of this issue to Beijing); a collaborator with Washington in counter-terrorist activities; a "dual capable" major power ever more integrated in regional economics, politics, and security, both in conjunction with and apart from the United States; a rapidly modernizing state that is successfully combining reformist policies and Leninist political norms; an ever growing magnet for large-scale U.S. trade and investment, including in numerous high technology sectors; a primary enabler of U.S. deficit spending through major purchases of U.S. Treasury notes; an emergent major military power with undeniable strategic autonomy from the U.S.; and a potential American military adversary in relation to contingencies involving Taiwan. The competing U.S. policy impulses at work in these multiple domains are without parallel in American relations with any other major power.

These multiple cross currents find ample expression in DoD policy. Although senior Pentagon officials assert that the United States no longer premises its policies on the basis of "threat based" strategies, this claim seems

forced. The 2001 QDR made explicit mention of a prospective threat in Asia from "a military competitor with a formidable resource base" that was China in all but name. The forthcoming QDR will purportedly characterize China as the prototypical example of "a country at a strategic crossroads," but Beijing is the only major power whose pursuit of military modernization (including current or potential contributions of Israel and the EU to future Chinese weapons development) is openly, even vehemently, contested by senior U.S. officials. DoD's most recent annual report on China's military power, released after ample internal deliberation and delay in mid-July 2005, paints a far more worrisome picture of the scale, breadth, and presumed purposes of Chinese weapons development, including claims of a major Chinese investment in power projection capabilities that the Pentagon argues have direct implications for sea-control missions beyond China's immediate periphery. The study draws particular attention to Chinese efforts to counteract major advances in U.S. information warfare and deep strike capabilities, as well as its efforts to develop sea-denial and related anti-access capabilities designed to deter, delay, or defeat a "foreign intervention" in a Taiwan scenario. By characterizing China as a looming regional threat with implications both for Taiwan and well beyond it, DoD has moved much closer to an explicitly adversarial depiction of Chinese modernization goals.

It is less clear, however, whether these characterizations are largely an artifact of the defense planning process, which necessarily entails components of hedging and balancing in relation to China's future political-military roles. The parallel need to articulate longer-term rationales to justify future weapons system investments (especially in the forthcoming QDR) also warrants mention in this regard. But the Pentagon confronts daunting policy

choices, as it seeks to retain future options in the context of renewed constraints on defense expenditure following a half-decade of stunning growth in the U.S. defense budget. (In current dollars, the DoD budget has increased by over 41 per cent since 2001, not including supplemental authorizations exceeding an additional $350 billion to cover the costs post-September 11 military operations.) Indeed, the DoD civilian leadership (responding to urgings from senior uniformed officers) is again voicing an enhanced commitment to military to military relations with China, which included Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's first official visit to Beijing in October 2005.

These steps, though welcomed by the Pentagon's uniformed leadership as well as by leaders across the Asia-Pacific, leave very large issues unresolved. Is the sustaining or enhancement of U.S. military power in the West Pacific deemed an inherent threat to Chinese national security interests? Is China's future military development deemed an inherent threat to U.S. national security interests? If not, what does the United States deem an appropriate level of capability, activity, and responsibility for China as a member of the UN Security Council and as a reemerged major power in the Asia-Pacific region? What would be the underlying basis for strategic understandings between Washington and Beijing serving as simultaneous "responsible stakeholders," especially in relation to a future Northeast Asian security order? How would pursuit of this goal be reconciled with America's emergent security relationship with Japan? Could America and China agree to explicit constraints in their respective security activities in the West Pacific while retaining largely autonomous security goals? In all these areas, these issues

have not been explored on a sustained or consistent basis, and seem certain to preoccupy American and Chinese policy makers for many years to come.

The Road Ahead

The United States confronts unprecedented challenges in redefining its security role in East Asia at a time of competing policy pressures and major regional realignment. U.S. strategy remains premised on ensuring maximum autonomy and freedom of action, but this goal seems increasingly problematic, as regional states give increasing weight to indigenously-derived concepts of security order that differ from American strategic preferences. A future U.S. strategy must therefore define a larger concept of regional security, not a vision tailored exclusively to America's strategic requirements. Over the longer run, the United States must determine whether to seek power and responsibility-sharing arrangements with regional states, or to define policy success primarily by whether others accommodate to American strategic expectations and needs. America enjoys unquestioned military primacy in the Asia-Pacific region, ensuring ample U.S. influence, especially in a maritime context. But U.S. military power cannot serve as a stand-alone instrument of American policy leverage. In the event of an insufficiently attentive U.S. regional policy, the United States might well be viewed as a more distant power that focuses on the region only when vital American interests are at risk, thereby diminishing its longer-term role and influence. There is nothing inevitable about such an outcome, but it is incumbent above all on U.S. actions to ensure that it does not come to pass.