

The Obama Administration and Strategies for East Asia

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National Security Panel

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The Obama Administration's East Asia Strategy

Following the remarkable election of President Barack Obama, there has been much debate about which direction the new administration will go with its foreign policy. In South Korea we see two kinds of expectations and assessments about which path the Obama administration will take.

The first view is that the new administration will seek to take on a completely new direction in its foreign policy. It holds that Obama's pledges of change will extend to foreign policy and we will witness a complete break from the Bush administration's policies. Its implications will be profound as the Obama administration sets out on a new approach to the major issues and problems.

The second view is that the Obama administration's foreign policy will actually not be that great a departure from the Bush administration and that it will seek to maintain a similar course. This view holds that it will maintain continuity and reach out across political divides. The implications of this will mean that the new administration will use the same policies to deal with the old problems and issues.

Now if we actually look at what has been said by major figures in the Obama administration we can develop a better understanding of what the new administration's foreign policy will be like. We believe that the key point in

understanding the Obama administration's foreign policy is to look at the concept of "Power of Balance".¹ Going by what has been said by the new administration, we can see that this is what will be shaping their policy. Power of Balance marks a clear departure from the concept of balance of power which has defined the basic security architecture of the Asian region. In this complicated world, the Power of Balance tries to get away from state-centric ideas prevalent in the Balance of Power. It recognizes that there are many actors, including non-state actors and many sources of power, soft as well as hard power. With a strategic guide to balance, the new administration will try to utilize all tools from diplomatic and cultural to economic and military while at the same time recognizing the interests of other states.

If we look at the two main areas of focus in the Power of Balance, we can understand how this plays out.

- Balance of Actors: While the Bush administration made efforts to stress "partnership" in its foreign policy, this has shown some clear limits. The Bush administration failed to maintain formidable strong partnerships in the

¹ Kurt M. Campbell, Nirav Patel, and Vikram J. Singh, *The Power of Balance: America in iAsia* (Center for a New American Security, 2008); Ralph A. Cossa, Brad Glosserman, Michael A. McDevitt, Nirav Patel, James Przystup, and Brad Roberts, *The United States and the Asia-Pacific Region: Security Strategy for the Obama Administration* (Center for a New American Security, 2009).

"Power of Balance will be the basis of the new administration's strategy towards East Asia."

midst of impending security crises. So now there will be a need for a true balance between actors. In this respect, the U.S. will need to make its partners feel more respected and equally treated by exercising genuine leadership. This kind of leadership can only come about through sharing its responsibilities in the global challenges ahead.

- Balance between Hard Power and Soft Power: The Obama administration will no doubt break away from the Bush administration's overreliance on military power. But breaking away from that does not mean shifting focus exclusively to other means than the military. On the contrary, the Obama administration will be pursuing a policy of balance among all important areas from the economy and soft power resources, to diplomacy and culture. What this means is that the new administration will be displaying a balance across many fields without a single focus on just one area like the military or the economy.

We believe that the Power of Balance will be the basis of the new administration's strategy towards East Asia for two reasons. The first is that the Obama administration recognizes that the U.S. cannot take on all the responsibilities and tasks in East Asia. It is now time to share responsibilities and challenges. This does not mean the U.S. will be passive in its role in Asia but rather it wants to consolidate its position more prudently. It wishes to be more of a manager than an all round player and captain. The second dimension is that the U.S. also recognizes now that East Asian nations themselves have a

stronger role to play in the region. Their interests and concerns should no longer be underestimated and their aspirations need to be embraced. The Power of Balance will allow the Obama administration to deal with the challenges in the region more effectively.

Regional Dynamics and Sino-Japanese Relationship in East Asia

The Bush administration's focus on East Asia was distracted by challenges elsewhere particularly the Middle East. However the strategy it pursued in East Asia was based upon the perception of layers of players around concentric circles. With U.S.-China issues at the center, they were surrounded by the inner circle of the U.S.-Japan alliance plus Australia. Outside of that were other regional alliances in the middle circle and then the outer circle is the regional organizations and mechanisms.

This strategy was more or less laid out by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in her nomination hearing speech. Similar remarks were echoed by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton during her nomination speech too. On the face of it, we see little difference between the two in terms of a main strategy for East Asia.

Among a range of mutual relations, the relationship between China and Japan will be one of the most significant elements for the future regional order. It is an interesting contrast to see how Japan focuses on its past while China pays more attention to its future.

Japanese strategic view quite often refers back to 19th century modernism. It is natural when you consider that Japan successfully became the major power in East Asia towards

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the latter half of the 19th century. During this period, two key events shaped Japan’s rise: victory in the Russo-Japanese War and the strategic alliance with Britain. The main threat today for Japan’s policy makers is China’s rise. In responding to this challenge, will it depend upon a regional mechanism or will it go for a more competitive strategy? By looking to their past (for them their most reliable example) they will seek to maintain a competitive stance toward China on the basis of the US-Japan alliance as well as its linkages with Australia and India.

We see China’s strategy as more forward-looking. China’s future-orientated approach was reflected in a speech given recently by President Hu Jintao to mark the 30th anniversary of China’s economic development and reforms. He presented his vision of China in 2049. That year, of course, will mark the centenary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The picture drawn up presents an interesting view of how China views itself in the future. In this picture, it will seek a harmonious relationship with its neighbors. It will be of critical importance to see how this policy will shape itself over the coming decades.

Searching for the US role in East Asia

Simple-minded realists might argue that the U.S. should not become involved in any possible Sino-Japanese rivalry. The argument would follow that if China and Japan mutually compete with each other, the U.S. will find a better ground that is more beneficial to its own interests. For them, the main threat should be the rise of new competitors in East Asia. Competition between two nations is not a major threat that U.S. policy makers should

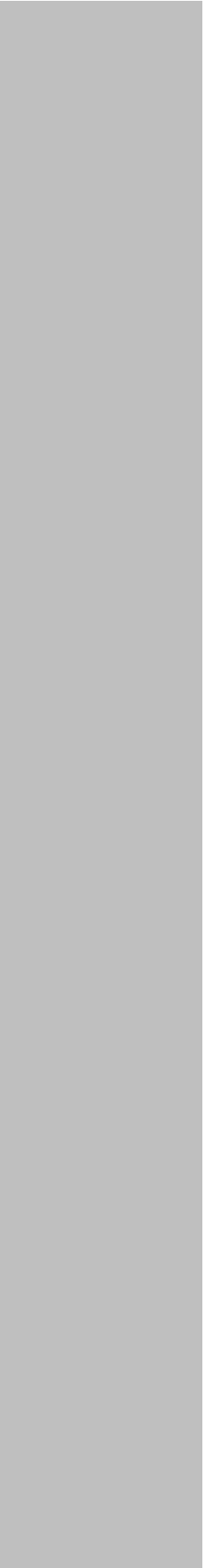
be concerned about.

This view is wrong. Although there is no direct military dimension of the Sino-Japanese rivalry, there will be economic costs. Were the two sides to cause damage to the other’s economy, it would be a major blow to an already damaged world economy. So wouldn’t the U.S. try to compensate for that?

The economic system of today is very different from that which existed during the First and Second World Wars. Today we see the world as very interdependent and countries are now economically integrated. If you look at the production network in the world and the links between East Asia and the U.S., were conflict to break out it would certainly be a major blow to the U.S.

Viewed simply as a relative gain, the benefits for the U.S. could be high, but on the other hand looking at the absolute loss we can see that the damage would be immense. This shows that the simplistic realist argument does not hold up.

One should not focus too much on security matters when talking of costs and benefits. Leadership does not always have to be based primarily on military power but can also cover other areas. Were the U.S. to withdraw from East Asia, then there would be some shortfall in those areas in which it has been showing leadership, both in hard and soft power. This is something that theorist George Modelski spoke of in his Long Cycle Theory some time ago. He talked of a leadership that offers more than just military power but also “public goods”. That is not to say that there are no self-interests or that there are no costs. But one has to remember that the benefits are not always so visible when compared with the costs. Now it is time to think about balance between benefits and



costs as well. ■