Issue Briefing

Post-2012 U.S. Leadership and U.S. Policy toward East Asia

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A Venture of Forecasting

In 2012 the United States will hold another presidential election, and it will surely be a referendum on the first term of the Obama presidency. As usual, the election will attract the attention of the public and the pundits alike, both at home and abroad, particularly at a time when an increasing number of people will be interested in how the election's outcome will affect U.S. foreign policy and, related to it, the Sino-American bipolar configuration in East Asia. Since the *Cheonan* incident in the West Sea in the spring of 2009, particularly, the evolution and interaction of the Sino-American relationship in East Asia has become the focus of speculation among policy analysts and practitioners.

That said, the outcome of the 2012 U.S. presidential election raises several questions. Will the 2012 presidential election bring a new leadership team to the White House? And will the outcome, new leaders or not, affect the overall tone of U.S. strategy in East Asia? If not, what other factors should be considered in forecasting the future of East Asia? Although a definitive answer to these questions cannot be had when we are still two years away from the 2012 presidential election, addressing them, nevertheless, is an intriguing mental exercise.

We can say immediately that it is unlikely that the outcome of the 2012 election will be the dominant factor determining the United States' strategy in East Asia as of 2013. Because of the rising power of China and the ever-hardening bipolarized structure of power in the region, significant changes in post-2012 East Asia are more likely to be triggered by changes from within East Asia itself, rather than from the United States. An ambitious China, taking a more aggressive posture toward both its neighbors and the United States, could be a potentially destabilizing factor in the region. Internal changes in North Korea could also be regionally destabilizing. The United States' East Asian policy would thus be somewhat reactive in its general tone, although not passive. The U.S. stance could be firm and even assertive, however, depending on the situation, just as it was recently in dealing with China's bid for expansion toward the South China Sea.

The 2010 U.S. Mid-term Elections

Once in the White House, President Obama took several significant steps to get rid of Bush legacies in U.S.

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foreign policy. He ordered the closure of the prison at Guantánamo, declared the Missile Defense system in Eastern Europe dead, disclosed the time schedule of the U.S. drawdown in Iraq, and began to reset the U.S. relationship with Russia. In addition, he strengthened U.S. soft power diplomacy in the Middle East and tried to induce China to play a more responsible role in both global and regional affairs, publicly renouncing efforts to "contain" China. Correspondingly, the U.S. image around the globe has improved, as the June 2010 Pew Global Attitudes Survey shows.

When it comes to the 2010 congressional mid-term election, however, the outcome is rather gloomy for President Obama and his party. The Republican victory proves once again that what matters in the mid-term election is not the president's performance in international affairs but how well the president has executed his job in domestic matters for the previous two years. As a matter of fact, throughout the public opinion polls taken up to the November 2 mid-term election, all the survey outcomes had consistently shown negative signs for Obama and his party. For example, according to the Gallup poll taken October 11 through 17, the presidential approval rate, which once spiked to 68 percent after the Obama inauguration, plummeted to 45 percent. Several economic indicators were in a negative state as well. The percentage of respondents saying the U.S. economy is in a poor condition was high, 45 percent according to the three-day average of the Gallup poll of October 15-17. To make matters worse, 61 percent of the respondents said the economy is getting worse, about slightly less than double the percentage of the respondents saying it is getting better, 33 percent, according to the same three-day average of Gallup. Such figures made the Democratic electoral chances for November look quite bleak, and that exactly turned out to be the case.

Among other things, the ferocious power of the Tea Party movement greatly contributed to the Republican victory in the 2010 congressional election. The movement participants were usually strong conservatives having shown a great interest in voting in this election. They were much more likely to vote than the average American as well as the average Democrat, helping the Republican Party to recapture the majority status in the House and increase some seats in the Senate. Framed through conservative media like Fox News, Obama-initiated policies were perceived by them to be threatening to such core conservative American values as limited government and fiscal responsibility, thus turning the movement participants into warriors in this election.

Second Obama Term in 2012?

Can the Democratic defeat in the 2010 mid-term election be a safe short-cut predictor for the 2012 presidential match? In other words, will the Democratic defeat in this mid-term election eventually lead to another unfortunate outcome for the incumbent Democratic president in 2012? In my view this is unlikely, though I have some reservations. It may sound unrealistic at the moment, but President Obama can be expected to stay another four more years in the White House after 2012. What are the grounds for this premature forecast favoring the incumbent president?

First, the nature of the mid-term election cautions us from predicting the results for 2012 on the basis of 2010. It has been traditionally true, with rare exceptions, that since the end of the Second World War, the president's party has suffered some loss of seats in the mid-term elections. The incumbent president seeking reelection, however, more often than not has bounced back two years later to retain the White House. Truman's unanticipated victory in 1948 after the Democratic huge mid-term loss in 1946 would be a good example. Reagan's triumphal return in 1984 after the Republican loss of 26 House seats in the 1982 mid-term election, and Clinton's survival in 1996 after the 1994 Democratic debacle also reveal the same pattern. The presidential approval rate that had hovered

around 45 percent as Barack Obama neared his first-term mid-term election cannot be seen as a block to his seeking and obtaining reelection.

The surge and decline hypothesis helps explain a presidential party's mid-term loss. The hypothesis argues that in the mid-term elections the marginal supporters for the incumbent president, who are not as ardent as the core supporters and only enthusiastic about such major contests as the presidential election, do not usually come to the polls in such minor contests fought only by congressional candidates. These voters' high expectations of the president may have turned into disappointment in two years, which would not be the case among the president's core supporters. That would lower the turnout level for the president's party candidates in the mid-term elections.[1] Given this hypothesis, if the Democratic Party can successfully galvanize its dormant supporters to come to the polls in 2012, they will not be in as difficult a position as they were in the 2010 mid-term election. What matters is mobilization, and the Democratic Party will regain the edge in that matter in 2012.

Besides the traditional characteristics of mobilization in the mid-term elections, several other factors make it more reasonable to forecast positively for Obama's second term. First, Obama's leadership style needs to be mentioned. Unlike his predecessor, George W. Bush, who had been held back by ideological constraints, Obama is a pragmatic centrist, shrewdly reading the hearts and minds of average American voters and strategically positioning himself. Obama's centrist trait was put in serious doubt in his full-bore push for health care reform, but he attempted to regroup as a centrist by trying to address the federal deficit and to extend the Bush tax cuts beyond 2010, although the latter are now stalled in Congress.

Second, the two recent structural trends of American electoral politics, that is, the ever-hardening party parity and the greater regional bifurcation separating blue and red states, may, coupled with the winner-take-all nature of the electoral-college system, make Obama and the Democrats less worried about their electoral prospects in 2012. That is, the loss of several seats this fall in these solidly partisan states, red or blue, will not matter much in real terms for Obama in his supporters' calculation of electoral-college votes in 2012. What really matters will be the voters' trends in the so-called swing states. If Obama can recover competitiveness in the swing states in 2012, losing several dozen legislative seats in the 2010 mid-term elections will not be irrevocably damaging to him.

Finally, Republicans are unintentionally helping the incumbent president by being presented as obstructionists to many independent voters on the one hand, and by being captured and swayed by right-wing Tea Partiers on the other hand. Many independents, though disappointed by some of Obama policies of strong liberal bent, are uneasy as well about the Republicans' frequent resort to obstructionist parliamentary tactics, such as Senate filibustering. Throughout the 111st Congress, Republicans have been obstructionist in order to prevent President Obama and his party from claiming legislative achievements in the 2010 mid-term election campaign. The problem is, however, that Republican obstructionism may only remind the independent voters of narrow-minded Republican partisanship over the long haul. On the other hand, Republicans were producing extreme right wing candidates in the 2010 mid-term primaries thanks to the wider participation of Tea Party primary voters. If this trend continues up to the 2012 Republican primaries and helps produce an extreme right wing presidential candidate, his or her Democratic counterpart will be greatly advantaged by that, prevailing in the battle for the middle ground.

Enabling the Obama presidency to remain in the White House, however, can only be achieved when some conditions are met to a certain degree in two short years. Among other things, two crucial factors have to be counted in the 2012 mathematics, the economy and the U.S. war in Afghanistan. As factors of importance next to none, these two elements will deter-

mine, along with other factors, the level of the American public's approval of the Obama presidency.

There can be no doubt that President Obama's declining popularity should mainly be ascribed to the sluggish pace of the American economic recovery. If nothing else, the unemployment rate staying consistently around 9.5 percent is a most visible proof of the fact that the American economy is still far off the ascending curve. To make matters worse, several authoritative sources warn that the American economy may be sliding into a double-digit situation, predicting that the recession may last longer than optimistic speculators anticipate. It has been also said that the Obama administration's economic prescriptions have been losing the confidence of American businesses. Obviously, presidential popularity among the American public is a function of voters' overall level of satisfaction with the state of economy. They are, however, simply impatient with their current shape of economy, and now deeply frustrated. If the economy continues to stay in this miserable state, and if the job market situation is not getting remarkably better as the 2012 election approaches, President Obama will have to face again angry voters during the campaign.

On the international front, the United States' war in Afghanistan poses another dilemma for President Obama. Different from the Iraq war, on which then-senator Obama voted no in 2002 with regard to sending U.S. troops, and to which President Obama declared an end regarding the U.S. battle mission in August 2010, the Afghanistan war is now surely Obama's war, one in which the United States is fighting, according to the president, its real enemy, Al Qaeda. Beginning with the 2008 campaign up to now, Obama has continued to ask the American public and the military to focus on Afghanistan, not on Iraq, claiming the Al Qaeda militants are mostly concentrated in the former region. In line with this, he endorsed the military's request to be supplied with additional troops by deciding to send 31,000 more soldiers there early this year. The problem, however, is that the prospects for the Afghanistan war are not good, being aggravated by the incompetent Karzai regime of Afghanistan losing both its own people's trust and U.S. confidence. If the situation there does not markedly improve even with the recent U.S. military surge, President Obama may be in the double dilemma where he not only loses the support of the core liberal base of the Democratic Party, which has been opposed to sending and stationing American troops in Afghanistan from the start, but is also blamed by the broader public for having gravely mismanaged national security.

The U.S. and East Asia after 2012

No one will question that the current policy posture of the United States in East Asia is first and foremost based on maintaining a good working relationship with the rapidly ascending China as a regional great power. It is now a widely held consensus among top U.S. foreign policy makers that without accommodating China, the United States cannot successfully pursue its foreign policy goals on climate change, nuclear non-proliferation, its deficit reduction and global rebalancing, and the reform of global financial institutions.

Given these necessities on the American side, it is highly unlikely that leadership change, or continuity, in the United States in 2012 per se will cause any significant changes in its policy toward East Asia, whose power configuration is parametered within the manageable boundaries of cooperation and conflict between the United States and China. Now and for the foreseeable future, the United States will see a new China that will flex its economic leverage toward the entire world, fling its fleet farther to the South and East China Seas, and even set its own criteria for measuring carbon dioxide emission reduction in the climate. Given all this, U.S. leadership change itself will not cause any big shift in the East Asian power configuration. If anything, the shift will come not from changes in the U.S. leadership, but rather from domestic changes in China or

other East Asian nations, respectively or combined.

Besides the East Asian bipolar power relationship launched by a newly assertive China and tightly structured by the two nations, U.S. domestic problems also makes it safe to predict that the U.S. will not initiate major changes in the region. As widely discussed in policy and academic circles, the United States is currently undergoing a new round of symptoms of decline. In a contrast to the declinist arguments that were triggered by Nixon's refusal to change dollars into gold in the early 1970s, and the European and Japanese rise in the 1980s, the current debate focuses on domestic decay as well as the American relative decline in global power distribution. To borrow from Fallows, the U.S. is "falling short" domestically as well as "falling behind" on the global stage.[2]

Although the current faltering American economy will eventually recover to a decent level sometime in the future, the tumultuous state of U.S. domestic politics will probably continue to linger for quite some years to come. The ongoing cultural, ideological, and partisan bipolarization of American society and politics has been exhausting national vitality as a whole. The current rampant Tea Party movement makes repercussions as a centrifugal force endangering the ever shrinking middle ground for consensus; the deteriorating social infrastructure and educational system make innovation more and more difficult to achieve; the prohibitive stance on immigration may narrow the U.S. base for human resources in the future. If these trends persist, the United States may have to go through the American version of "biding its time" until it can regroup domestically before reasserting itself on the global scene. Amid these tremendous domestic tasks, the United States will be less likely to invest its resources to change the status quo for short-term interests in East Asia in the near future.

The low probability that the United States will seek changes first does not, however, imply that there will be no changes whatsoever in the region. Nor does it mean that the United States will never reconfigure its policy posture toward East Asia, particularly vis-à-vis China. It only means that the prime movement for changes in the region, if any, will rather come first from the East Asian nations themselves, particularly from the dynamics of their domestic politics or their desire to break away from the status quo.

China currently does not hide its intention to sharpen its sword as well as to grind its plough. Emboldened by the successful hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, its rise to the G-2, and the relative decline of the United States, China seems to have changed its policy stance from one of keeping a low profile to one of doing what it has and deserves to do. According to recent media reports, China has declared its ambition to empower its navy to cruise in the far oceans beyond the near seas. China recently even clashed with Japan over the Senkaku, or Diaoyu, Islands, amid the long tension over the territorial disputes surrounding them. In this way, and in the process, China approached the point of threatening U.S. security interests in protecting its strategic sea lanes in the South China Sea.

Although somewhat reactive, the United States now stands firm against this aggressive stance pursued by China. Partly to abide by its obligations as an ally to Japan and Korea, and partly to protect its strategic interests in East Asia, the United States did not step back when faced with Chinese bluffing against the Korea-U.S. joint maritime military exercise in both the West and the East Seas of Korea, and with the Chinese bid for exclusive security interests in the South China Sea. Recently, the U.S. Defense Department was reported to have strengthened its naval presence in the Pacific Ocean to check against this expansionist tendency of China.

The nuclear issue of and potential emergencies coming from North Korea could bring about turbulence in East Asia, and add more tension to the U.S.-China relationship in that regard, as well. According to various sources, North Korea has now begun to prepare for its leadership change, aiming to complete its preliminary measures by 2012, which it declared as the

year of "opening a powerful great nation." In the transition process and afterward, North Korea could relapse into another round of provocative measures, such as nuclear or missile tests and clandestine attempts to export nuclear-weapons-related technology and materials. When the post-2012 new leadership needs to further consolidate its position without giving up nuclear ambitions, it will continue to pursue a risk-taking path. All steps would be taken with the purpose of ensuring domestic unity, given North Korea's still fragile leadership transition, as well as with that of obtaining more concessions from South Korea and the United States. For whatever purposes, any provocative measures will intensify the tensions between the two Koreas as well as between North Korea and the United States, eventually stretching into more tensions between the United States and China surrounding the Korean Peninsula.

A much worse scenario in North Korea would be unanticipated developments such as the sudden death of the current top leader, an eruption of internal power struggle surrounding the fragile new leadership, and even the demise of the regime itself. All these emergencies would drive the whole of East Asia into turmoil unless meticulously prepared for in advance and prudently managed as the situation evolves. In contrast to the North Korean nuclear issue, which is somehow managed and controlled through the Six-Party Talks despite North Korea's repeated defiant behavior, these unanticipated emergencies could bring the two camps led by the United States and China each to a colliding track if no tacit agreement is made between them in advance. China for its part would not tolerate a situation in which its national security was threatened. Though not a docile neighbor to China, North Korea is still a strategic asset of vital importance to China, and China will not simply stand aside when a North Korean power vacuum creates a serious geopolitical crisis.

The Way Ahead

President Obama said in Tokyo in November 2009 on his way to both the Singapore APEC Summit and the Beijing U.S.-China summit meeting that he is "America's first Pacific President." Although the rhetoric was intended to deliver his good will to his Asia-Pacific neighbors and particularly to China, it also captures a hard reality, which is that Asia now looms larger in the American ledger of national interests. No doubt America will need an ongoing good working relationship with the rapidly ascending China in order to maintain its national interests in various areas, regardless of its potential leadership change in 2012. It is extremely unlikely that America will wind up being a downscaled Atlantic nation as a result of its decline. The United States will continue to engage in East Asia through the inevitabilities and necessities whereby it is tied.

In that process the United States will leave the U.S.-China bipolar system in East Asia intact. Given the reality of an increasingly assertive China, and its own domestic turmoil to be dealt with, the United States will not pursue a policy that will drastically change the status quo in the region. Among other things, this is true simply because a new venture of this sort would require a great amount of new resources the United States cannot afford to invest. The changes in the region, if any, will rather be triggered by the East Asian nations themselves. If the changes sought by China or any other nation in the region seriously endanger U.S. security interests, however, that challenge will alarm and compel the United States to pay the cost necessary to protect its vital interests.

Given what has been discussed so far, the following policy guidelines can be offered for the United States.

1. The United States can avert a confrontational path toward China if it wants to, but should not avoid preparing for a possible collision in the future. However remote the collision scenario given the precarious but well-managed relations between the two nations

thus far, an increasingly assertive China will and may gradually constrain the policy options open to the United States in East Asia.

2. The United States should regularly update its working assumptions about the motivations behind China's foreign policy behavior. Holding to one fixed assumption will only damage U.S. national interests in East Asia, particularly when it turns out to be false. The updating must be flexible, and be based on actual Chinese behavior, not on the U.S. anticipation of it. The reality is that the United States' benign intention, if that is what it is, is not always reciprocated by China.

3. The U.S. commitment to the Asian regional architecture should not come about at the expense of its bilateral security partnerships with Korea and Japan. With an increasing number of political elites in both nations feeling the looming weight of China, whether they like it or not, U.S. foreign policy should not take their cooperation for granted. The security alliance feeds on sustained mutual investment and respect.

4. The United States should make every effort to dispel the lingering suspicion, if any and however unrealistic, of its East Asian partners that due to its domestic political and economic hardships, the United States will someday draw down its involvement in East Asia and eventually revert to the Atlanticist path. The United States should maintain a sufficient level of visibility and presence in East Asia by actively participating in the newly emerging multilateral forum, and at the same time maintaining its close bilateral consultation with its traditional security allies.■

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Notes

[1] One needs to pay a particular attention to the surge and decline thesis in this year's mid-term election, since a great number of Hispanic voters, about 70% of whom supported Obama in 2008, were not as likely to participate in 2010 as they were two years ago. Neither was the 2008 young generation of Obama supporters. In contrast, a great number of Republicans or Republican-leaning white voters were more likely to come to the polls in the 2010 election, particularly the Tea Party adherents despite the Republic internal civil war.

[2] James Fallows, 2010, "How America Can Rise Again," *Atlantic Magazine*, January/February. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/01/how-america-can-rise-again/7839/