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Rethinking Northeast Asia

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THE CHALLENGE

Simultaneously nurturing bilateral relations with a rising China while reinvigorating relations with Japan and Korea—key American allies in Northeast Asia—will be a delicate but urgent challenge for the Obama Administration. Each relationship has its particular needs. But success on all fronts will also require that those relationships be addressed in a regional context when dealing with non-proliferation issues such as the denuclearization of North Korea, transnational issues such as climate change and energy security, or stable economic growth in a period of extreme financial stress. Whether such a regional perspective requires—or can produce—a new regional architecture is a different question, however, one without an obvious answer.

THE CONTEXT

A wide-ranging constructive relationship with China is an obvious need if the new Administration is to achieve not only the most pressing regional objectives but also critical global goals. As to the two greatest consumers of energy and the two greatest producers of carbon emissions, the United States and China must cooperate if solutions are to be found. Moreover, not only because of the heft of their economies but also because their relations are vital to protect and promote critical American interests, the somewhat fragile alliance relationships with Japan and South Korea must be tended to on an urgent basis. All three countries play critical roles in the effort to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula and transform North Korea's relations from problematic to at least potentially productive. Fruitful unofficial relations with Taiwan that undergird the deepening of the island's democracy, economic growth and security also serve a broad range of American interests, including the maintenance of peace across the Strait and throughout the region. Integrating Taiwan more into regional regimes on a non-sovereign basis would serve not only American interests but the interests of others.

The sometimes ignored reality is that none of these relationships exists in isolation from the others, and properly weaving them together greatly enhances the prospects of peace in a region that has drawn the United States into war three times in the past century. Moreover, while the United States cannot resolve the bilateral issues between them, it can—and must—forge a policy that contributes to greater mutual trust and a set of relationships

among them that is conducive to long-term stability and to a sense of shared economic destiny.

WHERE TO START

• **Encourage cooperative relations among others, but not at expense of US exclusion**

While Washington will want to encourage cordial, cooperative relations among these various players, that should not come at the expense of American exclusion—or self-exclusion. The United States does not have to be—indeed, should not be—represented at every multilateral meeting in Northeast Asia. But the United States must be an active partner with these societies individually and in groups, exercising leadership that is consultative and respectful, not insistent and demanding. In particular, Washington should seek, as it has in the past, to encourage warmer relations between Korea and Japan, not in opposition to China or anyone else but based on a number of shared values and other interests the United States has with them.

• **Promote an inclusive regional approach**

In particular, this region—including the United States— is critical to coping with the new transnational agenda—environmental degradation, energy security and climate change. The region represents a large part of the global problem and must be a central part of the solution. Despite a natural competitive instinct, all of these governments and societies need to act in a cooperative enterprise—including bringing Taiwan in on a non-sovereign basis. Leaving any one out would be self-defeating, as would any effort by one country or a group of countries to gain advantage over others.

• **Work toward global solutions through regional building blocks**

Global solutions will eventually be required for many of the transnational issues. But working up from building blocks of regional cooperation is likely to be more successful in the long run than striving for an all-at-once solution. Moreover, given the decisive positions of the United States and China as energy consumers and carbon emitters, much of the global problem can be dealt with if regional arrangements “get it right.”

• **Reduce mutual strategic suspicion with China**

For reasons that have both historical as well as more contemporary roots, the United States and China view each other with deep strategic suspicion. Beijing fears that Washington seeks to constrain its power and influence and to limit its geographic reach while Washington suspects that Beijing aims to reduce American clout in the region,

including by eroding US alliances and undermining the value of American military might. There is no doubt an irreducible minimum level of concern that will always remain. Still, a critical requirement for the new Administration will be to strive to ameliorate this mutual strategic suspicion as much as possible. Otherwise, it will be difficult if not impossible to move ahead with sufficient confidence to resolve the most pressing and sensitive issues, even where their shared interest is manifestly clear.

● **Reach true partnership with Japan and Korea**

In many respects—especially rhetorically—US regional alliances are strong. But in both cases, there is an underlying sense on the part of America’s allies that Washington disregards their interests, employing consultation as a one-way street to demand that they “do more.” Conversely, there has been a growing level of American frustration over what is perceived as reluctance by alliance partners to accept responsibilities, regionally and globally, commensurate with their new strength. Among the most challenging tasks for the new Administration is the need to face up to problems in relations with US allies and move to fashion more productive partnerships with them on a truly equal basis.

● **Maintain American leadership through positive engagement and presence**

Perhaps a meaningful regional peace and security mechanism can eventually be created to deal not only with military-related issues but also with the other issues of vital importance. That is likely only going to come, however, as a follow-on to success in the Six-Party Talks, which means it is a relatively distant prospect. In the meantime, troubled as US relations sometimes are, most if not all of America’s regional partners want the United States to continue to play an active role, acting not only as the balance wheel that helps maintain regional stability but also the provider of public goods that ensures there is no strategic vacuum that anyone else might feel tempted—or compelled—to fill. Maintaining a visible US military presence signals to all concerned a continuing American commitment to the region. At the same time, however, the level of non-military American engagement and the style of US leadership will need to be more respectful of the achievements of counterparts and the differences between their views and American views. “Because I said so”—the message often received in the past even if not the one intended—must be replaced with the reality and perception of genuine give-and-take. The United States needs to listen better, to understand how Asians see their own role—and America’s—in order to forge successful policies.

WHAT'S ON THE LINE

Reliance on regional partners is not a substitute for responsible American policy. Approaching things with a regional perspective is also not a substitute for sound bilateral relations. But failure to view these relationships not just bilaterally but also through a regional prism is both to miss the potential synergies and to misapprehend the dynamics as perceived by US partners. If Washington is not aware of the regional context, they certainly are. And their policies are importantly shaped by those perspectives.

The United States has been more remiss in Southeast Asia than in Northeast Asia in sloughing off opportunities to participate in regional groupings and dialogues. Refusal to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and a cavalier attitude toward participation in the East Asia Summit are cases in point.

There are no direct parallels in Northeast Asia. But there has grown up among several of the players in Northeast Asia a greater sense of common interest as seen in the "+3" dialogues and in the interest, at least among some, in promoting a regional Northeast Asia peace and security mechanism as a follow-on to the Korean Six-Party Talks. That particular idea may be premature; it will be important to keep the Six-Party process going as an important tool in the effort to denuclearize North Korea. Moreover, the benefits of a regional mechanism may be oversold by some of its advocates. But that doesn't mean it has no potential usefulness, including helping to create habits of cooperation and forging agreements on "rules of the road" and other arrangements that could minimize the chances of confrontation.

In any event, as relations among regional players develop, including across the Taiwan Strait, while there will be plenty of minefields to be navigated, there is a considerable potential payoff if the United States acts with creativity, flexibility, and a style of leadership that attracts rather than repels its partners. To take full advantage of the potential such an approach could create, the United States needs to think more regionally, not only in the traditional hub-and-spokes bilateral framework that has been the almost exclusive focus in the past.

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Before Alan Romberg joined the Stimson Center in September 2000, he enjoyed a distinguished career working on Asian issues in and out of government, including twenty years as a US Foreign Service Officer. Romberg, who was Principal Deputy Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff and Deputy Spokesman of the Department, served in various capacities dealing with East Asia, including Director of the Office of Japanese Affairs, Member of the Policy Planning Staff for East Asia, and staff member at the National Security Council for China. He served overseas in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Additionally, Romberg spent almost ten years as the C.V. Starr Senior Fellow for Asian Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, and was Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Navy. Romberg holds an

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The East Asia program focuses on the complex security issues confronting the Asia-Pacific region, including the rise of China, US alliance relationships in East Asia, North Korea, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. The program also seeks to increase US-Japan-China cooperation and coordination in security policymaking. Through its Visiting Fellows program, the program facilitates dialogue between regional security professionals and their counterparts in the United States.

ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS

For additional original research on Northeast Asia, please read these publications by Alan Romberg:

"Cross-Strait Relations: First the Easy Steps, Then the Difficult Ones" (China Leadership Monitor, No. 26, Fall 2008)

"Taiwan: George Bush Meet Abba Eban" (Stimson Center, 2008)

U.S. Policy Toward Taiwan, Time for Change? (Position paper for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace debate series, *Reframing China Policy*, 2008)

The U.S. "One China" Policy: Time for a Change? (Neuhauser Memorial Lecture, Harvard, 2007)

"Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice: American Policy Toward Taiwan and US-PRC Relations" (Stimson Center, October 2003)