

George Bush and Northeast Asia: Anticipating the Final Two Years

Alan D. Romberg

Senior Associate and Director, East Asia Program
The Henry L. Stimson Center

Introduction

After 9/11, many observers depicted the Bush administration as simply ignoring Northeast Asia. The emphasis on alliances announced at the start of the term was seen as totally subordinated to the Global War on Terrorism, Afghanistan and, eventually, Iraq. Now, as we enter the final two years of Mr. Bush's term, the policy balance seems once again to be shifting—although not in as dramatic a fashion,

However, as the pendulum makes this modest swing back, it is worth noting that the character of many U.S. relationships with the region has changed. China, once held at arms length, is now perhaps the most evident success story in terms of a new set of cooperative relations. Taiwan, which found great comfort in George Bush's April 2001 pledge to do "whatever it took" to protect it, today finds itself more tolerated than embraced. The principal American allies, Japan and South Korea, while still mainstays of shared U.S. interests and values, are experiencing some tension in ties with Washington. And North Korea, initially shunned as a negotiating partner and currently no more beloved than before, has become the object of potentially serious negotiations that are shaping much of U.S. policy throughout the area.

U.S. Policy in Northeast Asia

Some would question whether the United States really has a "policy" for Northeast Asia, arguing that what passes for policy is merely the agglomeration of a set of specific country-focused relationships, with ad hoc linkages. This is not a frivolous or unimportant question and the answer is not unambiguously clear. For the moment, the answer would still seem to lean more toward the side of specific relationships joined by necessity. Nonetheless, in addition to the broader implications of China's rise, there does seem to be a growing interconnectedness among the U.S. policy concerns in the region, many of them revolving at least in part around the question of North Korea.

The central role of North Korea. The approach to North Korea over most of the Bush presidency has largely been one of ad hoc-ism characterized by attitudes, not policy, which has sometimes produced a level of incoherence that has damaged American relations with the ROK, Japan and even China.

Why has this been so? Ultimately, responsibility rests with the President, who prioritized promotion of certain American values in North Korea over protecting U.S. national

security interests. It is relevant to note the role of a small number of powerful personalities in the Bush administration who opposed compromising with Pyongyang or being seen to follow the example of the Clinton administration. Vice President Richard Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Under Secretary of State John Bolton all acted in a coordinated fashion to impede real diplomacy with the DPRK, favoring unrelenting, if ineffectual, pressure. This attitude fed President Bush's own bias against dealing with an immoral regime, and overwhelmed other policy considerations.

As a result, while Mr. Bush was lending his prestige to those pushing a human rights agenda with the North, he gave short shrift to the consideration of workable negotiating approaches to cope with North Korea's nuclear program and its potential for proliferation. Those in the administration who opposed this prioritization were left with the unenviable task of blocking some of the more extreme measures that might have done even more damage to U.S. interests. But they had little space to propose a constructive agenda to advance those interests. Secretary of State Colin Powell was the most prominent official buffeted by this approach, but he was hardly alone.

Bush's initial allergy to dealing with North Korea eventually morphed into a willingness to "engage," but only on terms that were unrealistic and one-sided. He failed to take account of the rich negotiating record with the North that told much about what works with Pyongyang and what doesn't. Now, that position has suddenly been transformed into what appears to be a real commitment to negotiate in a manner that at least holds the potential to achieve Mr. Bush's long-stated goal of a completely denuclearized Korean Peninsula.

Many have asked why this change has come about. The answers have included the wake-up call of the North's October nuclear test; the departure of some of the key hard-line officials from his administration; Mr. Bush's growing desire to develop some positive achievements for his legacy; the need to minimize complications that he faces outside of Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran; and, finally, his response to weakness as reflected in both the November 2006 congressional elections as well as a string of public opinion polls. But whatever the reason, what is important is that the change is apparently real. So, although it comes five years after many analysts believe it would have been most useful, and at a high cost in terms of the expansion of the North's nuclear capabilities, nonetheless, the fact that it *has* come is an important development not just for Korean Peninsula issues but for broader American interests, as well. It may, in fact, be too late. But whether the current effort will succeed, muddle along, or fizzle out remains to be seen as we write in early spring 2007.

Impact on Relations with South Korea. While recognizing that other factors were also at play on the South Korean side, one significant consequence of the U.S. approach to North Korea over the past several years has been to contribute to severely strained relations with the ROK. The tensions, sometimes seen in public demonstrations, have even spilled over to alliance issues that may now be on a course from which it will be hard to fully recover. They have also been reflected in the distance between U.S. and ROK views on the applicability of the alliance in Northeast Asia. The consequences include changes in

deployments and command arrangements that, despite claims of both governments to the contrary, could well undermine prospects for coordinated military action in the future. Fortunately, this weakness may never be tested because, although the North could wreak havoc with its long-range artillery and short-range missiles, it is in no shape to fight a sustained war. And whatever the organizational shortcomings of the alliance, the continued existence of devastating retaliatory capability against the North acts as an effective deterrent to maintain the uncertain peace that has been in place for over half a century.

Although there is some U.S.-ROK cooperation in more far-flung places such as Iraq, there is no longer an agreed vision about the purposes of the alliance as it might function in Northeast Asia or even on the Peninsula. One should note that, under the Roh administration, there has been some improvement from the early days, and the presidential election in Korea in late 2007 could drive an even more rapid healing process. But unless some more concerted vision of the purposes of the alliance is agreed upon, its long-term survival as a robust element of Northeast Asian security could be cast into serious doubt.

What is necessary is that the United States steps back and evaluates the importance of the alliance from a perspective broader than the immediate issue of “strategic flexibility.” The alliance serves to bolster peace and stability in the region through its very existence and its weakening would harm the American ability to pursue those most important goals.

For its part, Seoul needs to show a greater appreciation of the U.S. role. This is complicated by the fact that South Korea not only has greatly accelerated the timetable for taking the military lead within the alliance, but takes a very forward-leaning posture toward the North and, perhaps even more important as time passes, desires to play the lead role in resolving the nuclear issue and in forging a permanent peace structure on the Peninsula.

The United States has no “principled” objection to the South playing such a role. Indeed, it has long been an American objective to move from the lead role in defense of the Peninsula to a supporting role. But Washington does have two concerns. First, it wants to be assured that the South’s eagerness for nuclear resolution and permanent peace does not translate into terms that do not take adequate account of American equities (including on nuclear proliferation). Second, the fact remains that the North still looks to the United States as the critical source of reassurance regarding its future status and security. So, much as the South wants to play “the” lead role, and much as the United States may agree in principle (as the saying goes, “it is after all their Peninsula”), the reality is that success will require an important American leadership role. That role needs to be played in full partnership with South Korea, so that the results suit Seoul’s sense of itself and its vision of the future. Only in that way can any agreement become a positive force rather than a factor for division. But if long-term peace and stability are to be assured, the United States should not opt out of the lead, and the South should not push it out.

Unless current political trends in South Korea are reversed, there will be a new, more conservative administration elected at the end of 2007 that will have a very different approach to some of these issues. Such a government would probably place greater emphasis on a more openly cooperative tone in the relationship with the United States and would seek to stretch out the adjustments in alliance responsibilities to some extent, and it would be less willing to make unilateral gestures to the North.

Nonetheless, absent some dramatically threatening act by Pyongyang, the shift in ROK policy toward the North in the direction of greater accommodation and less confrontation is probably irreversible. It reflects a deeply felt conviction by South Koreans that a second Korean War is not only unacceptable but unnecessary. Standing up to Pyongyang is increasingly seen as an integral component of this newer policy, and even the Roh Moo Hyun government has toughened its stance in recent months. But this is not the same thing as returning to a confrontational mode or adopting measures designed to force early reunification. No foreseeable government in Seoul will revert to such a policy.

In addition, any government in South Korea is going to insist on both the image and the reality of greater parity in the alliance partnership with the United States. As already suggested, this need not cause greater friction if it is done in a spirit of common enterprise. Recent experience, however, suggests that both governments have some way to go in learning how to make this a positive experience rather than one fraught with risks to the future of the alliance.

Japan—Key Ally, Accumulating Issues. Japan continues to occupy a central place in the American pantheon of global allies and in American thinking about how to project its influence and power in the region. No Asia-Pacific country plays a more important role in terms of promoting shared values and goals. But, despite a remarkably warm relationship between Bush and former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, it is generally recognized that Koizumi's stubborn attitude toward demonstrating regret for Japan's aggression in the 20th century was costly. Most prominently, his continued visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors 14 Class A War Criminals among Japan's other war dead, while perhaps understandable in Japanese political terms, were not helpful to promotion of U.S. interests—or Japan's.

Shinzo Abe's assumption of the prime ministership in September 2006 and his early visits to China and South Korea encouraged many in Washington regarding the prospects for lowering tensions between Japan and its two nearby neighbors. Mr. Abe's initial ambiguity about his own plans for visiting Yasukuni were overlooked by both China and Korea in their desire to improve relations. But his subsequent insistence on denying Japanese culpability in recruiting "comfort women" (forced prostitutes) during World War II, and his potential openness to rewriting other aspects of history, including the slaughter known as the Rape of Nanjing, have again raised doubts about the future course of those relations.

The importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance hasn't fundamentally changed in the American view. But, in light of these controversial actions on Abe's part, the U.S. embrace of Japan

inevitably affects Washington's ability to manage other issues and other relationships. The frustrations this generates on the American side are beginning to parallel some long-standing frustrations on the Japanese side about the functioning of the alliance, and these will need urgent attention.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the North Korean context. Just at the time when the United States is beginning to pursue a more pragmatic approach to negotiating with Pyongyang, the Abe administration is placing great emphasis on maintaining extreme firmness over terms for resolving the cases of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea some decades ago.

The Clinton Administration had expressed sympathy and support for Japan over the abduction question, but it never raised resolution of that issue to the level of a "criterion" for removing North Korea from the U.S. "terrorism list" and lifting related sanctions. The Bush Administration, however, has done just that, and the United States has fully endorsed the need to resolve the abduction issue as part of the Six-Party process.

There is nothing wrong with such support in principle, and much that is right about it. But the search for a negotiated outcome of the overall nuclear issue is not compatible with the totally unyielding position Tokyo has adopted with Pyongyang in recent discussions. Clearly the North has much it must do to reach agreement with Tokyo by abandoning its stonewalling approach and undertaking genuine efforts to bring this tragic issue to closure. But to remain in step with the hope, if not necessarily the promise, of success at the Six-Party table, Japan, too, must adjust its policy. It must abandon its insistence on a full accounting for the missing as a precondition to making any progress in relations with the North and to participating with the other Six-Party partners in offering financial inducements to North Korea to spur compliance with Pyongyang's denuclearization commitments. Rather than relying on rhetoric, Tokyo must accept a real process (not a feigned one on the North's part) to produce further, more reliable information about the abductees that can bring comfort to the victims' long-suffering families. If this does not happen, one can predict with some degree of confidence that American and Japanese paths on North Korea will increasingly diverge. One can only hope that managing this issue will ease after the July 2007 Upper House elections.

At the same time, there is a broader trend that one must recognize. There has been a shift in Japanese political opinion over time, and while Tokyo is far from returning to the aggressive, militaristic policies of the early 20th century as some in China seem to fear, Japan will adopt more robust positions both with regard to its defense capabilities and to assertion of its power and influence. Although some of this will be reflected in Japan's independent activities, much will be expressed through its role in the alliance. The United States will generally welcome, even encourage, that. But both alliance partners need to carefully assess the net effect of such policies in the region and to try to ensure that they are implemented in ways that are not counterproductive.

China's rise—and the shift in Bush Administration policy. China has assumed a role in Bush's thinking that far exceeds what the President appeared to have in mind when he

came into office. Then, while acknowledging China's importance, Mr. Bush sought to lower the PRC's place on the American priority list, highlighting its "competitor" (vs. "partner") role in terms of political values, economic practices, and military power. Now, while those concerns remain, they have been put into a substantially different, and more positive, perspective. Indeed, Sino-American relations overall probably rank as one of the brighter spots in the Bush foreign policy record, and not just in Northeast Asia.

The United States and China have found common cause across an increasingly broad spectrum of issues, but this has been particularly evident with regard to North Korea. For some time, a certain level of mutual frustration existed. Washington saw China holding back from exerting all of its leverage to bring the North to the Six-Party table and to accept total denuclearization; Beijing saw Washington refusing to take a negotiating approach with a sufficient sense of reciprocity to hold any serious prospect of success.

This began to change with the Joint Statement of Principles agreed in Beijing in September 2005, when for the first time each side saw the other moving more or less unambiguously in a constructive direction. American statements in praise of China's role became far less tinged with "yes, but" phrases, and China's judgment that Pyongyang had to do more of the heavy lifting was increasingly clear. This became especially noticeable after the DPRK missile tests in July 2006 and nuclear test in October, and it was reflected in the cooperative work that led to the February 13 agreement.

Many predict that, with the Democrats retaking control of Congress and the impending U.S. presidential campaign, China will once more be placed on the American political front burner. Perhaps that will happen, and surely there will be some pressure on a range of economic and trade issues as the recent Administration action over certain Chinese products and practices makes clear. However, there seems to be a much greater awareness throughout the U.S. political system that, as much as we really do need Beijing to act responsibly—and to understand that we will protect our economic interests as appropriate—our economies are now so intertwined that precipitate, drastic action would probably do the United States more harm than good. Again, that doesn't mean the Administration won't act if necessary. Or certainly that the Congress won't add pressure. But it does argue that, if the PRC cooperates on a course that can be understood on both sides as reasonable, such issues need not rise to a "political" level in the campaign.

The Administration and the Congress will continue to be concerned about the pace and scope of PLA modernization, and they should be. But despite the impressive developments in that realm, and especially acquisition of some sophisticated missile and other asymmetric capabilities that the United States will need to counter, no serious observer would argue that China currently, or in the foreseeable future, can outgun the United States. It could raise the stakes of any confrontation considerably, and could be particularly problematic with respect to Taiwan. But in a comprehensive sense, it has yet to be demonstrated that China could gain and maintain the upper hand.

The larger point, of course, is that both sides should be thinking, not about outgunning the other, but about how to frame their national security policies, and national security

relations, in ways that provide reassurance about long-term intentions rather than simply hedging against uncertainty. The latter is necessary, and will go on—by both sides. China cannot be certain of ultimate American intentions regarding China taking its “rightful” place as a regional and global power; the United States cannot be certain of the ultimate Chinese vision about what that “rightful” place is and how Beijing will seek to achieve it.

But, even as both countries strengthen their military capabilities, the thrust of their mutual efforts should be to do so as much as possible with an eye to deepening peace and stability—not putting it at risk.

The two sets of senior dialogues the United States and China have undertaken—in the economic/financial area and in terms of politics and strategy—need to proceed with some vigor and imagination. They need to get beyond exchanges of talking points to some very frank and open brain-storming, not only about immediate issues of the day but, more important, about the future—where they see themselves and the other party heading and how they can manage all of that constructively. The reality, however, is that the remaining time is now limited for the Bush administration, and while some useful sessions can take place, perhaps the most important result can be to set the scene for greater progress in the next administration.

Taiwan. The circumstances of the “core” issue in U.S.-PRC relations, Taiwan, paradoxically are both very difficult and not very serious. The constant envelope-pushing by the Chen Shui-bian administration on “desinicization” and “Taiwanization” of everything from textbooks to the names of state-owned corporations to ideas for constitutional revision and application to the United Nations is not only nettlesome but potentially complicating for U.S. interests. In an otherwise standard recitation of Chinese positions in a speech recently, the PRC ambassador launched into a fairly heavy-handed lecture about the need for the United States to adhere to its commitments over Taiwan and to live up to its responsibilities for maintaining peace and stability in the Strait. While much of this was apparently generated by concerns over a recent announcement of prospective arms sales to the island, it also reflected frustration that the U.S. response to some of Chen Shui-bian’s latest pronouncements has been weak and seemingly ineffectual.

The United States need not, and should not, dance to every tune Beijing plays over Taiwan. But the reality is that much of the more problematic rhetoric coming out of Taipei, now as over the past several years, reflects the priority given there to Taiwan’s domestic politics and the seemingly willful disregard of American national interests. While one can understand that a politician’s first task is to get elected, in circumstances where Taiwan may eventually call on the United States as its ultimate security guarantor, this one-sided prioritization is not fully understandable, at least in the eyes of Washington. The impending replacement of Taiwan’s representative in the United States is an internal matter for Taipei to decide. The departing and arriving envoys are both well-known and well-regarded in Washington. But if, as seems likely, the Chen administration thinks the recently departed representative was not forcefully advocating Taipei’s positions, and

that a change in personnel will resolve the problems in relations with the United States, it will be deeply disappointed. The problem has been the message, not the messenger.

Thus, across the remainder of his term, the President's patience with political gamesmanship on the island is likely to be limited. Despite Beijing's high level of concern, everyone understands that the prospects for concrete steps toward formal independence through constitutional change during the remainder of Chen's term are between slim and none. Nonetheless, if not stopped, the constant barrage of statements and actions from Taipei that are inconsistent with the Taiwan leader's commitments, including specifically to the President, will eventually exact a greater penalty than State Department press guidance about how they are "unhelpful." The administration has no particular interest in picking a fight with Chen. But neither can Washington simply sit by and allow a dangerous miscalculation to develop in Taipei about the real limits of U.S. tolerance for this sort of behavior. It is better that Taipei, and the Taiwan electorate, understand those limits before a crisis in relations emerges than to have a bilateral confrontation seemingly erupt out of the blue.

The December 2007 Taiwan legislative elections and 2008 presidential elections¹ could produce a very different set of players and priorities in Taipei. Certainly a victory by the current opposition KMT would set Taiwan on a different course from the past seven years, especially if its candidate is former Taipei mayor Ma Ying-jeou. It may not be as smooth as some in the PRC would hope, but Beijing seems prepared to accept the reality that Ma's flexibility may be more limited if he is elected than it would prefer. Still, a course that is not designed to promote formal, permanent separation would change the equation in a substantially positive way from the Mainland's perspective.

While not as favorable from Beijing's perspective, even a victory by either of the more moderate—and more likely—DPP candidates, Premier Su Tseng-chang and former premier Frank Hsieh Chang-ting, would have an important positive effect as compared with the current situation. No DPP candidate—or president—could endorse "one China," as demanded by Beijing as a precondition for resumption of cross-Strait dialogue. But while Su or Hsieh (or for that matter Ma or any other Taiwan leader) would insist on his nation's sovereign, independent status, no likely victor would continue to hold this issue up as the first priority requiring daily reaffirmation and reinforcement in a way that challenged the PRC. Rather, while maintaining principle, any of the likely winners would focus on pragmatic cross-Strait trade and other relations and on how those ties could be used to bolster developments within Taiwan.

As long as the next Taipei administration eschews measures that threaten to lead to formal, *de jure* independence, Beijing seems prepared to cooperate. After all, the burgeoning cross-Strait trade and investment relationship is very much in the PRC's economic interest, as well as being helpful in consolidating support on the island against provocative steps. Whether such ties will eventually promote support for unification is a less certain proposition, but the chances of eventual agreement to some sort of "one

¹ There is consideration being given to combining these two elections into one, perhaps in January 2008.

China” solution would obviously be greater if cross-Strait relations were seen in Taiwan as mutually beneficial rather than antagonistic or threatening.

While some in the Bush administration may be nervous about the implications of a closer Taiwan-Mainland relationship, in fact the issue of reunification is not on the table and will not be for the foreseeable future. Even Beijing seems to accept this (though it cannot openly say so), as it has refocused its approach since 2004 away from bringing about early reunification toward blocking independence. This will likely remain the PRC approach for the foreseeable future unless Taipei forces its hand through formal separatist steps. So the net effect of a calmer cross-Strait relationship is likely to be the easing of a major national security concern of the United States, not the creation of one.

That said, even if cross-Strait relations are eased, Beijing will not abandon capabilities that can deter Taiwan from moving toward independence in the future, and the need for Taiwan to have “reasonable” defense capabilities will therefore also not disappear. Thus, it will still be the U.S. view that Taiwan needs to take sufficient steps in its own self-defense to contribute meaningfully to deterrence and to make any potential American intervention in a Taiwan contingency feasible. American pressure on Taiwan’s legislature to pass an adequate defense budget, while annoying to some on the island, will therefore continue.

Regionalism. The idea of a “regional security structure” in Northeast Asia is now much talked about. It has been given new life by its inclusion as a working group topic at the Six-Party Talks. Still, there is no driving vision of what it should be, including what such a structure would look like, what its purposes would be, and who would be included in it. Whatever emerges, it hardly seems destined to address hard, traditional war-and-peace security issues. The Korean issue won’t be resolved in such a structure, nor will the Taiwan question, not to mention any confrontation between China and Japan over conflicting claims to ocean areas and resources.

Still, a regional “structure” could help build relationships among key policymakers and promote greater habits of cooperation. It could also make concrete contributions in transnational and non-traditional security areas such as counter-terrorism, non-proliferation, anti-piracy, the trafficking of women and children, environmental pollution and the development of safe procedures/rules of the road to avoid incidents at sea or in the air. If this is so, one has to ask why its creation should have to wait upon success of the Six-Party Talks as is now envisaged. One answer is that it is perhaps the only practical approach; there will be great reluctance to include North Korea before a nuclear settlement is reached and China will be reluctant to participate without the North.

In any event, it is not the highest priority issue for any country in the region. But it does have potential utility and the Bush administration seems to believe it should not be allowed to simply die on the vine.

Shifting leadership picture. Finally, one thing that the Bush administration will surely face over the coming two years is an evolving pattern of leadership in the region. By

spring 2008, South Korea and Taiwan will have new leaders, perhaps representing significantly changed orientations. Whether Japan will experience a leadership change (albeit within the LDP) remains to be seen, but the current incumbent is struggling.

Ironically, in addition to China, which will probably see more continuity than change after the important 17th Party Congress that will meet in October 2007 to decide on leadership for the next five years, the most stable regional regime could be in North Korea. This is ironic because, while it is inherently the most brittle and most subject to sudden and dramatic change, there currently is no sign that the iron control Pyongyang has exercised thus far, including during far worse economic times, will suddenly fall apart. Still, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Kim Jong-Il will decide for reasons not entirely apparent to the outside world that this is indeed a moment to shift course. Or that someone else in Pyongyang will decide that for him.

If so, it would likely once again shake up the picture the Bush administration faces in its remaining days in office, with important implications for the entire range of U.S. relationships in Northeast Asia. Even while Iraq continues to bleed and Iran to pose a significant challenge for U.S. diplomacy, coping with any such change in Asia would bring the region even more centrally into the U.S. policy spotlight.

Which brings us back to the Bush administration, itself. As noted, there have already been significant personnel changes in Washington that have had an impact on U.S. relations with East Asia. The combative approach of a number of senior first-term officials has been replaced by a more measured tone. Although some of the real expertise on East Asia, and especially Northeast Asia, has been lost with the departure of some key State Department and NSC personnel, it appears that with the departure of the naysayers, the net result is, so far at least, positive. Especially the refurbished approach to North Korea has carried a lot of freight in improving the state of relations with Seoul and Beijing. If the Six-Party Talks collapse—not likely but the difficulty of even resolving the BDA issue is a disturbing indicator—much of this could be reversed. Absent that, however, the Bush team—and the President, himself—seems committed to maintaining momentum in these relationships as best one can in the Iraq era.

What happens after the American election of November 2008 and the installation of a new administration in January 2009, of course, not only goes beyond the scope of this essay, but beyond the crystal ball-gazing capabilities of its author. The likelihood is that any new administration will want to maintain the momentum with China and to pursue peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue in whatever ways it can. One hopes that repairing the alliance relations with Japan and South Korea will also be high on the agenda, as well as recasting ties with Taiwan in a more constructive mold.

But one might have hoped for that sort of continuity and consistency from the Bush administration, too and it didn't happen that way. So while the logic of American national interests, including national security interests, would argue for such an approach, it cannot be taken for granted.