



## Challenges for the US in Northeast Asia by Brad Glosserman

Brad Glosserman ([brad@pacforum.org](mailto:brad@pacforum.org)) is executive director of the Pacific Forum CSIS.

Northeast Asia invariably poses tricky problems for US policymakers: 2016 will prove no exception. Longstanding issues will continue to fester, and even recent successes may prove problematic. The overlay of a US election campaign will provide its usual complications. While the landscape may look familiar, rarely have the uncertainties consumed all the countries of the region at the same time.

### Who's in charge?

Looking to South Korea, the overarching concern is Seoul's policy toward North Korea and the prospect of widening rifts in the two allies' approach to the DPRK. Pyongyang's Jan. 6 nuclear test will inject a new sense of urgency into South Korean demands for signs of progress – on any front. In his new year's speech (before the test), DPRK Leader Kim Jong Un pledged to make inter-Korean relations a priority and Seoul should be eager to test him. The US is unlikely to have any interest in moving away from its policy of "strategic patience," especially during an election year; the test will only harden that resolve. At the same time, the nuclear test reminds South Koreans of the gap in their indigenous capabilities viz North Korea and increases demands for a response that strengthens deterrence and reassurance: expect new calls for the reintroduction of US tactical nuclear weapons on the peninsula and the renewed demands for the South to develop its own nuclear weapons.

In the absence of progress, ROK President Park Geun-hye is likely to press China to use its influence in Pyongyang. That will fuel the complaint that Seoul is "tilting" toward Beijing, a suspicion that will gain weight if Seoul hedges on other policies – deployment of the THAAD missile defense system, demanding Chinese compliance with international law in the South China Sea – to get China to back ROK positions toward the North.

Meanwhile, the US must navigate fallout from the ROK-Japan deal on comfort women reached at the end of 2015. That deal has unleashed tremendous anger in South Korea and there is a belief there that Seoul signed, not because it is in the ROK's interest (which it is), but because the US needs it and forced the Park government's hand. This belief emanates from two deep strands of ROK insecurity: fear that the alliance with the US is undervalued relative to the one that Washington has with Japan, and the more general sense that Korea remains "a shrimp among whales," buffeted by forces beyond its control. Both are false, but the beliefs compensate for outcomes that the Korean public does not like. The US must be prepared to deflect the anger and confusion triggered by this agreement.

## Will he or won't he?

In dealings with Tokyo, the US faces a similar problem. While relations are good, the chief danger for Washington is Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's readiness to capitalize on a disorganized opposition to further pursue his agenda, pushing unpopular policies – and the US will get the blame. The chief tactical question is whether Abe will call a double election this summer. There will be an Upper House ballot, and there is speculation that Abe will again exploit the vacuum on the other side of the aisle to boost his party's numbers in the Diet, as he did in 2014. Cold-blooded political realists applaud such moves and hope that it will give Abe and his party the supermajority needed to push for constitutional amendment, his longstanding goal. Shrinking turnout – the last election hit postwar lows – suggests a large part of the public, perhaps even a majority, does not share the prime minister's enthusiasms.

Moreover, in Japan, as in South Korea, there is an undercurrent of opinion that confuses US preferences for particular outcomes with the manipulation of politics to achieve those objectives. In other words, many Japanese, like many South Koreans, blame the US for their government's policies, believing that Washington is pulling strings. Given the outsized role the US has traditionally played in Tokyo's domestic politics, the concordance of US interests and those of conservative policymakers in Tokyo, and the readiness of Japanese politicians to use the US to justify a policy – *gaiatsu*, anyone? – confusion is understandable. The fact that the 2015 US-Japan Defense Guidelines were concluded before Japan passed legislation allowing the country to honor those commitments is cited as one example of US power and influence. The Futenma controversy is another. The readiness of many Japanese politicians to justify security reform as the responsibility of a conscientious ally, while laudable and music to the ears of many Americans, is used by some to confuse cause and effect. The US has to be ready for that blowback – as well as the complications it may pose for US relations with China.

### Misreading the tides of history?

Tokyo's readiness to take on a higher profile regional security role troubles many Chinese. Chinese analysts often charge the US is behind this effort (although in some conversations Americans are warned that they are being used by revanchist Japanese). The dispatch of armed Chinese Coast Guard ships into Japanese waters ("disputed territory" in Chinese eyes) at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 is a pointed reminder that a serious clash between Japan and China is possible and, in that case, the US must be ready to honor its Article 5 commitments to its ally.

The US commitment to freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea will continue to prompt Chinese

charges of meddling and promoting instability. The US must ensure that it remains committed to principles – freedom of navigation, peaceful resolution of disputes – without being perceived as reckless or weak. The US-ASEAN summit that will be held in February will surely be seen by Chinese as an attempt to influence Southeast Asian thinking; the symbolism of the meeting place – Sunnylands, California, where Presidents Barack Obama and Xi Jinping announced their “new type of major country relations” – will not be missed by China’s US watchers.

Before that meeting, there is the January election in Taiwan, a ballot that most believe will be won by Tsai Ing-wen, candidate of the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party. A DPP president will generate great anxiety in China and Beijing will do its best to limit the new government’s options and enlist the US in its efforts to do so. Managing that triangular relationship will be difficult.

Hanging over all those developments is the larger US-China relationship. In addition to the usual issues that inflame passions and consume policy makers in both capitals – cyber attacks, intellectual property theft, human rights, economic engagement, Taiwan arms sales – domestic developments in each country will contribute to a hot-house atmosphere. A presidential election campaign is a spectacle that sucks the air out of US politics, diverting attention in some cases, and distorting it in others. There is always a risk that foreign leaders will assume a US president is a lame duck, weakened and distracted, as the silly season proceeds.

That risk is greater still given the Chinese belief that the American imperium has run its course and their country’s rise and assumption of regional prominence is inevitable. A slowing economy, a crackdown on civil society, and growing internal strains could push the Beijing government to miscalculate in a crisis. The US must ensure that its interests are clear and that China understands the stakes as Beijing contemplates its response to external developments.

None of these challenges are new, but rarely have they all been present at the same time. Crisis management will likely be needed, but so too is vision and strategy. The former cannot come at the expense of the latter. US diplomats will earn their pay in 2016.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*