



## U.S. Policy in Northeast Asia: On the Right Track?

by Ralph A. Cossa

As we enter the Year of the Dragon, U.S. bilateral relations with key states in Northeast Asia generally appear on track. Ties with America's two most important security allies, Japan and the Republic of Korea, remain on steady ground, as the Trilateral Cooperation and Oversight Group (TCOG) process has helped to keep all three generally in synch when dealing with their most contentious common concern, North Korea. Meanwhile, Pyongyang appears on a charm offensive of sorts (at least by North Korean standards of behavior). Previously strained ties with China also appear gradually to be mending, witness Lt. Gen. Xiong Guangkai's generally cordial visit to Washington.

But, as American humorist Mark Twain once observed, "even if you are on the right track, you'll get run over if you just stand there." This is no time for complacency or benign neglect, all too common features of U.S. policy toward Asia, especially during an American election year.

**China.** U.S.-China relations remain the prime candidate for a future train wreck. True, the U.S. and China finally agreed to the terms of China's accession into the WTO and settled the compensation issue relating to damage to their respective diplomatic properties. However, while Washington is eager to move beyond the Kosovo-induced frictions, Beijing is still calling for a "satisfactory account" of the incident and punishment of the "perpetrators." As long as China continues to use the tragic Belgrade embassy bombing accident as a vehicle to promote Chinese nationalism and anti-Western sentiments, real rapprochement will be impossible. A highly nationalistic first anniversary observation in China in May will no doubt attract the attention of China detractors in the U.S. and harden the positions being prescribed by American presidential contenders.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Congressional debate over granting China permanent normal trade relations (as called for under the WTO agreement) is likely to be even more contentious during an American election year, especially if China fuels the debate by anti-business, or anti-human rights, or other unproductive actions. Congressional attempts to revive Taiwan Security Enhancement Act (TSEA) legislation will also inflame the situation.

**Taiwan.** China remains totally inflexible on all aspects of the Taiwan issue, be it future U.S. arms sales, Taiwan inclusion in theater missile defense (TMD) schemes, or a resumption of cross-Strait dialogue absent a retraction of Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's July 1999 pronouncement that cross-Strait dialogue must be conducted on a "special state-to-state" basis – something Lee is not about to do.

Fortunately, Beijing and Taipei have both refrained from overly harsh rhetoric in recent months, and Beijing thus far has avoided the type of heavy-handed actions (including missile launches) that proved so counterproductive in advance of the 1996 Taiwan elections. Nonetheless, there are fears in Beijing (and Washington) that President Lee Teng-hui may have another "shock" in store before he relinquishes power.

My own view is that President Lee will be increasingly preoccupied between now and election day (March 18) with domestic politics – his top priorities being to get his chosen successor, Lien Chan elected and, equally important, to keep ruling party defector James Soong from becoming President. The next "shock" is most likely to come if Soong is elected, as the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) – most likely with Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) support – might try to institutionalize Lee's "special state-to-state" dictum prior to inauguration day (May 20) to reduce Soong's flexibility in dealing with the Mainland.

Beijing previously drew a line in the sand over this issue and could feel compelled to respond to this or a variety of other perceived provocative actions. (Some have even intimated that the election of the DPP candidate, Chen Shui-bian, would, in and of itself, be perceived as provocative.) It must be made clear to Beijing that any harsh reaction to the democratic process in Taiwan will undoubtedly result in a hardening of anti-China positions among all the American presidential candidates, making improved relations with the next U.S. president even more difficult.

**Japan.** The election year news has not been all bad for U.S. Asia policy. Japan bashing, long a staple in American politics, has largely been absent from this year's debates and a recent *Yomiuri Shimbun* / Gallop poll, for the first time in 12 years, showed that more than 50% of respondents in both countries believe relations are good. Some rough spots loom on the horizon, however, both over the working out of the fine details regarding Okinawan base issues and over the impending debate about Japan's funding support to U.S. bases.

Okinawan Governor Inamine's willingness to proceed with the relocation of Futenma Airbase to a location in northern Okinawa is welcome news and promises to defuse a potentially embarrassing issue in advance of President Clinton's visit for the G-8 meeting in Okinawa this July. However, his request that the new base be returned to Okinawan control in fifteen years rightfully remains unacceptable to Tokyo and Washington. A compromise seems in order to reward Inamine for his efforts – a 15 year renewable lease would appear to be a reasonable approach, tying the future American presence at Nago (as elsewhere in Okinawa and the rest of Japan) to the future geopolitical environment.

Japan has also requested some relief in the amount it pays to help sustain the U.S. military presence. This so-called host nation support (HNS) currently stands at about five billion U.S. dollars annually. There is wide-spread belief in Japan, even among base supporters, that this figure should be reduced and this issue will no doubt be the subject of debate both within Japan and between Washington and Tokyo. The U.S. could, of course, take the moral high road and agree in advance to a symbolic 1% cut in HNS in recognition of Japan's economic difficulties (and its own continuing boom), but what are the odds of Washington being that forward thinking?

There is another trend in Washington that is sure to put future strains on the U.S.-Japan alliance. The Senate's October rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the administration's threats to abandon the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty if Russia does not agree to significant revisions are ringing alarm bells in Tokyo, where the commitment to nuclear disarmament and arms control runs deep. Vigorous U.S. pursuit of national missile defense (NMD), which is seen as undermining the ABM Treaty, could threaten Japanese support for the less contentious (to them) theater missile defense program. A growing tendency to lump the TMD and NMD programs together is further complicating Washington's and Tokyo's relations with both Moscow and Beijing, as well as potentially with one another.

**Korea.** The current improved state of U.S.-ROK relations also rests on a potentially shaky foundation. The good news is that both sides have done amazingly well in defusing several potentially explosive issues: revelations regarding the apparent killing of Korean civilians by American soldiers during the early, confused days of the Korean War; disagreements over the ROK's desire to develop an enhanced offensive missile capability which could exceed Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) range limitations; and such old stand-by issues as the U.S.-ROK status of forces (SOFA) agreement and the U.S. military's use of prime Seoul real estate. In addition, trade disagreements have generally been submerged in the broader multilateral World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations.

However, any of the above issues could turn ugly and the current coincidence of views regarding pursuit of a generally soft approach toward North Korea could change as a result of domestic politics in either country – President Kim faces a difficult parliamentary election in April that could further chip away at domestic support for his “Sunshine Policy” toward North Korea and no American politician ever made points by saying nice things about Pyongyang.

In addition, no one underestimates North Korea's ability to serve as its own worst enemy through some unpredictable action that would strain Washington and Seoul's relations both with Pyongyang and with one another. Current, admittedly modest, signs of moderation and increased flexibility emanating from North Korea may provide cause for cautious optimism. But, Pyongyang's reluctance to send a senior official to Washington as promised and its continued intense criticism of U.S. actions suggest that it is too soon to tell if recent positive developments signal a shift in policy or merely a change in tactics.

**Regional Perceptions.** Finally, even the perception that U.S. policy is currently on track can be called into question. Just as the U.S. Senate's October 1999 rejection of the CTBT raised questions about America's desire and ability to lead the global non-proliferation movement, so to did the Seattle WTO debacle in December raise questions about America's economic leadership.

While the embarrassment was global, many Asian countries – including some of America's closest allies – were particularly upset by America's handling of the meeting; Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister (and WTO heir-apparent) Supachi Panichpakdi could only hope that Seattle would serve as a “wake-up call” that the interests of developing countries must be seriously taken into account. President Clinton's willingness in Seattle to collapse a long-planned economic meeting rather than bear even modest domestic political costs has led many in Asia to conclude that there is little to be gained from serious negotiation with the current lame duck administration. This view can spill over into U.S. bilateral security relationships as well.

In short, this is no time for complacency or inertia when it comes to addressing continuing Asia-Pacific foreign policy challenges. The United States needs to make a concerted effort to recover ground lost as a result of the WTO and CTBT setbacks. Washington must convincingly demonstrate its willingness and ability to address or contain some of the negative trends surrounding its bilateral relations with many states in the region. First priority, as always, should go to alliance maintenance. Keeping the lid on potential problems with Japan and South Korea will require skillful diplomacy, along with increased attention and understanding. Insulating U.S.-China and U.S.-North Korea relations from partisan politics will be even more challenging, especially if Beijing or Pyongyang (or Taipei) takes steps that add fuel to the fire. The big question: will Washington answer the wake-up call or remain half asleep on the tracks?

*Ralph A. Cossa is Executive Director of Pacific Forum CSIS and co-editor of Comparative Connections, an online journal [<http://www.csis.org/pacfor/ccejournal.html>] which provides quarterly updates on key Asia-Pacific bilateral relationships.*