



Bush's Emerging Asia Policy: What's Still Missing

by Ralph A. Cossa

With one notable exception, Secretary of State Colin Powell's Senate confirmation testimony outlining the Bush administration's Asia policy signaled a remarkable degree of continuity. Powell identified America's bilateral alliance network, and particularly the U.S.-Japan relationship, as the bedrock from which all else in Asia flows -- this was stated policy during the Clinton administration as well, even if it occasionally suffered in its implementation. Powell also reiterated America's "one-China" policy, with the caveat that "we expect and demand a peaceful settlement, acceptable to people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait." Like its predecessors, the Bush administration will not support unilateral attempts by either side to alter the status quo and will not tolerate any attempt by Beijing to force a solution unacceptable to the people of Taiwan.

Secretary Powell also pledged to support reconciliation efforts between North and South Korea and to continue Washington's dialogue with Pyongyang as long as it "addresses political, economic, and security concerns, is reciprocal, and does not come at the expense of our alliance relationships." The U.S. also intends to abide by the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework, "provided that North Korea does the same." While Pyongyang took offense at Powell's reference to its Dear Leader as a "dictator" - although few could lay greater title to the term -- fears that the U.S. would pull the rug out from under the North-South and U.S.-DPRK dialogue processes have thus far proven to be unfounded.

Powell also underscored the need to coordinate U.S. policies, particularly as regards Indonesia, with Australia. Some (perhaps disingenuously) have misinterpreted this tip of the hat to a long-standing ally as evidence of U.S. intentions to "deputize" Australia to do its bidding in the region. But, a greater effort at policy coordination between Washington and its Asia-Pacific allies makes sense, as does increased American attention to events in Indonesia (and elsewhere in Southeast Asia). One would hope to see greater coordination, not only with Canberra but with Tokyo and others as well, in developing policies aimed at ensuring the survival of emerging Southeast Asian democracies.

What was conspicuously absent from Powell's comments was any reference to Asian multilateralism. The U.S. is currently involved in two major region-wide efforts: the security-oriented ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) effort (which includes an annual Leaders' Meeting). Both are in need of stimulation but are still worthy of continued U.S. support.

The ARF -- an annual gathering of the region's foreign ministers -- needs to evolve beyond its useful but limited "talk shop" format to not only address the region's more sensitive

security issues but to also develop joint procedures for dealing with them. While the ASEAN states must take the lead here, it is not likely to happen without behind-the-scenes U.S. encouragement. Secretary Powell must also commit to attending the annual ARF ministerial meeting; his two Clinton-era predecessors fell short in this regard.

APEC also needs a boost. Not a great deal of substance came out of last fall's APEC gathering in Brunei. APEC's consensus-building approach has been allowed to provide a convenient excuse for some members to resist or impede liberalization, to everyone's detriment. This has helped stimulate moves by some more progressive APEC members to create bilateral Free Trade Agreements among themselves. Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong summed it up nicely: "Those who can run faster should run faster. They should not be restrained by those who don't want to run at all."

While APEC's sense of common purpose has suffered in recent years, the annual Leaders' Meeting still provides a useful opportunity to draw attention to -- and to press for the achievement of -- the Bogor Declaration's 2010 and 2020 open market goals for developed and developing states respectively. The Bush administration needs to revitalize the APEC notion of cooperation toward mutual goals, with the attendant give and take that requires. Washington should not waver on pushing for pragmatic results, but it can also set a higher tone of collaboration. In this vein, China's entry into the World Trade Organization will affect markets globally, but will be particularly felt by APEC members. Pacific Forum economic analyst Jane Skanderup warns that there will be temptations to revert to protectionist measures as countries face inevitable economic and political pressures resulting from China's increased exports to the region. The United States, in its own policies as well as its approach to APEC members, can help the region's leaders stay focused on the ultimate benefits of a more open, equitable Chinese market.

A full commitment to the APEC process by the U.S. should also entail active encouragement of the intra-Asian economic dialogues that exclude Washington. So far, the U.S. seems merely to tolerate (if not ignore) such fora as ASEAN Plus Three (Japan, China, Republic of Korea) and ASEM (which promotes Asia-Europe cooperation). But, the more opportunities East Asian countries have to flesh out differences among themselves on economic issues, the more progress APEC is likely to make in the long run.

Finally, some thought should be given to proposing that, in the future, the APEC Leaders' Meeting be held every other year, substituting an ARF Leaders' Meeting on the off years, in order to promote higher-level security as well as economic dialogue.

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