



## **Bush's First 100 Days: Northeast Asia Policy Off to a Rocky Start**

by Ralph A. Cossa

The Bush administration's first 100 days have been rocky ones as far as Asia policy is concerned. The positive spin emanating from President Bush's initial meeting with Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen quickly degenerated into a potential tailspin in Sino-U.S. relations after the mid-air collision between a Chinese jet fighter and a U.S. reconnaissance plane over the South China Sea. In addition, mixed signals from Bush's summit meeting with ROK President Kim Dae-jung seemed to contradict earlier, more positive statements by Secretary of State Colin Powell that the U.S. would support both the ROK's and the previous U.S. administration's policies of engagement with North Korea. Meanwhile, reality, in the form both of a surfacing submarine and a sinking economy, also tested Bush's resolve to raise U.S.-Japan relations to a higher strategic level. Still missing after 100 days is an overall vision statement for Asia to guide day-to-day policy.

China: Following the EP3E's April 1 emergency landing at a Chinese airfield on Hainan Island, the international spotlight became focused on Beijing, in whose hands rested the fate of the American crew, not to mention the possible future direction of Sino-U.S. relations. If maintaining good relations with Washington was a priority goal of Beijing, this was not immediately evident from its handling of the incident.

This is not to say that the U.S. handled things as smoothly as it could have. Instead of quickly blaming the deceased Chinese pilot and demanding the immediate return of the crew and aircraft, the U.S. could have merely reported that there had been an unfortunate, accidental collision and proposed a joint investigation of the accident along with the prompt return of the aircraft and crew. Such an approach may not have changed the Chinese reaction one bit. But, it is fair to say that the U.S. announcement helped set the initial tone and may have made China's overly defensive, highly-combative response more likely.

Nonetheless, it was China's hard-nosed behavior that could have precipitated a genuine crisis were it not for the generally smooth handling of the incident by the Bush team after day one. China's stonewalling on the return of the damaged U.S. aircraft will further complicate Bush's efforts to depoliticize the incident and keep the relationship on track. The Bush administration also deserves generally high marks on the way it handled the Taiwan arms sales package, holding AEGIS in abeyance while still providing enough to keep Taiwan (and the Congress) generally pleased without sending Beijing over the edge.

The low-keyed manner in which the planned visit of former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui to the U.S. (since delayed for health reasons) was handled also deserves some praise. Here,

again, Beijing just doesn't seem to get it. As was the case with Lee's just-concluded trip to Japan for medical treatment, the only thing that makes the visit significant is China's strong reaction to it. Had Beijing announced that it could care less what Lee did, given that he was "a disgraced politician abandoned by his own party," the visits would be little noticed and quickly forgotten. Lee is a private citizen. Granting him a visa to Japan, America, or elsewhere (he visited the UK last year) does not violate any agreements with China. China's attempts to dictate to others who they can allow to visit (the Dali Lama being another case in point) would, if the situation were reversed, be condemned by Beijing as "interference in one's internal affairs." This admonition works both ways.

The good marks received by his team's handling of these issues was quickly negated, however, by Bush's failure to stick to his cue cards regarding Washington's commitment to help Taiwan defend itself. Bush's pronouncements about doing whatever it takes to defend Taiwan, had they not been subsequently corrected (in what will likely be just one of many "what the President meant to say" instances during this administration), would have signaled a dramatic, uncoordinated (and in my view, unwise) change in U.S. policy. Strategic ambiguity has served the U.S. well; strategic confusion does not! Any decision to change this carefully thought-out and thus far successful policy should include comprehensive analysis, careful private debate, and full consultation with America's allies.

Korea: Bush's ad-libs also appear to have created some confusion regarding U.S. Korea policy, especially given his new team's inability to control the spin coming out of Bush's March 7 meeting with his ROK counterpart. President Kim sought four things from the summit: a personal Bush endorsement of his Sunshine Policy, a reaffirmation of the U.S.-Korea alliance, a continued U.S. commitment to the Agreed Framework and to the trilateral coordination process (which also involves Japan), and a greater understanding of Bush's views on East Asia security through the establishment of direct personal contact. President Kim got what he wanted, but the package was not as nicely wrapped as he had hoped.

To Kim's discomfort, Bush restated the obvious -- that North Korea was still a major threat to peace on the Peninsula -- while publicly registered his own skepticism regarding Pyongyang's trustworthiness, especially regarding missile negotiations. Bush made it clear that Washington's negotiations with Pyongyang were not going to proceed until an overall Korea/East Asia policy review was completed.

One can hardly fault a new administration for wanting to get its new team in place and its priorities established before proceeding. Nonetheless, Washington's reputed "hardline" approach toward the DPRK feeds ROK suspicions that the U.S. wants to keep the North Korean threat alive in order to justify both its military presence in Asia and its national missile defense

(NMD) program. A failure by Washington to deal effectively with the mixed signals and resulting perceptions could have a long-term negative impact on U.S.-ROK relations. This is especially true when U.S. actions are compared, as Koreans often do, with seemingly unqualified Chinese support for the North-South reconciliation effort.

Japan: The accidental sinking of the Ehime Maru placed an initial strain on U.S.-Japan relations but was successfully managed by both sides. Personal apologies by senior U.S. leaders including President Bush helped to defuse the crisis, as did the trip to Japan by the Navy's Vice Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral William Fallon. Nonetheless, such incidents chip away at public support for the military alliance at a time when both sides appear committed to redefining the relationship and taking it to a higher level of cooperation -- an effort that will, in the final analysis, be impossible without public support.

President Bush further underscored the importance of the alliance by agreeing to a summit meeting with then-Japanese Prime Mori despite the latter's impending resignation. During their Washington meeting, the two leaders issued a thoughtful joint communique pledging "a dynamic approach to bilateral defense consultation and planning" that can serve as the basis of future cooperation. Included in the Bush-Mori declaration was a pledge to "strengthen joint efforts to address the transnational challenges of the 21st century.

However, it wasn't long after Mori's departure when the U.S. announced, apparently without advance notice or coordination, that it was abandoning the Kyoto Protocol, which set strict air pollution limits. The action itself was not surprising. Given widespread bipartisan sentiment against the treaty in the U.S. Senate, the treaty appeared doomed regardless of who became president. But, it was the way the announcement was handled that took Tokyo by surprise. For a leader who promised "leadership without arrogance" and close dialogue on major issues, the failure to discuss this decision in advance with the country most closely associated with the global initiative has sent warning signals to Tokyo that this administration may be no more inclined to discuss issues of concern with Tokyo than the previous one.

The recent selection of Koizumi Junichiro -- a self-proclaimed reformer and strong advocate of an enhanced U.S.-Japan relationship and greater Japanese responsibility-sharing -- as Japan's new Prime Minister may yet open the door for the type of enhanced strategic relationship that Bush advisors such as Deputy Secretary of State Armitage are advocating, provided that the two sides can agree on what Japan's future role realistically should and can be.

Next Steps. In order to deal with the mixed signals and anxiety generated by policies and practices to date, President Bush needs to lay out a clear Asia "Vision Statement" spelling out his administration's overall goals and policies toward East Asia in general and toward China, both Koreas, and Japan in particular. During his first Asia visit in July 1993, President Clinton -- himself a relatively inexperienced southern governor whose election similarly raised Asian anxiety levels -- outlined his vision of a "New Pacific Community" which helped to alleviate growing concern about his Asia policies. Unfortunately, Bush's first Asian visit will likely not occur until this fall, in conjunction with the October APEC meeting (with anticipated

stopovers in Japan and Korea before arriving in China). Some exposition of a new vision for Asia is needed before then, if not by President Bush, then perhaps by Secretary of State Colin Powell in conjunction with his own impending trip to Asia. Hopefully, during his June visit, Powell will provide the overall vision and framework that President Bush will then be able to reinforce and embellish in October.

*Ralph A. Cossa is President of the Pacific Forum CSIS.*