



America's Role in Asia

Prior to the U.S. presidential elections, the Asia Foundation [www.asiafoundation.org] established four task forces – one each in the U.S., Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and South Asia – to review, and to make recommendations to the next U.S. administration about America's role in Asia. Recommendations growing out of the Southeast Asian and U.S. reports were discussed during the Singapore launch of the report in early December by task force members Tommy Koh and Ralph Cossa. A summary of their remarks follows:

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America's Role in Asia: A Convergence of Views

by Ralph A. Cossa

In its second term, the Bush administration needs to pay more attention to Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular. Most importantly, while Asians need to recognize the importance of the war on terrorism to Washington in the post-Sept. 11 world, so too does Washington need to understand that a seemingly unidimensional approach toward Southeast Asia – frequently characterized as Washington's continued "hectoring" on terrorism issues – detracts from the accomplishment of other key objectives shared by Washington and the majority of East Asian nations: the promotion of open markets, democracy, and the rule of law; the need to address root causes of instability; human security concerns, such as the spread of HIV/AIDS, SARS, bird flu, etc.; the desire for safe and secure sea lanes; and the need to stem the flow of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – an effort that has gained a sense of urgency over fears that such weapons might fall into the hands of terrorists.

These findings of the "America's Role in Asia" U.S. task force closely parallel the findings of the simultaneous effort undertaken by scholars and security specialists in Southeast Asia. The U.S. and Southeast Asian task forces, and similar groups representing scholars from both Northeast and South Asia, had another major point in common: all saw the relationship between the U.S. and an emerging China as a key factor in shaping the future geopolitical environment. "The region does not view the rise of China as a threat but as an opportunity and a challenge," the Southeast Asia report states; American task force members (and their Northeast and South Asia colleagues) agree. Washington needs to better articulate its long-term vision regarding China . . . and Beijing also needs to articulate its long-term vision for its own role in Asia.

In fairness, those reading beyond the two pages dealing with "preemptive attacks" (in the face of an imminent WMD threat) would have discovered that the Bush administration's 2002 *National Security Strategy* clearly identified major power cooperation as key to future global stability and identified China as part of the solution (even while acknowledging that it had the potential to become part of the

problem if so inclined). Fortunately, China was not an issue in the 2004 U.S. presidential campaigns. While the term "strategic competitor" (left over from the 2000 election) is frequently mentioned in Asian circles, Washington prefers to call Beijing a "partner in diplomacy" while both refer to their "cooperative, constructive, but candid" relations as extremely good (if not "the best ever," a description heard more in Washington than in Beijing).

Yet, neither the Americans nor their Asian colleagues take China's "peaceful rise" for granted. This is why most support a continued U.S. military presence in Asia as a "hedge" against a more assertive China in the future – as one regional expert noted: "we have no doubt China's rise will be peaceful; it's what China will do once it has risen that is the real concern." Washington can do things that will increase the probability of an interconnected, interrelated, cooperative China – and can do things that make things considerably worse – but, in the final analysis, it is up to Beijing to address Washington's and the region's concerns about its future intentions, as its political, economic, and military power continues to grow. It is not a "zero-sum game," American and regional scholars argue, and neither Washington nor Beijing should approach its relations – either with one another or with Asia – from this mindset. This having been said, Asians also warn Washington that it is "losing the competition for influence in Southeast Asia" . . . and that China is winning. This is not a cry for help; it is a cry for attention!

The American report pays a lot of attention to the most probable China-U.S. flashpoint – Taiwan – as does the companion report from Northeast Asia. All too characteristically, Southeast Asian colleagues barely made passing reference to this problem, even though a fierce zero-sum battle for influence continues in Southeast Asia between Beijing and Taipei and, as many senior Southeast Asian officials have warned, U.S. mismanagement of its own relations with Taipei could have disastrous consequences for the region writ large. Isolating Taiwan is not the answer. Trying to find creative ways of integrating Taiwan into the economic, political, and security dialogue makes more sense, although this requires a less confrontational approach from Taipei and more flexibility than Beijing has thus far been willing to demonstrate.

The U.S. and Southeast Asian reports also stress the need for closer cooperation between Washington and the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a whole, rather than its current focus, which is perceived to favor a bilateral approach with individual (especially like-minded) ASEAN members. China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand all now participate in annual summit meetings with ASEAN; the U.S. does not. One key stumbling point is Myanmar (or Burma, we can't even agree on its name). Both reports encourage Washington to find more

effective ways to promote political reconciliation and openness in Rangoon while also calling on its military rulers to honor their Roadmap to Democracy. Finally, the American and Southeast Asian reports both call for Washington to more effectively reach out to Southeast Asia's 250 million Muslims, highlighting for particular attention the need to effectively, but diplomatically (read: unobtrusively), support Indonesia's democratization.

The message from Southeast Asia is clear: We want to have good relations with the United States, based on a mutual recognition of the region's growing economic and political importance, not just as a "second front" in the war on terrorism.

American and East Asian specialists alike call on the Bush administration, as it starts its second term, to better articulate a comprehensive strategy and vision for Asia in general, and for ASEAN in particular, encompassing a broad spectrum of political, economic, security, and social/cultural dimensions.

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