PacNet
Number 10

Pacific Forum CSIS
Honolulu, Hawaii

February 6, 2009

Reassuring Allies: Secretary Clinton's Most Important Mission by Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman

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We welcome the news that Hillary Clinton's first overseas trip as Secretary of State will be to Japan, Korea, and China (appropriately in that order). While her visit to Beijing will likely garner the lion's share of attention, her visits to Tokyo and Seoul are equally if not more important. As we discovered during a recent visit, anxieties about the Obama administration's Asia policy are running high among government officials and foreign policy elites in both capitals.

A certain amount of anxiety is present every time a new administration takes power – Obama ran on a platform of "change" but it is not clear what changes, if any, his administration has in store for East Asia. But there is also a great deal of anxiety about current trends, which many in Tokyo and Seoul fear will not be reversed and might even be accelerated.

Bush administration diplomacy raised fears that the U.S. was content to "manage" North Korean nuclear weapons instead of insisting on complete disarmament. This has resulted in a situation in which conservative governments in Seoul and Tokyo are taking a harder line against North Korea than is the U.S. This gap must be closed. Allied anxieties are magnified by the U.S. negotiating style. We heard frequent complaints that negotiations with North Korea had been too closely held and that our other partners were not being sufficiently consulted about the bilateral talks. Greater transparency must be promised and provided since indications are that President Obama intends to continue and might even increase the level of bilateral negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang.

This plays into the traditional stereotyping of Democratic administrations as being "soft" on security. Candidate Obama's proclaimed readiness to talk to all adversaries sounds naive to the realists that dominate security planning among our allies. While this stance has since been heavily caveated, fears remain that the North Koreans would out-maneuver an unseasoned U.S. administration that was looking for some early diplomatic success or that the Obama administration would fall for a "grand bargain" under which the U.S. would accept a nuclear-armed DPRK as long as it does not proliferate. While the prospects of this happening in our opinion are slim to none, anxieties persist in Japan and Korea (and, for that matter, in China as well). Once again, reassurance and transparency are needed, in both word and deed.

Officials in Seoul and especially in Japan also privately express concern about a greater U.S. "tilt" toward China, noting (incorrectly, in our view) that this tendency had already begun during Bush's second term and was likely to be increased in a Democratic administration. Don't read this the wrong way! No one wants Washington to have a confrontational policy toward Beijing; to the extent one seemed to exist during the Rumsfeld years, it made our allies nervous. But Tokyo and Seoul need reassurance that allies still come first and that improved Sino-U.S. relations will not come at their expense.

The gaps in perspectives on North Korea and China have our allies quietly voicing concern about the credibility of the U.S. commitment to their defense. We don't want to overstate this claim: both alliances are highly valued and a pillar of both countries' defense. But there are growing doubts about U.S. reliability. Twists in U.S. policy, and especially the decision to take North Korea off the list of state sponsors of terrorism, have antagonized many Japanese; many South Koreans also thought the action premature, given that the promised quid pro quo – a denuclearization verification regime – was never achieved. While few would brand the U.S. as unreliable, the majority with whom we spoke saw Washington as increasingly less reliable at the end of the Bush administration than at its onset.

As a result, it is critically important that there should be no surprises emanating from Secretary Clinton's discussions in Beijing; Seoul and Tokyo must be thoroughly briefed in advance on her major talking points and desired outcomes. Likewise, the contents of any pre-briefings should not appear in the Japanese or Korean press before Secretary Clinton arrives in Beijing – reliability works both ways.

It should be noted that allies' fears are magnified by the weakness of the governments in Seoul and Tokyo. Both South Korean President Lee Myeung Bak and Japanese Prime Minister Aso Taro are very unpopular; Lee's popularity rating has plunged to 23 percent while the support rate for Aso's government is about 20 percent. Our conversations revealed two sets of concerns. First, there are worries that the U.S. will ask both partners to contribute to international efforts – the war in Afghanistan is a top item – that are politically unpopular. Second, there is fear that because of their weakness – "paralysis" is the word most often used to describe the political situation in Tokyo – these governments will be eclipsed by an activist Chinese leadership that is ready to work with Washington on global issues.

Visiting U.S. secretaries usually come armed with a list of needs (read: demands); it would be much smarter for Secretary Clinton instead to merely ask what the allies can do to help (and smarter yet for them to be prepared with an answer).

Lest one think the concerns are restricted to the security arena, we also heard a lot of complaints that the "made in America" financial crisis had exacted a terrific toll on the global economy: a failure of U.S. regulation, excessive greed, or flaws in the U.S model are all blamed. Some believe this signals the beginning of the end of U.S. predominance in Asia (and globally), a song many Chinese also appear eager to sing. There is some fear that U.S. economic weakness could shift the balance of power in bilateral negotiations with Beijing (and others) on a variety of issues in ways that would play to Tokyo's or Seoul's detriment.

There is much greater fear – perhaps not entirely unfounded – that a Democratic administration will be instinctively protectionist when responding to the economic downturn and Asia will be the primary scapegoat. Some reassurance that the Obama administration will remain committed to open markets and free trade will also be needed; this message must be heard and believed not only in Tokyo and Seoul but in the halls of the U.S. Congress.

Each country has its particular concerns. In Seoul, the transfer of operational control of wartime command from U.S. to Korean forces, scheduled for 2011, is very unpopular among conservatives. There is virtual unanimity among Korean security specialists that the decision was a mistake and should be delayed or rescinded. Equally troubling are prospects for the Korea-U.S. free trade agreement (KORUS). Secretary Clinton has expressed reservations about the deal – the standard U.S. argument is that it doesn't guarantee sufficient U.S. access to key sectors of the Korean market (rice, beef, and autos) and that it doesn't protect labor and environmental standards. South Koreans have dismissed calls to reopen negotiations and failure to ratify the agreement would be taken as a huge insult to Korea and a repudiation of a broader strategic partnership between the two countries. Given Lee's current weakness, he has virtually no flexibility on this issue. Politics aside, it is worth noting that both countries are considerably better off with the deal as currently written than without it. Now all we have to do is figure out how to creatively set politics aside.

In Japan, relocation of the Futenma Air Station has for over a decade been a problem for the bilateral relationship, but now the stalemate is seen as part of a broader failure to implement the roadmap for realignment of U.S. forces in Japan, agreed by the two countries in May 2006. Japanese financial support for moving U.S. forces to Guam has become a headache as well. Japanese officials are keen to discern any indication that they are being eclipsed as America's "most important partner" in Asia, ever alert to another case of "Japan passing."

These problems are not alliance killers. They can do great damage to these vital bilateral relationships, however, and chip away at the base of public support essential for long-term alliance viability. Ignoring them will ensure that they fester and get worse. The first and most important step is to acknowledge our allies concerns. Mrs. Clinton needs to signal the governments in Tokyo and Seoul that "we get it." That means ensuring that allies take pride of place in our relations with Asia.

We also need to better consult our allies on regional issues. We don't have to defer to them -- each government should defend its national interests. But we do need to ensure that there is genuine two-way communication and both sides understand each other. The countries' security establishments need a better dialogue on how our respective alliances will operate in times of crisis. That means better preparation for contingencies as well as discussions about how deterrence works in theory and practice. Those conversations will become even more important as the U.S. administration undertakes its Nuclear Posture Review and if it adopts a new approach to nuclear arms negotiations. Changes in U.S. nuclear diplomacy have profound implications for the credibility of our extended deterrent.

Our allies have their own responsibilities. First, they need to live up to previous commitments. Alliances are built on trust and the failure to deliver on earlier promises makes it difficult if not impossible to move forward. Revisiting defense transformation issues in Japan and Korea is counter-productive and not the way to revitalize the border defense relationships.

Second, our allies need to articulate a vision of what they can and cannot do in support of our alliances. It is not enough to say what isn't possible or to plead difficult political circumstances. Allies need to figure out how they can contribute to the protection of shared national interests. Creativity is needed. Japan and Korea may be in tough situations, but there is still a lot they can do.

Despite the anxieties mentioned above, there has still been a groundswell of optimism surrounding the election of Barack Obama and the symbolism of Secretary Clinton choosing Asia as her first overseas destination can build upon this if she recognizes and addresses regional anxieties and provides the reassurance both allies need to revitalize these important security relationships.