

## **Continuity and Change: U.S. Asia Policy**

by Ralph A. Cossa

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent trip to Asia underscored elements of continuity and change in the Obama administration's Asia policy. Generally speaking, her visits in Northeast Asia – to Japan, Korea, and China – represented continuity; her trip to Indonesia signaled change.

Her first stop was, as it should have been, Tokyo, where she underscored the continuing role of the U.S.-Japan alliance relationship as the “foundation” of U.S. Asia policy and the “cornerstone of security in East Asia,” as it was during the Bush administration (and during her husband's and administrations before that). She clearly endorsed and locked in the “military transformation” plans of her predecessor by signing an agreement with her Japanese counterpart to relocate some 8,000 U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam by 2014 (with substantial Japanese financial support), while stressing that America's defense commitment to Japan remained as strong and unwavering as ever.

Secretary Clinton also met with the families of “abductees” – Japanese citizens known or suspected to have been kidnapped by North Korea, mostly during the 1980s – promising, as the Bush administration had before her, that their loved ones would not be forgotten, while being equally careful not to tie North Korea denuclearization too closely to progress on the abductee issue. Many Japanese feel that President Bush personally “betrayed” them on this issue when Washington removed Pyongyang from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list. Mrs. Clinton wisely avoided getting tied down on this issue. At the end of the day, no U.S. administration will sacrifice the opportunity for real progress on Korean Peninsula denuclearization and the Japanese realize this. The problem with the delisting decision was the anticipated real progress – North Korea's promise to accept a verification protocol to validate its declared nuclear holdings – never materialized.

While in Tokyo, and again from Seoul, Secretary Clinton also sent a strong message that the Obama administration was as committed as its predecessor to “the complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea,” even while assuring Pyongyang that “if North Korea abides by the obligations it has already entered into and verifiably and completely eliminates its nuclear program, then there will be a reciprocal response.” Underscoring the continuity of policy and approach was the presence in her entourage of the Bush administration's chief Six-Party Talks negotiator, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill (a career diplomat whose “reward” for four years of frustrating negotiations with Pyongyang appears to be a pending appointment as the next U.S. ambassador to Iraq).

During her trip, Secretary Clinton made several references to the Obama administration's commitment to “a system of open and fair trade,” but she carefully sidestepped a public discussion of the beleaguered Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) while in Seoul. During her confirmation hearings she had expressed opposition to the KORUS FTA but the administration has since hinted that it had not ruled out “creative solutions short of renegotiation.” While no one will accuse the Obama administration (or the Democratic-controlled Congress) of being advocates of free trade on a par with the prior administration, Secretary Clinton's backing away from her earlier insistence on renegotiation shows that, officially at least, this policy has not (yet) changed – even suggesting such an option would have dealt a severe blow to an already domestically weakened ROK President Lee Myung-bak and would have turned a positive trip immediately sour.

Most importantly, Secretary Clinton strongly signaled that when it came to the two Koreas, the South still comes first, warning that Pyongyang is “not going to get a different relationship with the United States while insulting and refusing dialogue with the Republic of Korea.” While this should not come as a surprise, it was reassuring nonetheless given ROK concerns that the Obama administration, which had run on a platform of talking with one's enemies, might be too forthcoming with North Korea at the South's expense. Her admonitions to Pyongyang to end its “provocative language” and to avoid “unhelpful” actions such as the threatened missile (or satellite) launch are likely to fall on deaf ears, however.

Secretary Clinton also clearly signaled that the Obama administration – like all of its predecessors since Richard Nixon – was committed to a policy of engagement with China, arguing that “the United States and China can benefit from and contribute to each other's successes.” She followed the time-honored principle of stressing the positive aspects of the relationship during her visit – the need for a cooperative effort in dealing with the global financial crisis, climate change, and our mutual goal of Korean Peninsula denuclearization – while pointing out differences prior to her visit; during her pre-trip speech to the Asia Society in New York, for example, she expressed President Obama's and her own commitment to creating a world where (among other things) “Tibetans and all Chinese people can enjoy religious freedom without fear of prosecution.” Protests from single issue groups notwithstanding, there is no indication that the Obama administration is going to pay any less attention to human rights than did any of its predecessors; it may just take a more subtle (and thus, in the long run, potentially more effective) approach.

This is not to suggest that it was business completely as usual with Northeast Asia. Secretary Clinton stressed that this

administration would spend more time listening and responding to the concerns of its allies and partners (not to mention opposition politicians like Democratic Party of Japan leader Ozawa Ichiro) and would not neglect the region despite preoccupation with serious challenges elsewhere (a frequent accusation against the Bush administration). She also stressed at each stop, but especially in China, the need to cooperate to address the serious transnational challenges posed by climate change. But basic policy – alliances come first and engagement (vice containment) of China – reflected continuity with previous administrations.

Her visit to Indonesia, on the other hand, signaled change; just going to Southeast Asia on her first trip was signal enough – normally Secretaries of State show up in Southeast Asia for the annual ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) ministerial, if at all (her predecessor missed two out of four ARF meetings). According to Secretary Clinton, including Indonesia in her first trip demonstrated that Washington was “paying attention” to Southeast Asia, that “our interests are not just focused on China,” and that “the United States must have strong relationships and a strong and productive presence here in Southeast Asia.” She committed to attending the next ARF ministerial (in Bangkok in July) and, more importantly, announced that she was launching the formal interagency process to pursue U.S. accession to ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, an action resisted by all previous (Democratic and Republican) administrations since it went into force in 1976.

Repeatedly during her trip, she pointed out that Indonesia “demonstrated for the entire world to see that Islam, democracy, and modernity can co-exist very successfully,” accomplishing the twin objectives of reaching out to the Islamic world (as President Obama has promised to do) while promoting Indonesia as a model for the Islamic world to follow. This twin message will no doubt be reinforced when President Obama makes his much-anticipated “homecoming” visit to Indonesia later this year (in conjunction with the fall APEC Leaders Meeting in Singapore, if not before). She also acknowledged that imposing sanctions on Burma (a.k.a. Myanmar) “has not influenced the junta,” suggesting that some (unspecified) change in policy would be forthcoming.

All in all, Secretary Clinton’s trip successfully accomplished its main missions: it reassured America’s allies and partners that the U.S. was committed to the region and its alliances, that it wanted a cooperative relationship with China, that it would hold fast on Washington’s denuclearization demands even while reaching out to Pyongyang, and that it would become more proactively engaged in Southeast as well as Northeast Asia. The enthusiastic reception she received at every stop also indicates that American “soft power” may indeed be making a comeback with the advent of the new administration.