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Regional Overview: High Priority and Drama over Asia

by Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's choice of Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, and China for her first official trip overseas helped shine a spotlight on Asia this quarter, as did North Korean Dear Leader Kim Jong-il's announcement that he intended to launch a satellite in early April. The drama surrounding the anticipated launch provided an unfortunate back drop for otherwise very positive pronouncements about intended Obama administration policies in East Asia. ASEAN leaders finally held their summit and celebrated the entry into force of their much-maligned Charter. Meanwhile, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd visited Washington to underscore that the U.S. and Australia are still "mates," even as his reluctance to send more combat forces to Afghanistan foreshadowed the difficulty President Obama faces in getting allies to sign up for his "surge" there. Finally, economic forecasts were adjusted downward as leaders prepared for the G20 summit in hopes that this would bring a turnaround.

U.S.-Japan: A Fresh Start by Michael J. Green and Nicholas Szechenyi

A new calendar year did little to change the tenor of Japanese domestic politics as the public became increasingly frustrated with parliamentary gridlock and the leadership of Prime Minister Aso. In an effort to prevent political turmoil from weakening Japan's global leadership role, the government dispatched two Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyers to participate in antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Meanwhile, the Obama administration wasted little time in establishing a positive trajectory for the U.S.-Japan alliance, first sending Secretary of State Clinton to Tokyo and receiving Prime Minister Aso at the White House shortly after. The core agenda items for both visits reflected both regional and global challenges. In a fitting end to a quarter of close bilateral coordination, Washington and Tokyo were poised to monitor an anticipated missile test by North Korea and orchestrate a cohesive response that could determine the fate of the Six-Party Talks.

U.S.-China: A Good Beginning Is Half Way to Success by Bonnie Glaser

U.S.-China relations got off to a good start under the Obama administration, easing Chinese worries that it would take time to educate the new U.S. president about China's importance. "Positive" and "cooperative" were the two watchwords used repeatedly by Secretary of State Clinton in her discussions with Chinese leaders, which focused on the need to deepen and broaden the U.S.-China relationship, and to elevate cooperation to address urgent global problems. In

late February, U.S.-China military-to-military ties resumed with the visit of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense David Sedney to Beijing. A naval confrontation between U.S. and Chinese ships took place near Hainan Island, which was quickly defused, although the underlying causes remain. Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi visited Washington D.C. in March to prepare for the first meeting between the two countries' presidents, which took place on the margins of the G20 meeting in London on April 1.

U.S.-Korea: The Late Night Phone Call by Victor D. Cha

The quarter ended with the question of whether President Obama's first late-night crisis phone call – the metric for leadership during the campaign – would be over a ballistic missile test by North Korea. The end to the quarter contrasted with its quiet start where the focus of U.S.-ROK bilateral relations was on initial contacts between the Lee and Obama administration teams and policy coordination over the global financial crisis. However events unfold, the launch itself gives the new administration its first taste of North Korean bad behavior and confronts it with the problem of finding the right balance between under- and over-reaction that is needed to move denuclearization negotiations forward.

U.S.-Russia: Russia Sizes up Obama by Joseph Ferguson

The bilateral dialogue in the first quarter was cordial, if somewhat distant. The Obama administration sent clear and positive signals to the Kremlin. At times President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin reciprocated with positive language; at times Moscow's negative rhetoric reappeared. Clearly the Russian leadership has been making a cautious assessment of the new U.S. leader. Optimism was again evident at the London meeting between Obama and Medvedev on the eve of the G20 summit. The two leaders pledged cooperation on a variety of issues, centering on arms control. There has been nothing positive in the bilateral relationship to report since last April and the Bush-Putin meeting at Sochi as relations plunged to depths unseen since the Cold War. There is clearly much work to be done to repair the rift that has developed.

U.S.-Southeast Asia: Indonesia as Exemplar of Southeast Asia's Importance by Sheldon Simon

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Indonesia was enthusiastically received in the world's most populous Muslim country. She praised Indonesia's thriving democracy as evidence of the compatibility of Islam and political pluralism. Noting Southeast Asia's importance, she announced that the U.S. would begin consideration of a process to sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, a prerequisite for membership in the East Asia Summit. Clinton also acknowledged the need for the U.S. to consult with ASEAN in finding a better strategy for dealing with Burma. Meanwhile, ASEAN held its 14th summit in Thailand at the end of

February. While the global economic crisis dominated the agenda, the future of a human rights commission mandated by ASEAN's new Charter proved the most contentious issue.

China-Southeast Asia: South China Sea, Economic Issues

by Robert Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang

Southeast Asian and broader international attention focused in March on the confrontation between five Chinese government ships and the U.S. surveyor ship *USNS Impeccable* in the South China Sea near Hainan Island. U.S. and Chinese protests and related media commentary highlighted for Southeast Asian audiences a pattern of U.S. surveillance to learn more about China's growing military activities and China's unwillingness to tolerate such actions in areas where it claims rights. This provided a vivid backdrop for China's continued efforts to claim and defend territory in the South China Sea that is also claimed by Southeast Asian nations. Meanwhile, there was little good news on the economic front as China's international trade and economic interchange with Southeast Asia continued to fall rapidly.

China-Taiwan: New Economic Challenges

by David G. Brown

Beijing and Taipei have been making preparations for the third round of ARATS-SEF talks to be held in May or June. The global recession has led to a dramatic decline in cross-Strait trade and that has helped accelerate plans to negotiate a comprehensive cross-Strait economic agreement. However, the planning for such an agreement has produced a storm of opposition protest in Taiwan, which represents the most serious challenge yet to President Ma's cross-Strait policies. Officials on both sides are speaking optimistically about finding a formula under which Taipei could be an observer at the World Health Assembly (WHA) in May. Although defense reports from both sides acknowledge reduced tensions, there is as yet no sign that Beijing will reduce the military threat directed at Taiwan.

North Korea-South Korea: Squeezing the Border

by Aidan Foster-Carter

This was a quarter when the expectation of an event dominated the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia more widely. Suspected since January, announced in February and awaited throughout March, despite all efforts to dissuade it North Korea launched a rocket on April 5. This evoked a broader context, and a seeming shift in Pyongyang. Even by the DPRK's unfathomable logic, firing a big rocket – satellite or no – seemed a rude and perverse way to greet a new U.S. president avowedly committed to engagement with Washington's foes. Yet, no fewer than four separate senior private U.S. delegations, visiting Pyongyang in unusually swift succession during the past quarter, heard the same uncompromising message: North Korea apparently just is not interested in an opportunity for a fresh start offered by a radically different incumbent of the White House.

China-Korea: Year of China-DPRK Friendship; North's Rocket Fizzles

by Scott Snyder and See-won Byun

Diplomacy between Beijing and Pyongyang intensified this quarter in honor of China-DPRK Friendship Year and the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations. The Chinese

accompanied these commemorative meetings with diplomatic interaction with the U.S., South Korea, and Japan focused on how to respond to North Korea's rocket launch. Meanwhile, South Korea published its first public assessment on the implications of China's rising economic capabilities for the ROK's long-term security policies. The response to the North's rocket launch also highlights differences between Seoul and Beijing. Following years of expanding bilateral trade and investment ties, the global financial crisis also provides new challenges for Sino-ROK economic relations.

Japan-China: New Year, Old Problems

by James J. Przystup

The year 2008 ended with reports that China would begin building two conventionally powered aircraft carriers, while February brought news that China planned to construct two nuclear-powered carriers. On the first anniversary of the contaminated *gyoza* controversy and despite concerted efforts, Chinese officials reported the investigation was back at square one. Meanwhile, efforts to implement the June 2008 Japan-China joint agreement on the development of natural gas fields in the East China Sea made little progress and the long-standing territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands found its way back into the headlines. In mid-March, China's defense minister confirmed to his Japanese counterpart Beijing's decision to initiate aircraft carrier construction.

Japan-Korea: Conflict with North Improves Japan-ROK Relations

by David Kang and Ji-Young Lee

Japan-DPRK relations went from stalemate to hostility in the first quarter as the prospects for a "satellite" launch by the North heightened tensions. With Pyongyang goading its partners in the Six-Party Talks for more favorable terms, Japan took steps to deal with the current North Korean missile crisis. Meanwhile, Tokyo and Seoul continued to focus on a practical partnership for economic cooperation and stayed on good terms. The highlight of the quarter was Prime Minister Aso's successful two-day visit to South Korea in mid-January. Although historical issues lingered as a factor that might challenge and disrupt this mood of détente, Japan-South Korea relations improved due in no small part to the Lee administration's tough policy toward Pyongyang.

China-Russia: Between Crisis and Cooperation

by Yu Bin

The year of 2009 unfolded with a series of high-profile interactions. The "Year of Russian Language" in China was launched, an oil pipeline is finally to be built from Skovorodino to northeast China, the two militaries were engaged in the first round of talks, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization held its first special session on Afghanistan as it officially reached out to NATO. Meanwhile, diplomats coordinated policies on the financial crisis and growing tensions in Korea. All of this, however, could hardly conceal a sense of uneasiness, especially in China, about the sinking of a Chinese cargo ship by the Russian Coast Guard near Vladivostok. While Beijing requested a thorough investigation, Moscow seemed more interested in a weapons smuggling case allegedly involving top Russian naval officers.