

## **Obama's East Asia Policy: So Far, So Good**

by Ralph A. Cossa

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With one important exception, US relations with the countries of East Asia are as good or better today than when the Obama administration took office just over one year ago. This is no small accomplishment since, again with one (different) exception, relations were already quite good – the Bush administration left Asia in pretty good shape.

Let's look at the exceptions first. The one relationship that has gotten worse under President Obama is perhaps the most important one, that between Washington and Tokyo. The fault lies primarily (but not exclusively) with Japan; a new government took power there, led for the first time by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which ran against the policies of the past. While Prime Minister Hatoyama still pays rhetorical allegiance to the US-Japan alliance relationship as the foundation of his foreign policy, in practice tensions have grown over his decision to reevaluate an Okinawa base relocation agreement negotiated between the Bush administration and the previous Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government which had been accepted and further formalized by the Obama administration. Hatoyama could have "reluctantly accepted" this government-to-government agreement and then focused his attention on greater "equality" in the future. Instead he choose to take on Washington from the opening days of his administration, creating what appears more and more like a lose-lose situation for both sides and which has also distracted from what should have been a forward-looking commemoration last month of the alliance's 50th anniversary.

Hatoyama has promised a decision on the Futenma airbase relocation plan by May and few are predicting a happy ending. A decision to go back to the drawing board (or even to delay a final decision until after this summer's Upper House elections) will further strain the alliance and Hatoyama's credibility and could also backfire politically; middle of the road voters that abandoned the LDP in droves in last fall's Lower House elections may come flocking back if the DPJ – already plagued by scandal and its failure to effectively deal with the economic situation – is further seen as threatening the still highly popular bilateral security alliance.

Both sides appear to be trying hard to look toward the long-term future and get the relationship back on track. This will require some patience on Washington's part and some political courage on Tokyo's. Putting off the decision on relocating Futenma Airbase until May solves little; bad news does not get better with age!

The Bush administration's major Asian dark spot was North Korea, where its efforts to craft a denuclearization agreement crumbled as Pyongyang walked away from its earlier pledges to verifiably give up its nuclear weapons. Things quickly went from bad to worse as the North welcomed the Obama administration first with a long-range missile test and then with its second-ever nuclear weapons test (the first was in October of 2006) amid pledges to never return to the Bush-initiated Six-Party Talks (involving North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the US). In the face of strict United Nations sanctions and a consistent hardline approach from Washington and Seoul, the North now appears to be relenting at least on the latter point (although thus far with unacceptable caveats). Nonetheless, the prospects of an eventual resumption of dialogue have improved somewhat (even though the prospects of actual denuclearization are as low as ever).

The relationship that has seen the greatest improvement under the Obama administration is between the US and South Korea. Presidents Obama and Lee Myung-bak have crafted a joint vision statement laying out the future course of the alliance relationship and the two seem in lock step when it comes to dealing with North Korea – Bush was either too soft (according to Lee) or too harsh (according to Lee's predecessor, Roh Moo-hyun).

The big stumbling block as we move forward will be the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS), which Bush and Roh negotiated and which Lee supports. Candidate Obama ran against it but has raised hopes after hinting that there might finally be some progress on such agreements during this year's State of the Union address. KORUS makes sense (not to mention dollars and cents and jobs, jobs, jobs) for both sides but it will take some political courage on Obama's part to get it past Congress. Both sides must also carefully review the milestones associated with the transition to ROK operation control (OPCON) of its own forces during wartime by 2012; many in the ROK remain unconvinced about the wisdom of this action or at least question the timing, absent some breakthrough with the North.

Nowhere in Asia is Obama more popular than in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia, which claims him as a semi-native son (since he lived there briefly as a child). Even his failure to visit Jakarta during his first trip to the region – to Singapore for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting – did not weaken the enthusiasm, and has now been more than compensated for with the announcement that he will take his entire family there during Spring Break next month. Meanwhile, his outstretched hand to Burma/Myanmar, while failing (at least thus far) to bring about the desired release of Aung San Suu Kyi, has increased the prospects of deeper cooperation with the rest of ASEAN,

as this 10-nation grouping (under subtle Indonesian leadership) seems to finally be getting serious about promoting human rights and good governance (although much remains to be done in this regard). The door has now also been opened for the US to join the East Asia Summit, following Washington's signing of ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation last year.

Finally, US-China relations are starting to look like *déjà vu* all over again. When Obama took office, China was boycotting military-to-military discussions with Washington in retaliation for Bush arms sales to Taiwan. Here we go again, even though the Obama administration's notification to Congress this month only involved weapons systems originally included in the 2001 Bush arms package and not the more sensitive and controversial *F-16 C/D* aircraft that Taipei subsequently requested (and on which no decision has yet been made).

Obama's decision early on to initiate a senior-level strategic dialogue with Beijing (led by Secretary Clinton herself) represented a clear desire to move US-China relations to a new, higher level of cooperation on a diverse range of issues from countering proliferation to combating climate change. One year later, it remains unclear if China really wants a strategic relationship with the US or just wants to say that it has one. The Chinese have threatened unspecified "consequences" if the arms sale go ahead as promised (which they will) or if Obama visits with the Dalai Lama later this month (which he will), but the reality is Beijing has already been less than fully cooperative on a wide range of issues from Iran (a "core interest" of the US) to climate change (ditto) to Burma and beyond, and has also seemed to be taking a much softer approach than warranted toward Pyongyang.

While both sides avoided the precipitous drop in US-China relations that had characterized previous regime changes in Washington and the relationship today is as good or better than last year at this time, it seems clear that the roller-coaster relationship is beginning a downward plunge; how steep and how long remain unknown as both sides see the benefit in not letting things get too out of hand even as China tries a bit of muscle flexing, perhaps to (unwisely) test the young American president after a year of stock-taking. Beijing was warned well in advance that both the arms sale notification and Dalai Lama visit were in the cards and both events are completely consistent with previous US policy and practices. Beijing's more strident than usual response – it has also threatened to boycott US firms involved in the arms sale – may reflect growing Chinese self-confidence; it could also be laying down a marker for an even harsher response if the Obama administration decides to move forward on the much-desired (by Taipei) *F-16 C/D* sale.

In short, as President Obama looks back on his first year, he can be generally satisfied with his Asia policy thus far. But, his first order of business for his second year in office is getting US-Japan relations back on track, sustaining the positive momentum on both halves of the Korean Peninsula and in Southeast Asia, and then testing Beijing's sincerity about being a "responsible stakeholder," a term (and aspiration) left over from the Bush years and a hope still largely unfulfilled.