



A Thought on American Foreign Policy in East Asia

by Dr. Kang Choi

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Power transition, caused mainly by the rise of China, is going on in East Asia. China has become the no. 1 trading partner of almost every country in the region. Even China's military power is increasing and advancing to the level that matches that of the United States. Asymmetrical interdependency between China and other regional states across various dimensions will continue to grow.

At the same time, East Asia has witnessed architectural and structural changes over the years. Minilateral or multilateral organizations and institutions such as the East Asian Summit (EAS), the China-Japan-Korea Summit, the ASEAN-Plus-Three, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) have become very active and are expected to expand their respective roles and areas. And increasing dynamism for integration and cooperation among the countries in the region has become very visible and multidimensional. On the other hand, despite efforts to modernize the alliance system and some progress, US bilateral alliances have remained relatively the same. Of course, regional and global roles and functions of those bilateral alliances have been emphasized and underscored.

Nationalistic sentiment, territorial disputes, and history issues have recently become more contentious problems among countries in the region, which impede further integration and cooperation and could become sources of conflict. In some countries, political transformation, or democratization, is taking place. Whether this transformation will be smooth is another source of potential instability. In a word, 'iAsia'— integration, innovation, investment, instability, and inequality — represents the current major characteristics of East Asia.

US Policies toward the Asia-Pacific Pivot

Against this backdrop, the Obama administration has recently announced its policy toward the Asia-Pacific region, which emphasizes a 'pivot' in US foreign policy. It reflects the rediscovery of the importance of the trans-Pacific axis in the 21st century in dimensions ranging from security to the economy. It seems that two words — engagement and enlargement — capture the basic direction of the Obama administration's policy toward the Asia-Pacific region. This is quite similar to that of the Clinton administration of the mid-1990s.

The US policy contains the following five elements: strengthening traditional alliances; strengthening partnerships with other regional countries; managing and developing a cooperative relationship with China; Participation in and working with multilateral regional mechanisms; and developing and strengthening trade relations (KORUS FTA and TPP).

How the Obama administration will implement its Asia policy remains to be seen. But the following concerns should be taken into account in the implementation process.

The US argues that it is an Asia-Pacific country. Unfortunately, such statements have not been backed up by concrete follow-up plans and actions. The US has maintained almost the same level of engagement or presence throughout the post-Cold War period. Some argue that US commitment to and engagement into the region remain rhetorical or unconvincing, especially in the field of economics. In turn, the credibility of US policy toward the region has been questioned and led some countries to seek alternative foreign policies.

The US has been relatively reactive toward changes in the region. It has not paid sufficient, or due, attention to the unfolding or possible changes or dynamics in the region. Sometimes, issue-by-issue, selective, rather than comprehensive, engagement is the characteristic of US policy toward the region. It has led some people to question whether the US has a clear vision for the Asia-Pacific region backed up by a comprehensive knowledge and profound understanding of regional dynamics and concerns.

The US approach has been driven by traditional security concerns and concepts. Consequently, it has relied mainly on bilateral alliances (US-ROK, US-Japan, US-Australia) and neglected other mechanisms and institutions. While the US often underscored the parallel or complementary development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms, it usually went back to bilateral mechanisms since its primary concern was rather traditional. However, regional countries have other security concerns and they might seek alternative mechanisms that can properly address emerging security concerns.

Some Concerns for the Future and Recommendations

In the face of China's rising influence, the US policy pivot toward East Asia would be welcomed by most East Asian states as one of the stabilizing or equalizing factors. As I noted, sustainability and consistency are the key factors determining the reliability of US policy toward East Asia.

Thus, the US must tighten its relationship with the region across various dimensions and issue areas — not just through verbal commitments but through concrete actions. It must try to build a system of systems for regional cooperation and integration and become a real resident power in the region. In other words, it is time for the US to operationalize its commitment to the region.

The current US approach toward East Asia could be considered “encirclement of China” by China and could invite Chinese reactions or countermeasures. Four of the five elements of US policy toward the Asia-Pacific region could be considered measures to encircle China. It is not possible to exclude the possibility that US policy might force its allies or partners to make a strategic choice between the US and China. This might invite friction between the US and its allies/partners. The relationship between China and other regional powers is very complex and complicated, and intertwined so that regional countries cannot make such a choice without suffering side effects. US understanding of this is necessary and desirable. Whether the US is able to deepen and widen a cooperative relationship with China and strengthen its other four policy pillars at the same time is the key concern which will determine the success of US policy toward East Asia.

The US and its allies/partners have not discussed fundamental issues, namely, the desirable end state or regional architecture in the region. While they are talking about peace, stability, and prosperity, they have rarely gone through their mental exercise to ascertain the condition or situation that ensures the achievement of what they most desire. In other words, the assessment and forecasting of the future strategic environment of the region have not been fully carried out. Thus the vision for the region has not been closely discussed and agreed. Without a common vision or efforts to introduce guiding principles for the attainment of this vision, it is not possible to overcome strategic distrust.

Finally, given financial constraints, burden-sharing, financial issues and responsibilities (roles/missions/capabilities) in maintaining and strengthening the alliance could arise. Careful management of this issue is critical in maintaining and strengthening domestic support for the alliance in the coming era.

In conclusion, the US needs to take into account the concerns of its allies and partners and to enhance its understanding of regional dynamics in East Asia. For that purpose, strategic dialogue with regional countries must be strengthened and expanded to cover wide areas of concern. And its active participation in and contribution to multilateral fora are necessary. Parallel and mutually reinforcing development of bi- and multilateral cooperation will enable the US to become the resident power in East Asia.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.