

Cultivating Tomorrow's Asia Hands

by Eric Sayers

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Discussions about the US “rebalancing” to the Asia-Pacific region have focused on the rhetoric and resources surrounding the effort. But after more than a decade of America’s aspiring foreign policy practitioners choosing and being directed to language training and graduate programs focused on terrorism and the Middle East, we also need a successful rebalancing of our human capital to the Asia-Pacific region to posture the United States for success. Kurt Campbell, assistant secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said at the annual CNAS conference: “We have now built an unbelievable cadre of people that can tell you every aspect about how to do post-conflict reconstruction. What I am hoping for and what I believe will be necessary [...] is to build a similar cohort of people that are deeply, profoundly knowledgeable about Asia.”

While it is difficult to quantify the challenge the US faces after a decade of focusing on the Middle East, I can attest that amongst my cohorts in Washington, there is a stark *imbalance* of Asia-focused experts age 25 to 35. This is true across the foreign policy spectrum: in think tanks, nongovernmental organizations, graduate programs, at the State and Defense Departments, and on Capitol Hill. Part of this can be attributed to a decade of intense focus on the Middle East by the US government and other international organizations, creating droves of career paths focused on the region. This in turn prompted graduate programs to align themselves to meet this demand, creating a new generation of terrorism, post-conflict reconstruction, and Middle East experts; NGOs that focused on the region to gain a new notoriety; and think tank centers and fellowship positions to support the intellectual thrust.

As one small example of this shift at a recent gathering of 30 young foreign policy experts from around town, we began by going around the room and saying our name, affiliation, and the last country we visited. Only myself and one other person named an Asian country as their most recent foreign destination; almost everyone else cited a Middle East or North African state.

Secretary Campbell is right: if the United States wants to continue to shape a more peaceful, prosperous, and democratic Asia-Pacific, it will need to cultivate a new generation of Asia experts that have spent considerable time in the region

learning its political, economic, cultural, historical, and geographic contours, building language skills, and expanding personal relationships.

How can we build and invest in future Asia Hands? As in the last decade, if our government and intellectual institutions continue to shift their focus to the region, a demand for Asia experts will follow. The better question for my generation and those just beginning to chart their career path, then, is how young, talented individuals with an interest in foreign policy can chart an Asia-focused career path for themselves.

A few suggestions from a junior Asia Hand:

Learn a language. The most obvious, but critical, decision to be made. Although I have focused on defense policy in the region and am guilty of not taking my own advice, committing to an Asian language in university (and even high school, if possible) is a big hammer in the career toolbox. And while Mandarin speakers will be essential, we must also focus on Korean, Japanese, and the host of other languages from across Southeast Asia. One intensive way to study language that friends have chosen is the Middlebury Language School in Vermont. Another is the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) in Monterey, California.

“Asia” doesn’t just mean “China.” The People’s Republic of China is a focal point for discussing the region’s economic and strategic future. But we cannot forget that the “Asia-Pacific” contains some of the most exciting states in the world, from India in the west, to Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia in the south. The political transformation in Burma over the last two years rivals the Arab Spring. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea continues to pose challenges to security on the Korean Peninsula. Finally, the United States maintains a host of alliances (with Japan, the Republic of Korea, Philippines, Thailand, and Australia) that will play a major role in shaping the future of the region.

Get out of town! The best way to learn about Asia is to go there. It’s as simple as that. Too many in the foreign policy field make it to D.C. and then believe they’ve made it. Instead of becoming an “armchair” regional analyst, we need to be learning Asia by engaging with its people, culture, and politics. Even today, only 10 percent of students who chose to study abroad are choosing Asia (well over 50 percent still head to Europe). London, Paris, and Berlin are fun places, but our generation should be seizing the opportunity to study a language in Tokyo or Beijing, economics in Singapore or Hong Kong, or history in Manila or Sydney. Other opportunities from Fulbright scholarships to the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program also present themselves. Think tanks in the region also offer opportunities, including the Lowy Institute in Sydney and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation in Tokyo.

Get a degree...in Asia. Individuals in the foreign policy community who have not focused on Asia in their early career and are considering a Masters degree should consider studying in the region. Many US universities have set up affiliate programs or dual degree programs with Asian affiliates in recent years. Columbia University, for instance, has a dual degree program (in English) with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore. Singapore also is home to the S. Rajaratnam School of International Affairs, which offers English Masters programs in Strategic Studies, Asian Studies, International Relations, and International Political Economy, as well as a PhD program (I attended RSIS in 2009-2010 along with a handful of other US students). Other programs worth looking at are De La Salle University in Manila, Philippines, The Diplomatic Academy in Hanoi, Vietnam, and Australian National University in Canberra, Australia.

Connect to other Asia Hands. A number of programs/networks can connect young Asia scholars with one another. In D.C., Young Professionals in Foreign Policy is a good way to meet others who focus on international relations, including Asia. The Young Leaders program at Pacific Forum CSIS in Honolulu is another great network. Pacific Forum organizes over a dozen conferences each year throughout the Asia-Pacific region and invites individuals from its Young Leaders program to take part in Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogues. The East-West Center in Honolulu offers a range of scholarships, fellowships, and exchanges to bring Asia-focused individuals together. It never hurts to be proactive and reach out to professors, think tank fellows, or government officials who work on Asia issues to ask them to share their experiences. I found this was an invaluable way to understand the broader community and learn how each individual and organization connect to one another.

Build Relationships with Asian Counterparts. Connecting to other Asia experts here at home is a valuable way to build your network, but aspiring Asia Hands should be seeking opportunities to build contacts overseas. A network of foreign contacts can bring context and further insight to complex issues. These personal relationships should also prove valuable later in a career. As well, one can always benefit from a new overseas drinking partner!

Write! The Diplomat has its own “New Leaders Forum” page, a space for young Asia watchers to offer insights into the diplomatic, strategic, economic, or cultural events of the week. This online magazine has become one of the most widely read discussion venues for Asia-specific issues. If you are an undergrad, working on a graduate degree, or further along in your career, contributing to *The Diplomat* for publication is a great way to hone writing skills and engage in the discussion with a global audience.

Whether we have an Obama II or Romney I administration next January, the US effort to refashion its time, energy, and resources to the Asia-Pacific region will continue. Resourcing this effort will not just require new diplomatic and military resources, but also a cadre of Asia Hands with deep knowledge of the region. The years ahead present a great opportunity for aspiring foreign policy thinkers to choose a career path focused on the Asia-Pacific region.

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