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What's Ahead for U.S. Policy in Asia?
by Michael H. Armacost

President Bush has claimed a renewed mandate, and has begun to reshuffle his national security team. Condoleezza Rice will move to the State Department; Steve Hadley will move up at the NSC. Richard Armitage and Jim Kelly, who have borne much of the day-to-day responsibility for U.S. policy in Asia, are leaving along with Colin Powell. What might we expect of the Bush administration in its second term?

Generally speaking, continuity rather than change is likely to be the watchword in foreign policy. Above all, the Middle East and South Asia are likely to remain the principal preoccupations of American concerns. In Iraq, Washington will seek to acquit its commitments – to hold elections, train Iraqi security forces, and accelerate reconstruction projects – with whatever measure of dignity and honor it can muster in the face of excruciatingly difficult choices. With Yasser Arafat's death, U.S. engagement on Israeli-Palestinian issues is destined to increase. And Iran's bid for nuclear weapons will continue to challenge the U.S. and Europe.

Thus Asia will not have pride of place on the Bush agenda. Yet it will continue to command Washington's attention. Why? Because it is in Asia that the interests of the Great Powers intersect most directly. Because Asia is the world's most dynamic economic area, and it is becoming more and more tightly integrated. Because Washington cannot afford to neglect South and Southeast Asia for in these areas Islam presents a relatively moderate face. And because North Korea, of course, poses a direct and growing challenge to the administration's nonproliferation policy.

Fortuitously, the U.S. is better positioned in Asia than in most other regions. Our military presence remains sizable and retains mobility and flexibility. Our economy continues to generate solid demand for Asian exports and a robust source of direct investment funds. While criticism of U.S. policy is widespread in the region, it is not expressed with the virulence that is noteworthy in Europe and the Middle East. Above all, Washington has cultivated the Asian Great Powers assiduously, and has managed simultaneously to improve relations with Tokyo, Beijing, Moscow, and New Delhi – a substantial accomplishment. It remains to be seen whether it can work in concert with others to ameliorate the sources of discord in the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait.

The U.S., to be sure, confronts some daunting challenges in Asia. If the U.S.-Japan alliance is in excellent condition, defense cooperation with Seoul remains troubled by the sharp divergence in U.S. and ROK perspectives on North Korean aims and strategy. Nor have we found a solid basis for pursuing with Pyongyang's neighbors a coordinated approach to the Six Power Talks. Regional economic cooperation is taking shape along pan-Asian rather than trans-Pacific lines. Developments in the Middle East threaten to "Arabize Islam" in Southeast Asia. And the "Johnny One Note" quality of U.S. diplomacy – i.e., its absorbing preoccupation with international terrorism – often plays poorly vis-à-vis Beijing's more broadly based effort to provide regional leadership.

Nor is America unconstrained in its policy efforts in the region. Our military forces are stretched thin globally, impelling some downsizing of deployments in Asia. Huge fiscal deficits loom, and with growing bills falling due in both Iraq and Afghanistan, resources available for polity initiatives elsewhere are likely to be tight. The president has succeeded in pushing negotiations with North Korea into a multilateral framework, yet it is Washington that is being pressured by negotiating partners to adopt a more conciliatory posture. The democratization of Asian nations, while welcome, does not automatically facilitate the pursuit of U.S. diplomatic objectives. Recent elections in South Korea and Taiwan were decisively shaped by a new generation of voters. Governments in Seoul and Taipei are increasingly accountable, yet viewed from the U.S., they are not extraordinarily sensitive to Washington's views, let alone deferential to its lead.

With these considerations in mind, one should expect President Bush and his foreign policy team to continue cultivating close ties with the Asian Great Powers. Whether Washington can effectively utilize those relationships to rollback North Korea's nuclear program and avert crises in the Taiwan Strait will depend heavily on its relationships with the governments in Seoul and Taipei. And at the moment South Korea appears determined to expand economic ties with the North virtually without reference to Pyongyang's nuclear activities. And Taipei remains preoccupied with efforts to assert its own identity while counting on U.S. protection.

In the end, of course, foreign policy rarely entails the fulfillment of carefully laid plans. Someone once asked newly elected British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan what would drive foreign policy when he formed his government. He answered without hesitation, "Events, dear boy, events." I expect the same may be true for Mr. Bush.

Michael H. Armacost is a distinguished fellow in the Asia Pacific Research Center at Stanford University. He can be reached at armacost@stanford.edu. *An earlier version of this article appeared in the Dec. 3, 2004 edition of the* Joongang Ilbo.