



## **East Asia Would Do Well to Help America in Gulf**

by Gerald Segal

As the United States and its closest allies close ranks on the verge of another major crisis in the Gulf, East Asian countries are standing aside. But unlike their stance during the Gulf War in 1991, many East Asians this time are not so much sitting on the fence as sitting on the opposite side of the fence from the United States and its Western partners.

At least in 1991 a number of Asian states, including Japan, provided financial support for the allied operation in the Gulf. This time, Australia is the only country in the region to offer a military contribution, though Japan on Friday backed the United States in its standoff with Iraq. The other East Asian nations closest to the United States – South Korea and Singapore – are perched on the fence, offering only guarded sympathy.

There are various explanations for the tendency of East Asians to be unsupportive or downright hostile to Western objectives. The starting point is a long-standing reluctance to join collective security operations of any sort and to see defense in narrow nationalistic terms.

Perhaps the most understandable explanation is that East Asia's economic crisis looms large and makes governments in the region less concerned about becoming net contributors to the maintenance of international order. Some, such as South Korea, might argue that they are now too poor to afford involvement in distant military engagements.

Of course, many East Asians in Malaysia and elsewhere will take this opportunity to express their pent-up resentment of what they see as Western bullying during the worst of the recent economic crisis.

The clear opposition of China, the region's military power, to action in the Gulf also certainly encourages East Asians to duck for cover.

Some in East Asia will take comfort in the relatively lower level of support the United States has found in Europe, even though all the major European players, except France, have expressed varying degrees of backing for the U.S.-led military buildup.

After the successful expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait in 1991, many East Asian officials quietly acknowledged that they had been wrong to sit on the fence. They risk making a similar mistake this time, whether the U.S.-British strikes are successful or not. East Asia is a region that depends, however tacitly, on an American commitment to regional order. Whether the challenge is deterring China from attacking Taiwan, keeping North Korea from obtaining nuclear weapons or attacking South Korea, or preventing serious conflict in the

South China Sea, it is the United States that provides stability and order.

The firmness of the U.S. response in the Gulf reflects a similar interest in defending international order and the authority of UN resolutions, and in minimizing the risk that weapons of mass destruction will spread.

If the United States feels that it must do all this on its own with minimal support from allies and friends, it will soon tire of the task. U.S. isolationist tendencies will strengthen.

A United States that moves toward isolation must be a worry for many East Asian countries that not only rely on America for order in their own region but expect Washington to organize the rescue of East Asian economies.

East Asia's myopia on this link between economics and security is part of the region's well-known tendency to pretend to see little need for a balance of power and to rely heavily on economic growth to maintain stability. Yet repeating this mantra now seems unhelpful as economic woes in the region lead to social unrest and political change.

East Asians should reflect on how matters will appear afterward. If Saddam Hussein capitulates and allows UN weapons inspectors back into Iraq, the United States will note, as it did in 1991, that its allies were all in Europe and in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Americans (and Europeans) will also remember that East Asia's economic crisis in 1997-1998 showed that they rely far less than they thought on economic ties with Asia and that trans-Atlantic relations are of primary importance.

If the military engagement fails, and those states with nuclear, chemical and biological weapons are freer to build their arsenals, the United States will consider even more carefully who its real friends are.

Either way, the winners will not be East Asians.

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