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Southeast Asia and the United States: Policy Without Strategy

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Clear strategic thinking is the bedrock upon which effective foreign policy and security policy must be built. But today, U.S. foreign policy toward Southeast Asia is being made in something disturbingly — even dangerously — close to a strategic vacuum. Responding to the financial/economic crisis that has afflicted the region has become the near sum and total of U.S. strategy. But an economic strategy, however well conceived and executed, is not a security strategy.

This would not matter greatly if Southeast Asia were free of serious security issues. In fact, the strategic challenges are growing. China is emerging as a regional great power — diplomatically, economically, and militarily. This is hardly a trivial development because China is the one potential peer competitor to the U.S. in world affairs. This is not to presume China will be an adversary. But it will surely be a competitor on all the dimensions that great powers interact. Moreover, China for the first time in at least two centuries is unimpeded by its two traditional security preoccupations, Russia and Japan, freeing Beijing to assert influence and interests to the south.

The rise of China presently coincides with the Asian economic crisis and the consequent loss of cohesion, confidence, and capacity of the Southeast Asian states. The crippling of Indonesia alone greatly alters the balance of capabilities between ASEAN and China. Japan's apparent loss of stature in the wake of an arguably ineffective response to Asia's economic difficulties and its own persistent recession have further accentuated China's rise. The logic of all this is to push Southeast Asia, however reluctantly, back toward greater reliance on the U.S. as a strategic counterweight to China. Only a few years ago, a rough regional security balance seemed to be emerging between ASEAN, China, and Japan with a united Korea waiting in the wings.

But why is the U.S. so prone to strategic drift in Asia, especially Southeast Asia? One factor, easily identified, is the fact that the current roster of key decision-makers in U.S. foreign policy is bereft of anyone with sustained in-depth expertise on Asia. The incumbent Secretary of Defense comes the closest to being an exception. It is difficult to watch contemporary American foreign policy without concluding that most planning, thinking, and effort goes into policy toward Europe and the Balkans, Russia, and the Middle East — not Asia.

A second factor is the in-built emphasis within Pacific defense structure on Northeast Asia. The loss of Clark and Subic as military installations in the Philippines simply reinforced a natural tendency to focus attention on the northern portion of the Pacific Command's area of responsibility.

A third factor concerns the uniquely emotive quality in American perceptions of China. To a remarkable degree, U.S.-China relations have oscillated between extremes of amity and enmity. The explanation for such dramatic swings in public (and elite) attitudes is found in the peculiar emotional investment Americans have made in China. The origins of that investment go back over a century to the Christian missionary effort initiated in China by American churches in the late 19th century. That coupled with Washington's "Open Door" policy designed to prevent the colonial dismemberment of China (and thereby preserve U.S. access to the China market) gave a particular coloration to American perceptions of the Middle Kingdom. In that perception, China became America's protégé. The U.S. would protect, foster, and ultimately convert China into America's mirror image in Asia. That image was powerfully reinforced in World War II when Nationalist China, led by a Christian president and his wife, fought as an ally of the U.S. against Japan.

Suddenly, it all went terribly bad. An anti-American, Communist regime overthrew China's Christian president followed shortly by a brutal war in Korea that pitted U.S. forces against the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). American views of China swung 180 degrees; the People's Republic had become the incarnation of evil, the citadel of the "blue ants," the new "yellow peril." The American foreign policy establishment self-immolated over the question of "who lost China?" Again, suddenly, everything changed. Almost overnight, ping-pong diplomacy and Nixon's 1972 trip to China revived America's infatuation. Deng Xiaoping's return visit in 1979 was a virtual lovefest. By the early 1980s, Washington and Beijing had become quasi-allies in the global Cold War contest with Moscow.

But then came the end of the Cold War and the "June 4 incident" in Tiananmen, which played out on the television screens of America. The pendulum has swung again and again. Today, amid reports of nuclear spying, three-quarters of the American public tell pollsters they see China as an adversary. Congress has become a hotbed of criticism of China on everything from abortion to satellite launches. Republicans have attacked the White House over alleged Chinese efforts to buy influence (and perhaps national security secrets) with campaign contributions. Without the anchor of a common strategic concern, U.S. policy towards China has become a magnet for seemingly every domestic group with a foreign policy agenda.

A final factor concerns the profound ambiguities of the Southeast Asian strategic environment. In Southeast Asia, there are no clear threats, no defined adversary, and no specific territorial boundaries to defend. A major objective of U.S. policy is to avoid words and actions that seem to prejudge whether one country (China) will become an adversary. America has two declared defense commitments in the region, with the Philippines

and Thailand. The alliance with the Philippines has been attenuated by disputes over the territorial scope of U.S. obligations, by the 1991 decision of the Philippines Senate to terminate the U.S. military presence, and by an unratified visiting forces agreement (although hopes for ratification have risen recently). Security ties with Thailand rest on executive understanding rather than a formal treaty. As a consequence, any American use of Thai military facilities (as in the Persian Gulf war) is dependent on a Thai government decision based on its interests of the moment.

One could conclude that the ambiguities in the environment are being matched by ambiguities in policy. In certain circumstances ambiguity is a valuable, even essential, element of policy. U.S. policy toward Taiwan is a case in point. But ambiguity can become a comfortable substitute for clear thinking — the policy equivalent of "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil."

The South China Sea is a case in point. One has to discount official Chinese statements and actions to conclude China poses no serious challenge to the status quo in the Spratlys and surrounding waters. For the ASEAN governments, several of which have competing (though less far-reaching) claims, Beijing's assertion that the entire sea is Chinese territory is a very serious matter. As for the U.S., the South China Sea encompasses important sea-lanes traversed by both commercial and naval shipping. Keeping those sea lines of communication secure and unencumbered is an important American economic and security interest.

Any statement of U.S. strategy should make such interests explicit and clear. The stakes are potentially far too high for muddled messages. Southeast Asia needs reliable cues as to what to expect, or not to expect, from the U.S. security presence. China needs the same. However, the latest official statement of U.S. strategy (The United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region) is virtually silent on these subjects. The core strategic issues posed by China go essentially unmentioned. To the reader it is clear that America is carrying a big stick in Asia, but it is not all clear why.

It goes without saying that U.S. security planners must be clear in their own minds as to U.S. interests in Asia and how those interests are rank-ordered; what threats exist to those interests and how they should be ranked in terms of plausibility and lethality; what assets the U.S. has (both its own and those of allies) to control those threats; and what specific policies can be implemented at what cost to maximize assets and minimize threats. In short, think strategically.

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