



The Top Five Threats to Asian Security: The Korean Peninsula Top's the List; China Issues Loom Large

by Rebecca Goodgame Ebinger

PacNet readers overwhelmingly named the future of the Korean Peninsula as one of the top five security concerns for the Asia Pacific. In a June 1999 survey, 63% of respondents listed challenges surrounding the Peninsula as a top threat, by far the largest consensus among PacNet readers. Concerns included uncertainties regarding North Korean military capabilities and intentions, the possibility of a collapse of the Kim Jong-il regime and the implications of such an implosion on regional stability, and managing a possible peaceful unification of the Peninsula.

The poll reflected that the Korean Peninsula and other 'hard' issues will remain of grave importance into the 21st century. Of the top five challenges, three directly involve the People's Republic of China--a strong indication that questions surrounding China's future loom large in the minds of many regional security specialists. Of note, many of the top five were linked in some way, creating the impression that respondents believe the security concerns of the region are intertwined and therefore must be addressed in a coherent and concerted manner.

Although the poll was issued prior to the latest crisis brought about by Taiwan President Lee's 'special state-to-state' comment, cross-Strait issues still came in second among the list of security challenges facing Asia. Half of the respondents expressed concerns regarding relations between China and Taiwan, and no doubt many more would agree with that assessment today. Comments regarding the issue ranged from fear of potential U.S. 'abandonment' of Taiwan to concerns that the Chinese will focus on the Taiwan issue to draw attention away from increasing domestic and economic concerns on the mainland.

Another sovereignty dispute ranked third among responses. The South China Sea issue was mentioned in 35% of responses. Readers expressed the need for greater international cooperation on the issue, specifically via the existing multinational institution in the region, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Some progress seems to have occurred on this issue at the recent ARF meeting, where a commitment to a Regional Code of Conduct was established. Many readers used this issue as an example as to why greater effort needs to be put into multilateral security organizations and confidence building measures. Other respondents tied the Spratley Islands issue together with cross-Strait concerns to question China's region-wide intentions.

The future role of China in regional affairs was the fourth most common challenge listed. This issue was addressed in different ways, but 33% of all respondents mentioned the 'rise of China,' 'integrating China,' or a similar reference as a top

concern. Another large percentile named the U.S.-China and China-Japan relationships, as well as the relationship among the three, as critical features of future security in Asia. In addition, PacNet readers mentioned possible environmental, economic, or demographic challenges inside China as elements of general concern.

27% of PacNet readers listed continuing United States engagement in the Asia Pacific, both military and political, as one of the top five challenges. Some readers specifically mentioned the maintenance and enhancement of the U.S.-Japan alliance and the need for U.S. military involvement in any development on the Korean Peninsula, while others focused on U.S. dedication to multilateral organizations and political leadership in Asia. Even as many respondents cited U.S. withdrawal from the region as their number one concern, the difficulty in achieving a balance between leadership and hegemony was recognized. Other readers mentioned the potential security threat of cultural clashes between Asian states and the U.S. This challenge was often listed as parallel to the security concerns listed above.

The combined measure of the three challenges that directly involve China greatly surpasses the Korean Peninsula as the number one concern for Asia Pacific security. As Sino-U.S. relations remain bogged down in the aftermath of the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade and tensions increase across the Taiwan Strait, it seems that these various Sino-centric challenges cannot and should not be separated. The China issue also cannot be extricated from concerns regarding U.S. involvement in the Asia Pacific. Continuing U.S. engagement and the smooth integration of China, as an emerging power, into the Asia Pacific community of nations are challenges that must be addressed if Asia is to enjoy peace and stability in the 21st century.

This list of the top five Asia Pacific security challenges was the result of a survey sent out in PacNet #22. The respondents represent a diversity of regions and occupations with interest in Asia as their common characteristic. Rebecca Goodgame Ebinger is a research assistant with Pacific Forum CSIS.