

Obama and East Asia: No Room for Complacency by Gerald Curtis

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The Obama administration's foreign policy in East Asia has been characterized more by continuity than by change, building on policies of previous administrations that have served U.S. interests well. But there is a danger that, forced by events to focus attention on the world's hot spots, continuity will shade into complacency, leaving the administration to constantly try to catch up with developments in an East Asia that is rapidly changing.

Managing trilateral relations among the U.S., China, and Japan requires a multi-level approach. Each of these countries is in a transformative period that is changing the dynamics of their interaction. Bilateral relationships will remain central. It is unrealistic and unwise, however, to think of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship as comprising a G-2 for dealing with regional and global issues. The notion of a G-2 grossly exaggerates China's strengths. It is not in U.S. interests to encourage China to believe that it has more power to influence global affairs than it actually possesses. Being the largest overseas purchaser of U.S. Treasury notes gives China considerable leverage in relations with the U.S. But one should not underestimate the mutual hostage quality that results from China being the largest holder of U.S. bonds, which produces a kind of economic Mutually Assured Destruction.

There is a role for ad hoc trilateral consultations with China and Japan but little to be gained from institutionalizing a consultative mechanism which would leave the South Koreans anxious about being left out, tempt China and Japan each to try to draw the U.S. to its side on controversial Sino-Japanese issues, and remove ASEAN as a useful neutral platform upon which these great powers can interact. As for institutionalizing the Six-Party Talks format, the reality is that these talks have failed to bring about the denuclearization of North Korea and it is not apparent why they would be useful to deal with issues not related to North Korea; it is not clear what such a "talk shop" would talk about. East Asia does not need a new security architecture. It needs an attentive U.S. government that engages with countries in the region flexibly and with imagination.

China's need for a stable international environment within which it can pursue its economic development goals has made its foreign policy eminently pragmatic, as can be seen in recent policies toward Taiwan and Japan. But many things can upset

this state of affairs. U.S. media criticism about China's violations of human rights, the inherent fragility of an authoritarian political system lacking in sources of legitimacy other than its ability to produce rapid economic growth, a reversal of positive trends in cross-Strait relations, a sharp divide between the U.S. and China in views about how to respond to North Korea's nuclear quest, and the possibility of growing protectionist pressures in the U.S. offer no room for complacency about future Sino-U.S. relations.

There does appear to be a considerable degree of complacency in the Obama administration about Japan and a tendency to underestimate Japan's strengths and the potential for significant change in its foreign policy. Japan is going through an important political transition. It is not only that the DPJ is likely to form the next government. There is also a generational change underway that is going to bring to the fore politicians who do not view the U.S. through quite the same kind of "special relationship" lens that characterizes older political leaders. The U.S. needs to embark on a strategic dialogue with Japan that amounts to more than a dialogue about how Japan can do more to help achieve U.S. policy goals. But to do so requires that Japan be prepared to put forth its own ideas about how to enhance U.S.-Japan cooperation.

In the likely event that the DPJ comes to power, both Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio and President Obama should be guided by an approach that is captured by one word: wait. Hatoyama should wait to go to Washington until he is prepared to offer specific proposals for how the U.S. and Japan can cooperate in dealing with important regional and global issues. Obama should wait until the Japanese government's new leaders have had a chance to absorb the reality that some of the foreign policies they need to pursue are necessarily different from what they said they would do when they were in opposition. Already, as the prospect of a DPJ victory has grown, so too has the party's efforts to make more conditional some campaign promises made only weeks earlier. If either side moves too precipitously, the result will be unnecessary and harmful confrontation.

But the Obama administration also needs to recognize that continuity in relations with Japan is not enough. The year 2010 is the 50th anniversary of the signing of the U.S.-Japan security treaty. This should be taken as an occasion not only to celebrate a remarkably deep and mutually beneficial alliance but to initiate a dialogue that would seek to bring that alliance more into sync with the needs of the first half of the 21st century rather than the second half of the last one.

The urgent tends to drive important but less urgent foreign policy issues to the bottom of the president's inbox. A concerted effort is needed to insure that does not become the case with U.S. policy toward East Asia. This region is far too

important to U.S. national interests to be treated with a kind of benign neglect; there is no room for complacency.

President Obama has the opportunity to build a strong relationship with the countries of East Asia on the foundation that his predecessors have left for him. But build he must. A comprehensive and constructive East Asian policy requires presidential leadership. It is only that leadership that will make continuity work.