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U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY, THE PACIFIC AND CHINA

by

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Introduction

In the preface to the *National Security Strategy of the United States*, President Bush writes: "A new world order is not a fact; it is an aspiration — and an opportunity."¹ Acknowledging the disappearance of an "old world order," which was one of bipolar confrontation and in which U.S. foreign policy was built around the ideas of containment and encircling alliances, the administration is staking out its intent to keep the country involved as the leader in the evolution of a new international system.

An important part of the foreign policy issue is the matter of military security and the question (or absence) of clearly defined military threats. On the one hand are those who simply conclude that there is no threat and no likelihood of a threat requiring substantial U.S. military capability. On the other are those who point to the increase in xenophobic and irredentist conflicts around the world, suggesting that it is in the U.S. interest and it is a U.S. responsibility to be prepared to be involved.

The United States remains a global power with economic, social and political interests in virtually every region of the world. The security commitments inherent in that role argue for continuing engagement as domestic and international political, economic, military, social and environmental events and circumstances shape U.S. security policy. This essay examines the future security role of the United States in the Pacific and, within that context, the implications for U.S. security relations with the emerging global power, the People's Republic of China.

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The East Asia Perspective

The mosaic of the "Pacific Rim" depends on the direction from which it is observed. Viewed from East Asia, the rim consists of trading partners Canada, the United States and Mexico; the western seaboard countries of Central and South America are also of interest to Asia/Pacific countries. The sea lanes of the Pacific and to, through, around and beyond the Western Hemisphere are vital to Pacific country interests for two-way trade and access to energy sources. The security of Pacific, as well as global, trade routes and access presently depends principally on the continuation of a significant U.S. ground, air and naval presence in the Pacific, to include forward bases and access to foreign ports, principally to supply and maintain the U.S. fleet.

In a recent interview, Dr. Yeo Ning Hong, Singapore's Minister for Defence, made it perfectly clear why Singapore had given the U.S. Navy access to port facilities after their departure from Subic Bay in the Philippines. He stated unequivocally that "Singapore's support for a continued U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia is based on our perception that a sustained U.S. presence will maintain the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific, reinforce the stable and peaceful regional environment, and enable the countries in Southeast Asia to concentrate their resources on economic development."² It is conceivable that representatives of the other member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), consisting of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, would make similar statements.

Japan, in a formal alliance with the United States, is the number one global economic power and needs continued access to North American markets and access to energy. Japan continues to offset U.S. expenses for bases and continues to welcome the presence of U.S. forces in Japan as a counterbalance to the two Koreas and China. South Korea, now a fledgling democracy, also has a formal alliance with the United States and continues to support U.S. military presence in light of an adversarial North Korea evidently in pursuit of nuclear weapons development. Domestic unrest in Japan and Korea regarding U.S. military presence has little short-term impact. However, in the longer view South Korea and Japan will prepare for the possibility that U.S. forces could be withdrawn by the end of the century. Japan would be forced to expand its defensive perimeter beyond the present 1,000-mile limit. A security void left by the departure of U.S. forces would have to be filled by Japan, and possibly a seat in the U.N. Security Council would eventually follow. However, Japan's historical rival China, which is seeking both economic prowess and eventual superpower status, remains an obstacle to Japanese remilitarization.

The perceptions from East Asia conjure up a declining United States, and a possibly less dependable ally down the road. New regional security arrangements could be in the offing which may or may not include the United States. There is a perceived need for the United States to get its house in order and to address internal weaknesses. East Asians may believe that just as the Cold War bankrupted the former Soviet Union, a similar, albeit less devastating, phenomenon may be at work in the United States. The East Asian prognosis for long-term U.S. engagement in the Pacific is not good.

The North American Perspective

Viewed from the United States, the Pacific Rim consists of the economic dynamos (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong), the economic enclaves along the China coast and the People's Republic of China. The neighboring giants to the west and north (India, Pakistan and

Russia) also enter into the U.S. security equation. And, of course, the United States retains residual interests in Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. The potential for the spread of nuclear weapons technology from Russia, India, Pakistan, North Korea and principally China is a major concern. A report by the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), after completing an inspection visit to North Korea on May 16, 1992, that North Korea is building a reprocessing plant to convert spent uranium into plutonium is not reassuring.³

China is in transition from its Cold War on-again/off-again engagements with the two military superpowers. With the demise of the Soviet Union, prospects for ever closer economic ties with Japan, Taiwan and other economic tigers, the impending absorption of Hong Kong in 1997, and its expanding role as foreign military supplier, China can choose to ignore the United States. The United States recognizes this predicament and, for now, must pursue redefined relationships with economic superpower Japan while awaiting the opportunity to reengage China. This process may begin with the expected changes in China's leadership when Deng Xiaoping and other Party elders pass from the scene.

Economic, trade and cultural tensions between the United States and Japan are of continuing concern and must figure strongly in any projection regarding the U.S. position in the Far East and, perforce, any speculation about U.S./China relations. While the Japanese are pleased to have a U.S. presence in Japan for many reasons, it is not inconceivable that current disagreements could escalate to the point where U.S. forces would be withdrawn. This is particularly the case in an environment where U.S. overseas deployments have little support at home. The withdrawal of the United States from Japan would have a profound impact in the area. In particular, if Japan were to embark on an external military buildup in their perceived need for security, the countries of the region would be much alarmed. Withdrawal from Korea would eliminate the only significant U.S. ground presence in the Pacific and add further to Japan's felt need to enhance its own security.

The perspective of the United States is its image as a Pacific maritime power long interested in reducing trade barriers. During the Cold War, security concerns were the primary focus, as evidenced by alliances in the Far East and with Australia and by direct military involvement in Korea and Indochina. The displacement of autocratic regimes with democratically elected institutions remains a principal value orientation. Consequently, U.S. aid is tied to democratic performance. Aid to China was cut off immediately after the People's Liberation Army (PLA) violently suppressed the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in June 1989. Aid to Thailand was cut off after a military coup in February 1991 displaced a democratically-elected government.

Given time, Russia is another significant player in the region, one which could have enormous influence. The question is when will the Russians be able to transcend the current economic disaster and take its place as an influential power in both Europe and Asia? In the rest of this century it seems unlikely that Russia will be able to exert major influence, but longer-term political and security arrangements in northeast Asia require taking Russia into account. In so doing, the United States should be having substantial dialogue with Russia on matters relating not only to Europe but also to Asia. This dialogue, while of little concern to the Chinese now, will assume increasing importance over time as China and Russia come into competition in the area.

There are no significant international organizations in the region to provide security and stability. ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is the only multinational treaty arrangement, and it has no history of involvement in security arrangements. A minor exception to

this history was a special discussion on security on the margins of a recent ASEAN meeting. This discussion, however, reflects the concern of Southeast Asian countries over the continuing U.S. presence.

China's Security Aspirations

There is little doubt that China aspires to fulfill a perceived destiny as the dominant regional power and ultimately as a major world power. While there is nothing to suggest major military adventurism on China's part, they clearly have concluded that a modern military is essential to the status desired. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, China no longer perceives itself to be threatened militarily. They do, however, perceive a potential threat from Japan and share with others in the region a historic mistrust of the Japanese.

For China, security concerns include the actions necessary to maintain its Marxist-Leninist socialist ways and to prevent the subversion of its cultural values by attempts at westernization or "peaceful evolution." At the same time, as if experiencing an identity crisis or split personality, China is making the best of western democratic-style economic development: the private sector economic zones are outperforming the government-run agencies. Chinese sensitivity to outside criticism of its internal affairs or foreign attempts at contacts with dissidents is well documented. As recently as May 17, 1992, the Beijing State Security Ministry searched the office of a *Washington Post* correspondent, confiscating documents and making accusations that the correspondent had engaged in activities incompatible with expected behavior of a foreign journalist.⁴

In order to achieve its primary goals in the economic sector, China needs relative peace. This has evidently been achieved as Beijing maintains a dialogue with its nuclear neighbor India and potential nuclear neighbor Pakistan. Participation in the Cambodia peace process (thus enhancing its ties with Vietnam), supporting the initial United Nations actions in the Persian Gulf crisis, and abstaining from the vote on direct military action did no harm to China's global image. Relations with the new Russia (still nuclear-capable and possessing a formidable conventional military capability) will be noncompetitive for now. Peace along China's borders, particularly with Russia, is essential for the advancement of economic goals and longer-term superpower status. Taiwan is not a security issue now, and, in fact, figures strongly in China's economic picture.

China does not accept a unipolar "new world order" or, for that matter, a tripolar world composed of Europe, the United States and Japan. For now China accepts the U.S., Japanese and South Korean regional alliances, which are important to overall regional stability and continued economic expansion. Without the alliances and U.S. presence, China knows well that Japan would be compelled to reexamine its security, possibly leading to remilitarization.

Strongly linked to China's economic goals, programs involving the manufacture and foreign sale of military arms — particularly ballistic missiles — feed hard currency to the modernization needs of the PLA. Acting where foreign competitors cannot or will not, China appears to have little regard for arms proliferation and attempts at arms control, particularly to regions beyond its immediate hegemonic sphere. In its military-to-military contacts, the PLA goal is to obtain information through limited purchases of foreign equipment and subsequently apply the technology to their own manufacturing.

U.S. Security Prognosis and Pacific Consequences

The United States will continue the ongoing process of disengagement from the Pacific, as well as from Europe, in the medium to long term. Though the U.S. National Security Strategy states that the intent of the United States is to exercise world leadership in the emerging new world order, a U.S. consensus does not presently exist to commit the resources required for the task. As the above discussion indicates, the United States is attempting to downsize its military capabilities to a prudent level of risk. However, it is more likely that the forces will be downsized even further as Congress cuts the defense budget much lower than requested by the administration.

The absence of an overarching threat to U.S. interests, U.S. domestic social and economic problems, and a lack of popular understanding of the interdependence of the United States with other nations from an economic, as well as moral, viewpoint is moving the country to a level of neo-isolationism. In the absence of the development of a political consensus which recognizes these two points, only a dramatic crisis event directly affecting the interests of the United States could reverse the trend toward more extensive disengagement. The tragic events ongoing among the warring republics of the former Yugoslavia and the potential for expanding military conflict among the former members of the Soviet Union (in which even Turkey has recently become involved) are reminiscent of the European continent balance-of-power relations which eventually led to World Wars I and II. As then, the United States is regarding these circumstances as principally a European problem.

The consequences of these trends are already in evidence among our allies, particularly in the Pacific. The traditional role of the United States as principal provider of security in the Pacific is being questioned. U.S. economic strength, though immense in absolute terms, is already viewed as significantly diminished in political importance as Pacific nations enjoy strong, expanding economies. U.S. political and economic interests in the Pacific are intertwined, and without significant U.S. military presence there is little room to guarantee them.

Asian expectations that the momentum of the U.S. withdrawal from the Pacific will exceed official projections could undermine stability throughout the region. The perceived loss of U.S. stature in the Pacific and the absence of a significant U.S. military presence could help fuel old rivalries which go beyond healthy economic competition. Asian perceptions that the United States may possess neither the requisite political will nor the military capability to deter adventurism could greatly reduce U.S. leverage to prevent open conflict among Asian competitors, much less to intervene militarily.

The outlook for a Pacific region without a significant U.S. military forward presence or capability to rapidly project military power from the United States is foreboding. The consequences could involve regional destabilization as nations posture to protect their interests, particularly in the economic domain. As discussed earlier, Japan would be compelled to strengthen its security through rearmament. The instability resulting from a lessened U.S. presence and expanding Japanese defense perimeter would lead to even stronger posturing by China, remilitarization of her smaller neighbors and heightened defensive measures by ASEAN, India, Pakistan, Korea and even Australia.

To maintain stability in the Pacific region in the future, U.S. security policy will have to gain a national consensus which supports a continuing and credible political, economic and military engagement. The message to the American public and Congress has to emphasize the continuing

and future economic well-being of the United States which results from international trade, and particularly the interdependence of the economies of the countries around the Pacific Rim. The real costs of a U.S. military policy of engagement should be kept in perspective since a relatively small portion of national treasure, or GNP, is actually devoted to national defense. The success of such an effort to gain national consensus is yet to be seen. Future U.S. security policy will attempt to remain engaged throughout the Pacific using mechanisms which will control healthy competition without destabilizing significant security concerns.

Implications for U.S. China Policy

In the medium- to long-term period, U.S. security policy will address ways to maintain U.S. influence as a global leader while developing new or revitalizing old mechanisms for assuring U.S. security and that of important allies and friends. This process will take place during a period when the real economic, political and military capabilities of the United States must meet stiffer competition. For China specifically, U.S. policy will have to accommodate a more coequal approach to doing business.

Security Methodology. U.S. security policy development in general, but especially with regard to the People's Republic of China, is currently defined in terms of relative power relationships with other countries. China reacts negatively toward balance-of-power approaches to international security, especially a recent U.S. statement (since withdrawn) which indicates a future unipolar world. Other countries, including longtime allies and friends, probably have the same reaction.

Present U.S. thinking regarding national security continues to be shaped by past Cold War operative concepts fostered in a world of opposing military superpowers. The scenario of a two-superpower nuclear exchange or a two-coalition war in Europe, to include the use of nuclear weapons, was voided with the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union. The leverage and international influence enjoyed by a superpower in the final decade of the twentieth century is changing rapidly — still based on military prowess but increasingly on other dimensions as well. Our future China policy will necessarily need to foster cooperation with China in the pursuit of mutually beneficial and common interests.

Military Engagement. In the post-Cold War era, continuing, albeit less extensive, engagement with the Pacific countries will be of major importance to the United States. The economic vitality of the United States will depend on it. U.S. military engagement with China in the future, as well as with other Pacific countries (particularly Japan, Korea and the members of ASEAN), will be one of the cornerstones of our security relationships. Military engagement includes more practical dimensions such as military assistance, training and exercises, as well as more formalized relationships defined by base rights, coalitions and alliances.

It is not unusual for the United States to suspend one of the elements of military cooperation as a political tactic to indicate visible displeasure with a country's behavior. This is done as well for U.S. domestic consumption. As recently as May 20, 1992, the Japanese government appeared to have little difficulty with Thailand's use of military force to disrupt protests against the appointment of the Thai supreme military commander as the prime minister. Japan has extensive automotive and electronics manufacturing firms in Thailand and provides Thailand about \$500 million in aid yearly.⁵ In response to this same situation, however, the United States cancelled military exercises with Thailand. The result is the severing of an avenue of influence to the Thai military.

U.S. law prescribes the cutoff of aid in certain situations involving human rights violations. In the area of military aid, cutoffs can interrupt the supply of major weapon systems and spare parts or maintenance, which can render a system inoperable. Additionally, the training of foreign military students is interrupted and programmed training is cancelled; students return home incompletely trained in their assigned skills. The "punishment" is felt, albeit most often at only a relatively low level. The use of the military instrument in this manner will probably not be as effective for future U.S. security policy in the Pacific where countries have other alternatives for meeting their military needs.

The cutoff of U.S. military aid and contacts to China was an appropriate response to the Tiananmen Square confrontation. However, as disruptive as this may have been to China, the result could be years of misdialogue, miscues and missed opportunities. This method of signalling U.S. displeasure will be less effective in the future in other than the most extreme circumstances. Using future military programs as instruments of foreign policy for otherwise minor infractions will undermine an important avenue of influence with China. The principal military force in China, as in most countries, is the army; in these foreign environments the army is also a major political force. U.S. China policy will have to keep the avenue of U.S. Army-to-foreign army dialogue open as long as political circumstances will allow. Military-to-military dialogue with the PLA and increased opportunities for professional military contacts and training in the United States can reap long-term influence benefits.

U.S. China policy will address the expansion of bilateral security relations, which will have to be sought continuously. The setting, in keeping with a revamped methodology, should be one of equality and not one of parent-child or teacher-student. The Chinese personality and frame of reference must be recognized and means developed to exploit it, not fight it. U.S. long-term goals of influencing China to act responsibly with its immediate neighbors and in other regions, and to accept international norms of behavior, will have to be kept in focus. Alternatives must be provided. Short-term results may not be encouraging. This is especially important in the areas of armaments proliferation and acceptance of arms control measures. Past arms control agreements with China have evidently been subject to reinterpretation (actually not very unusual in international agreements). The United States can build on this past experience with China for future rounds of negotiations.

Multinational Fora. It appears to be effective with the Chinese to approach U.S. security interests from a multinational perspective. This process could involve not only China's regional neighbors but countries from other regions as well. For example, multilateral approaches to mutual security needs could involve (along with the United States) China, Japan, North and South Korea, ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand, as well as Pakistan and India. The scope, reach and interdependence of these countries in the post-Cold War era will become extensive. The security agenda involves the core topics of nuclear technology, conventional weapons proliferation and new arms control measures. Such fora can also address issues of security cooperation. As suggested by others, just as there is a Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), there is a need for a Conference for Security and Cooperation in Asia (CSCA) for the Pacific arena.

From the Chinese viewpoint, it appears that the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) — to which China has said it will adhere subject to some reinterpretation — and other arms control instruments negotiated during the Cold War reflect past superpower relationships and necessarily past interpretations. New instruments of multilateral arms control might be needed. With China invited as a negotiating partner, the potential for solid results and adherence may be greater.

In the absence of a Soviet threat, U.S. policy could address new ways to cooperate with the Chinese, particularly in the military arena. The focus must be pragmatic and the goals less grand. Setting aside our tendency to focus on the big issue, smaller achievements could be sought as incremental steps to achieving larger goals.

China's involvement in multilateral military fora is a way to achieve small successes in dialogue. For example, the Pacific Area Senior Officer Logistics Seminar (PASOLS), which was begun in 1971, is held annually in a different country to address common military logistics issues. Twenty-five countries attended the last conference, held in Cairns, Australia. Such fora can help reduce the level of China's suspicions and provide opportunities for dialogue at a relatively high level. Pragmatic efforts along these lines have a cumulative effect.

The future contraction of U.S. military presence in the Pacific must be paced. The destabilizing effects of rapid drawdowns could lead to unwarranted alarm among the major actors, prompt major rearmament (especially by China and Japan), and possible exacerbation of the situation which exists between the two Koreas. Closer consultations with China, Japan, the two Koreas, Taiwan, Australia and ASEAN, to include clear indications of future U.S. roles and commitments, will be essential. U.S. military forward basing and use of foreign facilities, however limited, and engagement with the military institutions of Pacific countries will do much to maintain stability in the region. Consultations with China as an equal will be most important to the Chinese.

Military assistance to China and complementary assistance to significant neighbors could be restored in the near term, even at a reduced level. Focusing on military technical problems with the PLA will be sufficient. The avenue of influence, however small, should stay open to provide professional military information and data. As an example, China's purchase of two counterbattery radars in 1985 can be built upon by providing limited operational and maintenance information to keep them operational.

China cannot be ignored. As others have said, it is difficult to ignore over one billion people. From the U.S. security policy perspective, China must be recognized as a potential world power. U.S. policies cannot be reactive, particularly where there is a tendency to focus on immediate behavior. The policy must foster curiosity, initiatives and exchange of information. The views from either side of the Pacific Rim should emphasize the multinational interdependency of the countries involved. China will have to actively deal with the United States, just as the United States must take a more active role with China.

Actions will have to speak louder than the words from the U.S. National Security Strategy: "Consultations and contact with China will be central features of our policy, lest we intensify the isolation that shields repression. Change is inevitable in China, and our links with China must endure."⁶

Notes

1. *National Security Strategy of the United States*, August 1991, p. v.
2. John G. Roos, "An Exclusive AFJI Interview with: Dr. Yeo Ning Hong, Minister for Defence, Singapore," *Armed Forces Journal International*, May 1992, p. 38.

3. T. R. Reid, "N. Korean Plutonium Plant Cited," *The Washington Post*, May 17, 1992, p. 25.
4. Lena H. Sun, "Beijing Authorities Harass Reporter," *The Washington Post*, May 18, 1992, pp. 1, 20.
5. Philip Shenon, "Military Crackdown in Thailand Blunts Protest Against Army Rule," *The New York Times*, May 20, 1992, pp.1, 10.
6. *National Security Strategy of the United States*, August 1991, p. 9.

(Gen. Merritt is the president of the Association of the United States Army. This essay is based on a work in progress for the Atlantic Council of the United States and the National Committee on US-China Relations.)

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