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IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW BUSH ADMINISTRATION FOR EAST ASIA: U.S. VIEWby Derek Mitchell

ABSTRACT

Given a lengthy political transition process and a skeletal foreign policy team now in place in the United States, Asians and others will need to be patient in its expectations of Bush administration foreign policy. However, a general bipartisan consensus exists concerning commitment to U.S. alliances, maintaining U.S. military presence worldwide, promoting democracy and human rights, and supporting the trend towards globalization. The security/military background of the expected Bush Administration East Asia foreign policy team will lead to a less idealistic, more "results-oriented" approach to policy. The senior leadership will likely be more muted publicly in its diplomacy, preferring to consult quietly on issues of mutual interest or disagreement, while its instinctive aversion to U.S. military intervention worldwide will be challenged by the needs of U.S. leadership. The Japan-centered background of the East Asia team will be as much a challenge as a benefit to Japan due to expectations of greater bilateral cooperation, and relations with China will be based less on ideals of future partnership and more on hard assessments of its policies and intentions towards key U.S. interests, including peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue. U.S. policy toward North Korea will undergo a similar review, although continuity is more likely than any profound change in approach. Dialogue on national and theater missile defense will continue with allies and others alike, but the new administration's commitment to development and deployment is clear and not negotiable. Finally, the role of Republican Party elders, a more robust vice presidential foreign policy staff, and Congress will remain wildcards in the conduct of U.S. policy in East Asia.

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT

Before examining the implications for East Asia of the new Bush Administration, some context is needed.

First, a misperception seems to persist in Asia, and perhaps elsewhere internationally, that the U.S. presidential political system is like parliamentary systems around the world - on January 20, an old team goes out, a new team comes in, fully formed, complete, organized, and set to govern. Unfortunately, in America, this is not the case. On January 20, a new president is indeed installed, but he brings with him little else. An outgoing administration takes with it all its senior policy-makers and many more junior functionaries from U.S. government departments. When the new president's team arrives, White House offices are empty of all remnants of the previous administration, including all files, computer hard drives, even pens and paper.

The presence of many veterans of federal government in the new Bush Administration has enabled the new team to effect a relatively smooth transition over the past six weeks. Nonetheless, the mere process of installing a new government ensures a lengthy transition period, involving literally thousands of political appointments, background checks, Congressional hearings (for senior appointees), policy reviews, and promulgation of new procedures. Given this reality, our international friends will have to recognize that patience is a virtue, as the process of emplacing and empowering a full foreign policy team, and determining its policy, will take a considerable amount of time.

Secondly, one should note that when it comes to foreign policy, the implications of a political transition in the United States are both more dramatic and less dramatic than for other areas of U.S. governance: more dramatic, because the world does not stop for the United States when it undergoes its deliberate transition; less dramatic, because U.S. foreign policy is generally a study in continuity.

During the Cold War, despite some highly charged ideological debate, the strategy of containment of the Soviet Union remained the policy of the United States throughout more than 40 years of both Democratic and Republican administrations. Even moreso today, continuity is the norm, with no fundamental ideological differences between the two political parties. A consensus of international engagement has emerged within the foreign policy elite on both sides, including support for U.S. alliances, an international military presence, promotion of democracy and human rights, and globalization of investment and trade. The fringes of both political parties display ideological concerns about the implications of U.S. engagement and globalization, but their concerns are also shared in a less dogmatic way within the mainstream of the parties and may be co-opted in less extreme form within the consensus outlined above.

BACKGROUND OF PLAYERS

Given that the team is not yet officially in place, and given the imperfect science of examining past statements and positions for clues of future behavior in government, speculation about future policy is fraught with uncertainty, and may often reflect the biases of the observer as much as the observed. Nonetheless, it should be possible to make reasonable judgments of the general proclivities, instincts, and inclinations of individuals from careful consideration of the personalities, background, and record of those involved. Such consideration and judgments of the expected new Bush team follow.

President Bush himself has very limited international experience and has only traveled to Asia once, more than two decades ago when he visited his father in China. He is expected to rely enormously on his key advisors to guide him on foreign policy for the foreseeable future. The rest of his senior foreign policy team so far is equal part European and Asian specialists, although Europeanists remain in the most senior slots in the White House, State Department and Pentagon. The deputies in State and Defense, however, have extensive Asia background and experience.

Secretary of State Colin Powell, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice are Cold War Europeanists by training and have limited experience with Asia (aside from Powell's wartime service in Vietnam and brief tour in Korea in the 1970s). While their perceptions and instincts were developed during the Cold War, to assume that they retain an ideological or bipolar view of the international scene would be mistaken. It may be the case, though as yet unproven, that they retain a great power view of the world, whereby the imperative of maintaining a balance among the great powers must necessarily overshadow other concerns. But their commitment to engagement - political, diplomatic, economic, and military - and to maintenance of American influence overseas is unquestioned. However, whether these veterans of the Cold War can understand, appreciate, and adapt to the subtleties of the new array of security challenges, such as cyber security, global terrorist networks, infectious diseases, internal and external migration, environmental degradation, etc., is yet undetermined.

The profile of the expected new senior Asia team stands in contrast to their predecessors. One will notice that senior members of the Clinton team tended toward professional diplomats, academics, and lawyers, while what one might call "security practitioners" dominate the Bush team. Powell, Deputy Secretary of State-designate Richard Armitage, Assistant Secretary of State-designate for East Asia and the Pacific James Kelly, and National Security Council Asia chief Torkel Patterson each served in the military in their formative years. Along with Deputy Secretary of Defense-designate Paul Wolfowitz, who served as Undersecretary of Defense for Policy in the first Bush Administration, they each have substantial Pentagon experience, and indeed were weaned in the ethics of military and security affairs. While certainly not unschooled in the diplomatic art, their background suggests a rather different approach to international affairs, one generally less prone to idealistic or theoretical impulses, and more grounded in "realist" notions of cold national interest calculations, guided by such principles as reciprocity and bottom-line results.

The bottom-line approach of a Powell, for instance, suggests that if traditional approaches to long-standing problems do not seem to be working, he will be open to consider alternative approaches - witness recent developments concerning sanctions against Iraq. This does not mean excessive malleability or lack of principle, but, in good military form, practical consideration of whether an approach is achieving the results desired will likely override fidelity to a rigid ideology.

During the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush, Powell and Rice denounced what they viewed as U.S. "arrogance" internationally during the Clinton years. While perhaps an instinctive concern, the first months of the Bush Administration have caused substantial concern internationally and at home that a similar illness infects the new team, reflected, for instance, in decisions to summarily pull out of the Kyoto Treaty, take an abrupt hard line toward North Korea, and pursue missile defense without full consultation with allies and friends. In principle, the new administration affirmed a stronger preference for cooperation, coordination, and consultations with allies and friends to address future security challenges. Its actions so far have belied its rhetoric, but it remains early in the administration and the new team is still not yet fully in place. Indeed, to do otherwise may continue to induce a counter-reaction internationally, including such symbolic acts as the recent UN decision to exclude the United States from its Human Rights Commission. This action should serve as a wake-up call to the new administration of international concern over the tone and substance of its foreign policy approach to this point.

Powell and Rice have also registered openly their profound aversion to U.S. military intervention internationally, including involvement in non-warfighting operations such as peacekeeping, policing, and other methods of what they call "nation-building" in hotspots around the world. Ms. Rice's comment that the United States cannot be the world's "911" fits well into the famous Powell Doctrine restricting the conditions of U.S. military involvement in international conflicts. Their instincts suggest a relatively restrained U.S. security policy. Powell's public service record certainly reflects his strong commitment to the doctrine that bears his name. Whether his Doctrine will survive the test of governance during the coming years is less certain. However, there is no question that Rice and Powell will apply their instincts to Asia as much as to
Europe.

Uncertain will be the Pentagon's role in this debate. Secretary Rumsfeld has not spoken much on the issue of military intervention, but tends toward alleviating the operational tempo of soldiers and focusing on the hard military needs necessary for traditional warfighting. With regard to the Pentagon's influence on Asian affairs, this will depend on how much Secretary Rumsfeld decides to engage on Asian matters not in his specialty, and the degree to which Asia specialist Wolfowitz is willing and able to engage on the issues given his other responsibilities. Defense has yet to name its undersecretary for policy, let alone its senior Asia director, so any assumptions about their proclivities are obviously impossible. Regardless, the State Department institutionally has the advantage, and given the players there, State will take a stronger bureaucratic lead on Asian affairs than was the case during the Clinton Administration.

JAPAN: A STRONGER, DEEPER, BROADER ALLIANCE

Placing strong U.S. alliances in Asia and Europe at the center of U.S. foreign policy around the world, the prospective Bush team has affirmed a strong desire for increased cooperation, coordination, and consultation with allies and friends to address issues of mutual concern. In his confirmation hearing to become Secretary of State, Colin Powell commented: "To our west, across the Pacific, a … bedrock exists. It is our strong relationships with our Asia-Pacific allies and friends, and particularly Japan. Weaken those relationships and we weaken ourselves. All else in the Pacific and East Asia flows from those strong relationships… [W]e are a European and a Pacific nation, and we have to represent and defend our interests in both those theatres."

Within the circle of other Asia policymakers expected in the new Administration, expertise and experience is clearly oriented toward one country in particular: Japan. This is in contrast to the Clinton foreign policy team, which from the beginning seemed to fill its Asia team with China specialists and focused its attention on China. One might only note the list of participants in a recent bipartisan study group report examining the future of the U.S.-Japan partnership. The report, entitled "The United States and Japan: Advancing Toward a Mature Partnership," was dubbed the "Armitage-Nye" report, after two of the leading figures in the group. Besides the deputy secretary of state-elect, other members of the study group included such familiar names in the new administration as Paul Wolfowitz, James Kelly, and Torkel Patterson. Each of these individuals has a long history of focusing on the U.S.-Japan security alliance and less background in Chinese affairs. The new Administration's instincts will tend sharply toward Japan.

The Armitage-Nye report in fact takes a progressive view on the future of the alliance, calling for a more equal partnership and enhanced cooperation on a range of bilateral and regional matters (economic- as well as security-related). Whether Japan is prepared to accept fully the report's vision of a more direct and active Japanese role in regional security is unclear, but the inclinations of the new team are not. In seeking to implement their vision, however, these experienced officials also recognize the political realities in Japan, and thus will likely move in a moderate, cooperative, and evolutionary manner toward their goal.

Nonetheless, the Ehime Maru tragedy and other recent unfortunate incidents in Okinawa have placed the very future of the alliance at the forefront of the Bush team's agenda in a way unanticipated. Not since the Okinawa rape incident in 1995 has the alliance faced such a crisis. The new team's strong commitment to building an alliance that will sustain itself for the long term will likely lead to some creative thinking about issues such as force presence. Armitage was a hidden hand in developing initiatives after 1995 to reduce the U.S. military footprint on Okinawa. He has not been as committed to force numbers as was the Clinton team in preserving approximately 100,000 personnel in the region. It is not unlikely that he and his team will think hard once again on how to further reduce the burden of U.S. forces in Japan, both within the current SACO process and beyond to include questions such as possible relocation of U.S. Marines, in the interest of strengthening the long-term viability of the alliance overall.

KOREA: CONTINUITY WITH CAUTION

Colin Powell has confirmed that a review of U.S. policy on the Korean Peninsula is underway. Some reports have suggested that the new Administration is hostile to the Agreed Framework and is prepared to take a harder line toward North Korea than the Clinton Administration displayed, particularly in its waning days. Indeed, some senior officials in the new Administration have been on record as opposing the Agreed Framework and chastised President Clinton for a perceived dedication to legacy over propriety in pursuing aggressively a last-minute missile agreement with the DPRK. The troubled Bush-Kim summit in early March suggested confusion in the Administration and a disconnect between allies over the best policy towards the DPRK.

However, all speculation concerning the new Administration's Korea policy is premature. The results of the review are not preordained, and the Perry Report outlining a phased reciprocal approach to dealing with North Korea was a bipartisan document. The Administration's respect for the advice of allies suggests that Korea's opinion will be duly noted during the review process. The Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group process, despite rumors to the contrary, is alive and well, and members will meet in early March to determine how best to proceed on a coordinated policy. The Administration certainly does not want a crisis on the peninsula early in its administration. Nonetheless, the new team is very sensitive to continued military, particularly missile, activity in the North, and will seek necessarily to balance its political and military assessments of progress on the peninsula.

PRC/TAIWAN: "ONE CHINA" WITH AN EDGE

The Bush team clearly recognized that relations with the PRC, including the Taiwan issue, would push itself to the forefront of the Administration's foreign policy agenda early in its term. Human rights matters, Taiwan arms sales, and WTO accession are among the more visible issues to be addressed in the first months. However, no one could have predicted the EP-3 surveillance plane incident or its effect on relations so early in the new administration's term. The incident created new tensions and pushed relations with China to the forefront of national and international attention.

Regardless of the incident, the new administration fully appreciates the importance of effectively managing U.S. relations with the PRC for regional security, but its members have a different fundamental outlook on the relationship than was the case under Clinton.The Japan-centered, results-oriented, realistic perspective of the new team suggests a hard look at relations with China within the context of overall U.S. security interests in the region. As Colin Powell stated in his confirmation hearing,

"A strategic partner China is not, but neither is China our inevitable and implacable foe. China is a competitor, a potential regional rival, but also a trading partner willing to cooperate in areas where our strategic interests overlap. China is all of these things, but China is not an enemy, and our challenge is to keep it that way … Japan, South Korea, Australia, and our other allies and friends in the region have a stake in this process of nurturing a constructive relationship. And we will want to work with … our friends and allies in responding to a new and dynamic China."

One can be certain that the term "constructive strategic partnership," in whatever form, is a dead letter. As indicated in Powell's remarks, China is not viewed as an enemy but as a serious potential adversary and irritant to many important U.S. security interests, including our alliance structure, military presence, nonproliferation efforts, missile defense, and peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Evidence of PRC involvement in constructing a fiber optic communications network for Iraq, potentially in violation of UN sanctions, did not help matters. The new team recognizes and will seek to cooperate on the many areas of mutual interest between the two sides - Korea, South Asia, nuclear nonproliferation, terrorism, drug trafficking, etc. - but the PRC will need to deal directly with the issues of concern if the relationship is to achieve much progress.

The security-oriented background of the new team will lead to greater sensitivity to the scope and purpose of PRC military modernization, both with respect to Taiwan and as it affects the U.S.'s own ability to operate freely in the Asia-Pacific region. The PRC's military procurement, from Russia and elsewhere, will continue to be scrutinized closely, as will its overall military development and deployments. So too will the bilateral defense exchange program receive careful oversight.

The new team will be less sympathetic to U.S. commercial interests over security concerns, a charge leveled at the Clinton Administration. Indeed, two members of the new Administration, one now Vice President Cheney's chief of staff/national security adviser, served as members of the Cox Committee, which alleged that U.S. transfer of dual use technologies and systems bolstered PRC military capabilities. This is not to say that U.S. commercial activity with the PRC will be drastically curbed, but the Bush team will likely be more actively vigilant on this and other fronts in the bilateral relationship.

As the new Asia team is instinctively suspicious of China, it is also more supportive of Taiwan by nature. As Richard Armitage said in a speech last year, "Taiwan has become a democracy, and that's inconvenient for some. We look at Taiwan not as a problem but as an opportunity to show that democracy counts." The new team will continue to support a "One China" policy, and abide by the Three Communiques. They will remain as committed as ever to peaceful resolution of the Taiwan matter and will seek to provide for Taiwan's "sufficient self-defense capability" in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act even as it promotes dialogue between the two sides. Its implementation of the TRA will be more robust, particularly its policy on arms sales and other unofficial military assistance to the island. It does not see any contradiction, for instance, between this policy and commitment to the Three Communiques.

The recent robust package of arms sales to Taiwan, including diesel submarines, P-3 aircraft, and Kidd-class destroyers, reflects the new Administration's desire to signal its strong intent to counter PRC military development with increased commitment to Taiwan's defense needs. Although it deferred a decision on providing Arleigh Burke-class destroyers equipped with the AEGIS radar system, it is clear to this writer that given continuation of current military developments and deployments in the PRC, U.S. political authorization of an AEGIS sale is inevitable in the future, assuming Taiwan's ability to pay for and integrate it into its defense.. The new team certainly does not prefer a crisis in U.S.-PRC relations. However, the Bush team views the question of AEGIS as a function of PRC provocation -- reflecting an apparent shift in the PRC toward a coercive, military approach to solving the Taiwan issue over truly peaceful resolution -- and not as a change in longstanding U.S. policy under the Communiques and the TRA.

Finally, in 1999, Ambassador Armitage and Paul Wolfowitz included themselves among others who proposed an unambiguous declaration of support for Taiwan "in the event of an attack or blockade," which would effectively change the longstanding U.S. policy of "strategic ambiguity" concerning Taiwan. President Bush's statement that the United States would use "whatever means necessary" to defend Taiwan, whether officially "clarified" as consistent with longstanding U.S. policy or not, nonetheless signaled his personal orientation on the matter, a fact not lost on both the PRC and Taiwan. Should tensions rise across the Strait, due to an increase in the PRC threat and apparent commitment to a military solution, it is fairly certain that this statement will be repeated as official policy.

MULTILATERALISM

Members of the new team have said very little concerning their view of multilateralism. They have indicated privately that they will maintain the traditional U.S. policy of emphasizing bilateral relations while seeking vehicles for trilateral, quadrilateral or other dialogue to address specific regional security matters as appropriate. No new initiatives have been broached, and there is no indication that any dramatic changes to the current approach are being contemplated.

Nor is there any indication either way of the new team's opinion of CINCPAC Admiral Blair's notion of promoting the development of "security communities" through enhanced multinational engagement and, potentially, operations between regional militaries. The program continues to proceed through a Congressional earmark and is unlikely to be short-circuited with the change of administrations.

The ASEAN Regional Forum did not exist when many members of the new team last held power. Nonetheless, it is evident that their impulse is not to circumvent the forum but to make it a more active body for addressing the real challenges faced in the region, including the South China Sea, piracy, maritime safety, etc.

PROLIFERATION AND MISSILE DEFENSE

The United States has identified proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery as one of the primary future threats to regional security. The new team understands well this increasing threat and favors a robust program to counter it, including development and deployment of national and theater missile defenses. Given the strong bipartisan support in Washington for missile defense, right up to the president, the question is not whether but how the administration will implement this policy.

The future of the 1972 ABM Treaty is uncertain. Senior members of the new administration are on record as considering the treaty a relic of the Cold War that at best should be altered to account for the new challenges posed by missile proliferation. Secretary Powell has called for development internationally of a new strategic framework for a new era. As he stated at his confirmation hearing: "We believe that the ABM Treaty in its current form is probably no longer relevant to our new strategic framework, and we hope to persuade the Russians of the need to move beyond the ABM Treaty."

Secretary Rumsfeld led a special commission in 1998 that brought the missile threat into sharp relief: he is on record as recommending abrogation of the ABM Treaty and developing a robust missile defense system. This is contrasted with the inclination of the Clinton Administration, which sought to amend not end the Treaty to allow deployment of a limited system. The Bush Administration has made no decisions on its preferred approach to missile defense, including the future of the ABM Treaty, but its apparent instincts seem to lean towards at least amending, if not abrogating the Treaty.

The new administration recognizes the wave of international opposition that has developed over missile defense and has indicated it will seek to address these concerns through continued dialogue. Given the centrality of Russia and China to international opposition to missile defense, the implications of U.S. defense plans will depend largely on the reactions of these two nations. However, the views of other key U.S. allies and friends will also play a large role and will depend on U.S. commitment to true dialogue and consultation over a new international strategic framework. U.S. dialogue with Russia and NATO allies is on-going. There are also indications that the new administration is open to comprehensive talks with the PRC on issues concerning strategic forces, including nuclear capabilities, missiles, doctrine, etc. In the absence of such comprehensive understanding and transparency on these matters, members of the new team are unlikely to be sympathetic to the PRC's concerns. This is particularly true given past PRC statements threatening U.S. cities with attack by intercontinental ballistic missiles should the United States intervene during a cross-Strait conflict. Such threats have only served to reaffirm the need for missile defense in the eyes of some harder-line officials.

The PRC has registered particular concern over the prospect of the United States providing Taiwan with theater missile defense capabilities or including the island in a regional missile defense system. No plans currently exist for either, but given an ever-increasing missile threat across the Strait, the orientation of the new U.S. team almost surely suggests it will at least consider provision of these capabilities to Taiwan should the current trend continue.

WILDCARDS: ALUMNI, CHENEY, AND CONGRESS

One might note a few wildcards when considering the East Asia policy of the new Bush Administration. One is the influence of the Republican foreign policy elders. These figures include such alumni as George Shultz, James Baker, Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft and, of course, George Bush Senior himself. When and if they may capture the ear of the new president on particular issues could have an impact on his decision-making on key issues in Asia and elsewhere. The PRC seems to have recognized this fact when it deployed three former PRC ambassadors to the United States last month to meet with many of these figures to discuss Taiwan and the overall future of the U.S.-China relationship. Indeed, the Republican alumni seem to have a particularly warm history of relations with the PRC more than with any other Asian nation.

Another wildcard is the influence of the vice president. Vice President Cheney himself has served as U.S. Defense Secretary and has substantial experience in foreign affairs. He has also been granted the resources for a large personal staff, with experts on a variety of domestic and foreign policy matters, to include Asia. These individuals, led by chief of staff and national security advisor Lewis "Scooter" Libby (the aforementioned member of the Cox Committee), tend to be more ideologically conservative than others in the administration. How they may influence the work of a more threadbare National Security Council and interact with other bureaus, including the State Department, remains to be seen and cannot be predicted.

Finally, the role of Congress in international affairs is always the ultimate wildcard when examining U.S. foreign policy. The executive branch constitutionally and practically takes the leading role in national security policy, yet Congress will have its say should core U.S. interests or values be perceived as not getting the requisite attention. The accession of a new president with the same party affiliation as the Congressional majority generally bodes well for cooperation and consistency. But this is not a certainty. Members of Congress from both parties, for instance, have traditionally been very vocal about our policy towards the PRC, if from different angles. An economic slowdown in the United States or other developments could induce greater Congressional scrutiny of the U.S.-Japan security relationship. It is difficult to predict the range of international developments that may occur to affect even the best intentions of the new administration's approach to Asia.

CONCLUSION

President Bush has characterized his administration's foreign policy approach as based on "consistency, patience, and principle." The fundamental continuity of policy and principle that has laid historically at the heart of U.S. foreign policy will inform the new Administration's approach to Asia, absent dramatic developments in the region. The new Asia team is seasoned and experienced, and recognizes the important of continuity for effective conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Given that the new team is not yet in place, it is premature to make any airtight assumptions about the long-term course of the administration since the team itself does not yet know its own mind on many issues.

In examining the new team's background and public statements during the campaign and early in its term, however, one might sum up expectations for its policy towards Asia as being based on the "three R's:" restraint, reciprocity, and results -- "restraint" in intervening in international conflicts; "reciprocity," to ensure that U.S. acts of good faith and good will are matched appropriately by other powers; and "results," to affirm similarly that the best proof of a successful policy is not the hope but the achievement of the desired end. Some in Asia over the last three months might add a fourth "R" - "reckless" - given anxiety over perceived U.S. unilateralism and arrogance on such issues as the Kyoto Treaty, missile defense, North Korea, and PRC/Taiwan.

Ultimately, however, the administration must be judged not by its first confusing months but by the overall course of its policy once its team is in place and its policies reviewed.Perhaps the most important message the United States should send to East Asia at this still early stage of transition is one of patience. The transition will take some time, and may create false expectations or even cause uneven management. While there is much concern over the course of this administration from its early actions, Asians and Americans alike should respond not to early mistakes but to the longer-term course of the new team's policy approach as the Bush Administration steadily assumes the mantle of leadership of U.S. foreign policy in Asia

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