U.S. STRATEGY FOR A CHANGING ASIA

U.S. OBJECTIVES IN THE REGION

As Chapter Two attests, the changing character of the Asian political and military environment presents the United States with a host of critical challenges. If it is to meet these challenges, the United States must begin to formulate a strategy aimed at a pivotal long-term objective: preventing a worsening of the security situation in Asia. Central to this objective is the need to preclude the rise of a regional or continental hegemon. This is important for two main reasons:

- To prevent the United States from being denied economic, political, and military access to an important part of the globe; and
- To prevent a concentration of resources that could support a global challenge to the United States on the order of that posed by the former Soviet Union.

At the moment, no nation in Asia is close to becoming a regional or continental hegemon, but this is not to say that such a threat could not arise. In fact, one major power in Asia or a coalition thereof could readily choose to devote maximum effort to building up armed might in efforts to challenge the United States in the region. Although currently only a remote possibility, the outcome of such a buildup would be sufficiently adverse to U.S. interests to warrant priority.

The United States must also seek to maintain stability in the region through “shaping” activities aimed at providing positive incentives
for cooperative behavior and disincentives against the use of force to achieve geopolitical goals. These shaping activities must seek to convince the nations of the region that their security will be attained more easily if the United States maintains an active military role in the region than would be the case if it did not. The acceptance of this role should in turn strengthen the ability of the United States to bolster international norms and influence regional developments in a positive manner. If Asian states are to develop their economies and evolve as free societies, they must be free from the threat of armed attack or coercion. Stability will reduce the need for states to devote resources to the military beyond what is needed for their own defense.

Finally, the United States, in cooperation with its allies, must be able to help manage Asia’s ongoing transformation. To be sure, the wide variety of challenges Asia faces suggests that the United States is unlikely to prevent every problem or significantly influence every scenario, but it should be able to shape most scenarios so that they do not spiral out of control. Ultimately, the United States should seek to influence the region in a manner that fosters the development of democratic, market-oriented societies that are willing and able to abide by current international norms of behavior and, eventually, to cooperate in the manner of the democratic European nations so that major armed conflicts among them become unthinkable.

These objectives imply a large number of subsidiary goals that the United States should pursue as well. In dealing with current “hot spots” such as Taiwan and Korea, the United States seeks to deter the use of force or defend allies and states to whose defense it is committed. Aside from strengthening the barriers against the use of force, such actions protect U.S. credibility in the region. The general belief that the United States will remain engaged and that nations that depend on it will not be left in the lurch provides the strongest basis for the region’s continuing stability.

In addition, the United States wishes to maintain undiminished economic access to this dynamic region. This implies a continuation of policies toward free trade that have underpinned the region’s prosperity so far.
STRATEGIC OPTIONS

Given these objectives, the United States could pursue any of several alternative strategies.

At one end of the spectrum would be a strategy built on ensuring and strengthening U.S. hegemony in Asia. The key to this strategy would lie in maintaining and increasing the U.S. position of preeminent power in the region— if necessary by taking steps to constrain the economic and military growth of any other country that could threaten that preeminence. Such a strategy would require maximum vigilance as well as the expenditure of money and effort and, as such, would probably prove incompatible with U.S. domestic political requirements. It may also make demands on regional friends and allies that might undercut the very stability Washington seeks to reinforce.

A less ambitious strategy would lie in forming a “condominium” with one of Asia’s major powers—e.g., India, Japan, or China. In this scenario, the United States would share the military and political burden with its partner at the cost of reducing its ability to act independently, since the interests and wishes of that partner would have to be taken into account and accorded equal weight. However, none of the possible candidates for the role of partner seems suitable owing to the disproportion in power between the United States and each of its potential partners; the reaction of neighboring states to the enhanced political role of that partner; specific bilateral differences between the United States and its potential partner; and, more generally, the incompatibility of such a Realpolitik approach with U.S. domestic political realities.

An even less ambitious strategy would call for the United States to adopt the role of “balancer” among the major regional powers. This strategy envisages the transformation of Asia into a multipolar system in which several major powers of significant strength—e.g., China, Japan, India, and Russia, with perhaps Vietnam, a unified Korea, and Indonesia present as important but middle-rank powers—contend for influence and advantage in the region. The United States would have certain structural advantages in such a multipolar system: As a major power involved in the Asian balance but situated far away (and hence less likely to be seen by any country as a direct threat), it would enjoy maximum flexibility to make and shift al-
liances. This strategy would mean, however, that the United States could not effectively pursue any objective that was not already the objective of one or more of the region’s major powers. It would also mean that the United States would in general have to subordinate its ideological interests to the demands of its role as balancer.

An alternative strategy, and one that reflects a non-*Realpolitik* approach, would involve the creation of a collective security system embracing all the states in the region. Such an arrangement would reinforce stability by guaranteeing each state against aggression. By requiring a mechanism for either solving or shelving the various disputes over sovereignty that currently afflict the region, this approach would have to confront the weaknesses that have bedeviled previous attempts at collective security since the days of the League of Nations.

A final possible strategy would hinge on a U.S. disengagement from Asia, trusting to the mutual rivalries and suspicions of the regional powers—along with whatever diplomatic or political influence the United States could exert—to prevent any single power from becoming predominant. In the short run, such a strategy would be the cheapest and easiest to pursue. In the long run, however, it would run two major risks. First, a U.S. withdrawal could undermine the peaceful stability that has been the foundation on which Asia’s decades-long economic growth and political transformation have been built. The resulting loss of stability would cause severe and pervasive harm to both the United States and its regional friends. Second, U.S. withdrawal would raise the specter—at present remote but nonetheless worrisome—that a single power would achieve regional hegemony in Asia, bringing the economic and technological resources of Asia under its influence and control and potentially posing a security threat to the United States.

**A PROPOSED U.S. STRATEGY FOR ASIA**

The optimal U.S. strategy would involve elements of most of these options and would seek both to preserve U.S. influence in the region and to bolster Asian stability. While preserving a leading role for the United States, this strategy would seek to share responsibility with U.S. allies to the extent possible. At the same time, it would rely on a balance among regional powers where appropriate and useful.
This strategy would be integrated across political, military, and economic dimensions, and a necessary precondition would be continued American global leadership. It assumes that the United States will continue to make the necessary political, technological, and military investments in cementing its global preeminence. Economically, the United States should further the development of Asia by continuing to support the expansion of free-trade policies—e.g., by expanding the World Trade Organization (WTO) to include not only China but Taiwan and Vietnam as well. In political-military terms, a four-part strategy is required.

First, the United States should deepen as well as widen its bilateral security alliances to create a larger partnership. This multilateralization—which would be a complement to and not a substitute for existing bilateral alliances—should include the United States, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and perhaps Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand. Initially, however, the United States will need to promote trust among its allies as well as encourage them to build military capabilities that can respond to regional crises as part of potential coalitions. For example, improved relations between Japan and South Korea should be encouraged in order to facilitate their cooperation on security issues. The United States should support Japanese efforts to gradually become a normal state, which would allow for national participation in collective self-defense, expand its security horizon beyond its territorial defense, and permit Japan to acquire appropriate capabilities for supporting coalition operations.

Second, the United States should pursue a balance-of-power strategy among those major rising powers and key regional states in Asia which are not part of the existing U.S. alliance structure—including China, India, and a currently weakened Russia. The objective of this balance-of-power component is twofold: It seeks to prevent any one of these states from effectively threatening the security of another while simultaneously preventing any combination of these states from “bandwagoning” to undercut critical U.S. strategic interests in Asia. Developing a stable balance of power among these major powers will require great political and strategic agility on the part of the United States. Washington should thus seek strengthened political, economic, and military-to-military relations with all, but especially those least likely to challenge U.S. strategic interests.
Third, the United States should address those situations which, because of a power vacuum or for some other reason, tempt others to use force. The United States should, for example, clearly state that it opposes the use of force by China against Taiwan and likewise any declaration of independence by Taiwan. The United States should also work to resolve the territorial disputes in the South China Sea while emphasizing its commitment to freedom of navigation and the adherence to an agreed code of conduct in the area. It should, moreover, promote the cohesion, stability, and territorial integrity of Indonesia and other Southeast Asian states and foster security cooperation and interoperability among them as well as with the United States and its allies. In addition, the United States should use its influence to encourage the resolution of the Kashmir dispute through peaceful means and prevent an outbreak of a regional nuclear war in South Asia. It should also encourage Japan and Russia to resolve their territorial dispute over the Northern Territories.

Finally, the United States should promote an inclusive security dialogue among all the states of Asia. This dialogue would not only provide for a discussion of regional conflicts and promote confidence building but also encourage states to enter into the U.S.-led multilateral framework at some time in the future. At the same time, the United States should maintain flexibility of relations with as many countries as possible to support the formation of ad hoc coalitions to deal with challenges that might concern not only the United States and its allies but many others in the region as well.

Adapting the U.S. Position in Northeast Asia

Maintaining access to facilities in Northeast Asia is an important prerequisite to implementing such a strategy.

Looking Toward a United Korea. The United States must look forward to the possibility that Korea will be reunified or that North and South Korea will reconcile to such an extent that the possibility of military conflict between the two can be disregarded as a military planning contingency. In such a circumstance, the issue of the continued basing of U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula would come to the fore.
There are important political reasons for the United States to try to maintain at least some presence in Korea even when the prospect of war is removed from the peninsula. If all U.S. forces were to leave Korea, Japan would be left as the sole host of permanent U.S. military installations in East Asia, and it is questionable how satisfied Tokyo would be with such an arrangement given its history of uneven popular support for foreign bases. This would particularly be the case if China and Russia applied heavy pressure on Japan to expel American forces. The historic animosity between Korea and Japan has also been somewhat mitigated by the ongoing U.S. presence in both countries and by their mutual participation in security arrangements with Washington. Keeping even a small presence in a unified or reconciled Korea could thus help the United States continue to play a catalytic role in smoothing relations between its two key Asian allies.

If the process of unification involves a conflict or serious military confrontation, however, obtaining Chinese acquiescence in order to forestall any interference from Beijing could be an important policy objective. Achieving this might require some understanding with the Chinese concerning the role of U.S. forward-based forces in a unified Korea.

**Korean-Japanese Relations.** As already noted, a unified Korea might come to see Japan as its main security threat. The United States, however, can play an important role in strengthening trust between a unified Korea and Japan. By maintaining bases on their respective territories, the United States can reassure Korea and influence Japan toward peaceful behavior. In addition, as part of a nascent multilateral relationship, military-to-military exchanges and military exercises should be encouraged between the United States, Japan, and Korea.

**The Role of Russia in Northeast Asia.** Russian power in its Far East has been declining, and Moscow is unable at present to play a major role in the politics of Northeast Asia. Whether this will change depends heavily on developments in European Russia. Until Russia is able to complete its transition to a market economy and establish the legal institutions to support such a transition, it seems unlikely that the Russian Federation will even be able to support its current posture in the Far East, much less reinvigorate it.
Russia and Japan have both voiced the intention to solve the long-standing problem of the Northern Territories—the four disputed islands and island groups stretching north from Hokkaido. Although the two sides failed to reach an agreement on the issue during Russian President Vladimir Putin’s September 2000 visit to Japan, such an agreement should be encouraged both for economic reasons (to facilitate Japanese investment in the Russian Far East) and to give both parties more diplomatic flexibility vis-à-vis China should that be required in the future.

One area in which Russia has been active is in arms sales to China. Unable to find reliable suppliers in the West, China has turned to Moscow for advanced weapon systems. Chinese purchases of Russian equipment include Su-27 fighters, Kilo-class submarines, SA-10 surface-to-air-missile systems, Sovremenny destroyers, SS-N-22 “Sunburn” missiles, and, reportedly, airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft. This relationship has proved beneficial to both sides, with China acquiring advanced military hardware and the Russian arms industry remaining afloat by virtue of Beijing’s purchases. However, the relationship poses problems for the United States in that Russian weapons at least modestly strengthen China’s military power, which could in turn be used to create mischief in Asia to the detriment of American interests.

At the same time, Russian arms sales to China are probably motivated more by economic concerns than by a “strategic partnership” designed to bolster the two countries’ leverage vis-à-vis the United States. Some Russian military leaders have in fact expressed concern that these weapons could one day be used against Russia. Hence, U.S. policy toward Russia should pivot on encouraging Russia not to sell certain types of weapons to China.1 Russia’s further economic development and integration with Western economies could be used as a leverage on this issue.

Future of Japanese Security Policy. The United States should support Japanese efforts to play a greater role in its own defense (e.g., through the revision of its constitution). Such measures could start

---

out small; for example, air refueling equipment could be installed on
Japanese military aircraft and air refueling planes purchased. The
United States should also support Japanese efforts to play a more ac-
tive role in U.N. peacekeeping missions as well as to engage in more
frequent military exercises with the United States. Ultimately, the
United States would like to see Japan evolve into a country with a
more normal geopolitical status—one that is respected but not
feared. By slowly introducing its military to Asia through multilateral
alliances, Japan can redefine its historical role in Asia as well as
permit other nations to become comfortable with its more active
posture. Unified Germany’s cautious and gradual emergence on the
European stage over the past decade could serve as something of a
model for this transition.

Taiwan. The United States should continue to assert its interest in
the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan situation. The question that
remains, however, is whether the current posture of “strategic ambi-
guity” about U.S. intentions in the event of a Chinese attack on the
island is adequate for what seems to be the more threatening future
we face with respect to this issue. One alternative would be a more
explicit approach in which the United States makes clearer its inten-
tion to defend Taiwan against an unprovoked Chinese attack while
also clarifying to Taiwan exactly what it would regard as a provoca-
tion.

Such a policy would require securing the confidence of both sides.
Taiwan would have to believe that the United States would not be
tempted to sell it out for the sake of better Sino-U.S. relations, while
China would have to believe that the United States would maintain
its commitment to a One China policy. If this confidence were not
secured, Taiwan might be tempted, when it thought circumstances
were favorable, to force the hand of the United States by deliberately
taking more provocative stances than the United States had
“allowed,” believing that the United States, both for the sake of its
credibility in the region and by virtue of U.S. domestic political fac-
tors, would have to come to its defense in any case. China, on the
other hand, might treat the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan
against an unprovoked attack as tantamount to an abandonment of
“One China” and to the adoption of a containment policy.
Maintaining the status quo, however, does have its own dangers for China. By freezing the de jure situation, the policy would allow social and political forces on Taiwan to continue to evolve in the direction of normalization of Taiwan’s status as a de facto independent country and toward solidification of a Taiwanese identity. The last generation of mainlanders with personal ties to their native regions and to family members who did not flee to Taiwan would pass away while intermarriage and the passage of time would erase the distinction between mainlanders and indigenous Taiwanese in favor of a “new Taiwan identity.”

Economic forces, on the other hand, might have the opposite effect: Increased Taiwanese investment in China, more direct trade, travel and communication between Taiwan and China, and greater integration of the economies might increase the leverage China might be able to exercise. China could attempt to cultivate parts of the Taiwanese business community and influence them to lobby for pro-Chinese policies.\(^2\) In addition, the military balance could shift in China’s favor as the nation develops both technologically and economically.

Thus, to acquiesce in this U.S. policy, China would have to be willing to gamble either that the economic forces of integration would overpower the social and political forces of normalization or that China’s military strength would increase in relation to that of the United States. In the latter case, China would be convinced not only that it could mount a successful invasion and occupation of Taiwan but also that it could either deter the U.S. against intervening or succeed against U.S. resistance.

Finally, there is the question of how China will evolve in political and social terms. If China’s political system evolved in such a way as to make it more attractive to the Taiwanese population, then the salience of the reunification issue would probably diminish. A more democratic China might be less willing to risk its economic prospects

\(^2\)Although these economic ties might give Taiwan some long-term leverage as well, it is likely, especially in the short term, that an authoritarian China could exploit its economic leverage more effectively than could a democratic Taiwan. In any case, China will be in a position to hold “hostage” Taiwanese-owned assets on the mainland; as cross-straits economic ties develop, these could become considerable in magnitude.
by engaging in military action with respect to Taiwan, although de-
mocratization—especially in its early stages—might provide an op-
portunity for demagogues to play on nationalist sentiment in a way
that would enhance the risk of conflict.

Thus, Taiwan would have to believe either that China would evolve
in a favorable direction that would make reunification unimportant
to China or palatable to Taiwan, or that China’s military strength
would never be sufficient to deter the United States from living up to
its commitment to defend Taiwan against unprovoked attack.

South China Sea

The United States has not taken any position with respect to the
conflicting claims to the islands of the South China Sea, but a defense
official has stated that if military action in the Spratlys interfered
"with freedom of the seas, then we would be prepared to escort and
make sure that free navigation continues." 3 In addition, the United
States has a defense treaty with the Philippines—and although the
U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty deals only with attacks
on the metropolitan territory of the Philippines or the Philippine armed
forces, former Defense Secretary William Cohen made a statement in
August 1998 that was interpreted in the Philippine press as implying
U.S. support for Philippine forces that were attacked while defending
such claims. 4

The United States should continue its policy of demanding freedom
of the seas and, while avoiding a direct endorsement of any of the

---

3 Statement of Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Joseph
Nye, as quoted in Nigel Holloway, “Jolt from the Blue,” Far Eastern Economic Review,

4 It is unclear whether Secretary Cohen meant to change U.S. policy in any respect; it is
significant that his remarks do not appear to have been reported in the U.S. media.
The Philippine press report (Christina V. Deocadiz, Business World [Internet version],
August 6, 1998, reprinted as Philippines: Siazon: U.S. to “Aid” Manila in Event of
Spratlys Attack, FBIS-EAS-98-218) claimed that “the United States gave its assurance
that it will come to the aid of the Philippines in case its forces are attacked in disputed
territories in the South China Sea.” Although the United States holds that the Mutual
Defense Treaty applies only to Philippine territory as it existed in 1951 (and does not
cover Philippines-claimed regions of the South China Sea), the treaty calls for bilateral
consultations in case Philippine armed forces come under attack, whether or not they
were inside the boundaries of the Philippines, as defined for purposes of the treaty.
claims in the South China Sea, should work to resolve the territorial disputes to the extent possible. One risk inherent in establishing a regional security institution involving the Philippines, however, is that it could prompt the Philippines to ask for U.S. assistance in protecting its claims to the South China Sea. The United States should thus emphasize the importance of a multilateral solution to the overlapping claims while offering increased training and equipment transfers that would not only strengthen the Philippines role in the multilateral institution but also enable it to unilaterally defend itself.

South Asia

A New Relationship with India. As previously discussed, India may be in the early stages of a process of economic development and modernization similar to that which China began in 1978. Indeed, India is already ahead of China in some important areas—e.g., certain high-technology fields such as software development as well as in many military dimensions, with the important exceptions of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons.

Better relations between India and the United States make sense from a variety of perspectives. The two nations are the world’s largest and second-largest democracies. The development of the Indian software industry implies a close connection between the two countries’ economies, while both countries share common interests in reducing instability in Central Asia and preventing Islamic terrorism. The ultimate common interest, however, is probably the desire to hedge against the future emergence of a more powerful and assertive China. Since this is a long-term concern for both sides, however, there is no need to accelerate the process of U.S.-Indian rapprochement; indeed, Indian domestic politics limits the speed with which this process can develop.

There are, however, several steps the United States can take that could gradually improve U.S.-Indian relations by making such relations more politically palatable to Indian leaders. One such step would be to restore the regular high-level dialogue initiated in 1985; another would be to increase the number of military-to-military contacts similar to those now conducted with the Chinese. Other helpful initiatives would involve dropping the last remnants of the sanctions imposed in the aftermath of the 1998 nuclear tests by revi-
talizing trade and joint development in civilian high technology, information technology, and services. Yet another area of increased cooperation and informational exchange should center on training and planning for peacekeeping missions. In addition, the United States should seek opportunities to help resolve the Kashmir issue through peaceful means.

**Avoiding the Isolation of Pakistan.** In the process of improving relations with India, however, it is important that the United States not unnecessarily isolate Pakistan. Although the center of gravity of U.S. policy toward South Asia has shifted from Pakistan toward India, the United States should do whatever it can—consistent with its other policy interests—to prevent Pakistan from drifting into an embittered fundamentalism. In the wake of the military coup of 1999, Pakistan’s prospects are not very good: It does not have promising options for carrying on its efforts to wrest Kashmir from India; its economic situation is poor; its military government seems unable or unwilling to embark on a thoroughgoing reform program; and it remains beset with internal violence, fundamentalism, and separatist tendencies.

U.S. policy toward Pakistan should thus seek to address numerous problems. First, Pakistan should be assisted in developing its economy as well as encouraged to reform the economy structurally. Second, Pakistan should be encouraged to cease its support of terrorists operating in South Asia and beyond. Specifically, the country should be urged to peacefully resolve its differences with India over Kashmir, to stop supporting Islamist militants operating there, and to cease its politico-military support of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Third, Pakistan should be encouraged to safeguard its nuclear stockpile and limit its aggressive nuclear and missile acquisition program. As with India, Pakistan should be encouraged to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), support a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT), and avoid the deployment of ready nuclear forces. It should also establish a comprehensive command-and-control (C2) system to reduce the chances of accidental nuclear release; cease continued missile testing, production, and deployment; and institute export controls on weapons of mass destruction (WMD), their technologies, and their components.