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America's New Political and Military Orientation Towards Asia – A Challenge to Transatlantic Ties?

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Introduction

During the Cold War, the U.S. policy towards Asia was determined by the global security challenge, notably the strategic rivalry with the Soviet Union. During that time, Asian states had often to take sides, some even changed sides, and others adopted varying degrees of neutrality. The present security challenge for Asia is rather different: how to navigate between the U.S., as the only superpower in the world, and the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), as a perceived rising great power that may change fundamentally the balance of forces in the region, with wide-ranging implications for the rest of Asia and the world.

The Benefits of U.S. Policy in Asia

There is no doubt that a number of Asian nations benefited from American military protection, both politically and economically. Even today they benefit from America's concentration on the security of Persian/Arabian Gulf oil supplies. Any slowing of oil supplies from the Gulf would directly effect the Japanese economy, which is to more than 70 percent dependent from oil supplies abroad. In the past, however, only Japan and South Korea have made a major financial commitment to subsidizing America's guardianship of the Gulf and the sea-lanes of communications running through the Indian Ocean, the Malacca and Sunda Straits and the South China Sea. Although some Asian governments are diplomatically reticent about stating their support for America's military presence in the Asia-Pacific, any discussions that the U.S. policy might reduce its military commitments would be viewed with alarm. In their view, any reduction in U.S. commitment would mean a commensurate increase in China's power and influence. In this regard, U.S. military power in this region is seen by many nations as a necessary restraint on China's ability to assert its national interests, especially Beijing's claims to Taiwan and a considerably larger Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ).

Continuation of U.S. Commitments in Asia

Despite the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has maintained and even strengthened its security ties during the last years, particularly with its traditional allies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand. In both Japan and South Korea, the U.S. still has large air force and naval bases. The Chinese government, however, is greatly concerned about the predominant position that the U.S. has gained in world power politics after the collapse of the USSR, and is therefore opting for a multipolar world. For this reason it has sought to form a loose political alliance of nations opposed to perceived U.S. hegemony, notably with Russia. But the pronounced "strategic partnership" between both countries is in reality only a "tactical alliance" and is constrained by diverging interests in East and Central Asia. In the long-term, as Russian general staff officers admit, China may create the major security challenge for Russia, considering recent demographic, economic and military trends.

New Analysis of Asian Issues

In U.S. domestic discussions, the former preoccupation with the Soviet Union and Russia has meanwhile been replaced by a perceived looming “China threat”. China is still not perceived as a real threat but is equally not a real strategic partner, as the new Bush administration has already declared. From the U.S. perspective, tensions between China and the USA include:

- China’s arms sales (and smuggling) including nuclear and missile technology to Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and other potential “states of concern”
- Chinese espionage including theft of US missile secrets which may fasten the nuclear build-up of China’s ICBM force being able to target US territory
- A US\$90 billion trade surplus (in 1999) in China’s favor which Washington claims is exacerbated by China’s restrictions on US imports
- Human rights violations for dissidents
- China’s occupation of Tibet
- Chinese ongoing military pressure on Taiwan
- China’s EEZ claims in the South China Sea
- China’s support for the Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq
- China’s support for the Miloševic government in Yugoslavia.

From the Chinese point of view the problems in the bilateral relationship with Washington include:

- U.S. interference in China’s internal affairs including the so-called human rights issues (i.e. NATO’s humanitarian military intervention in Kosovo and the unfortunate U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade);
- perceived US containment policies vis-à-vis China (such as the strengthening of US bilateral military alliances in Asia and NATO’s PfP programs in Central Asia);
- US political and military support for Taiwan,
- Continuing US restrictions on the sale of various technologies, including computer technologies, to China; and
- the US plans to create an anti-missile system for itself (NMD) and with Japan (TMD) and to include Taiwan within the defended area.

Against this background and unresolved security problems in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean peninsula, European policies and the transatlantic ties may be affected by the security challenges in Asia-Pacific for the following reasons:

- fastening globalization of security policies (particularly in the field of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and of advanced high-tech conventional weaponry);
- the EU’s own strengthening of economic, political and security ties with the Asia-Pacific (ASEM, ARF, CSCAP-processes) and the gap between the EU’s official declarations and the political reality of fostering security ties with Asia;
- diverging transatlantic strategies to include China in the world community;
- US domestic policies that may still call for new burden sharing obligations for its European allies beyond Europe (Middle East etc.);
- numerous unresolved security challenges of Asia (Korean peninsula, Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, Indonesia, piracy problems etc.);
- the arms build-up and the “arms modernization race” in Asia;
- the underdevelopment of multilateral security ties in the region;
- the rising economic and political power of China and the entire Asia-Pacific region in world politics.

New Security Challenges in East Asia

In the Cold War, the security landscape of the Asia-Pacific region was determined in large by the major powers - the United States, Russia, China and Japan. With the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, as well as the reduction of the U.S. military presence in the region, the roles of China, Japan, the United States, Taiwan, both Korean states and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries are changing in accordance with the new fluid environment and “new uncertainties”. Apart from socio-economic security challenges, these “new uncertainties” can be summarized in the following way:

- unresolved historical border and territorial conflicts (like in the South China Sea);
- proliferation of ballistic missiles and nuclear, chemical and biological warheads as well as advanced conventional weapons
- socio-economic and transnational security challenges (rationalization and decentralization in domestic policies, migration, environment, etc.);
- nationalist tendencies in domestic and foreign policies;
- China’s growing economic, military and geopolitical weight.

The U.S., Japan, China Triangle

Japan and other countries of the Asia-Pacific region are particularly concerned by the uncertainties in the triangular relationship between the major powers - the United States, China and Japan. Any conflictual relationship between these powers might destabilize the region at large. While, in the last three years, ASEAN has seemed particularly alarmed about the U.S.-China relations, they now worry much more about the China-Japan relationship in the mid- and long-term. China and Japan have never been great powers simultaneously, whilst the emergence of a new great power has historically mostly been fraught with tensions in the region, as neighbors and other states see their share of international power diminished. Furthermore, both powers have no clearly articulated roles, whilst their bilateral relationship is hampered by considerable suspicion. If their mistrust increases, it might polarize and destabilize the Asia-Pacific region.

General Regional Progress Endangered

Overall strategic trends in the Asia-Pacific region have been positive in many respects. The region’s recovery from the Asian economic crisis has made progress, particularly in South Korea and Thailand. They have taken initial steps to rebuild prosperous economies, but the verdict on the recovery is still out. Moreover, major security conflicts remain unresolved or have produced new instabilities throughout the entire region since the early 1990s, such as the conflict in the Taiwan Strait. At the same time, the region is approaching an unprecedented arms race, fueled by new economic growth and an increasing globalization of security policies, interregional and global dual-use technology transfers.

In contrast to Europe and the Soviet-American strategic relationship during the Cold War, arms control policies continue to rank low on East Asia’s agenda. Furthermore, the region’s future strategic configuration will be determined by the changing norms of the international system, the revolution in military affairs (RMA), preoccupation of the

major powers with their own domestic problems, accelerating trends of democratization and the spread of market economies, and increasing interregional and interregional interdependencies, both economic and political.

Worldwide Implications of Asian Issues - Requires EU Attention

From a European point of view, it is important to recall that armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait, on the Korean Peninsula or in the South China Sea could have not only regional but global economic and security implications. Unless carefully managed, conflicts in those three theatres have the potential to escalate even into global conflict. Given the complex and rapidly changing nature of East Asia's strategic chessboard, crisis and conflict prevention have become urgent requirements for East Asia. With the increasing "globalization of security policies" and acknowledging that present policies have not translated into real European influence in the Asia-Pacific region, Europe and the EU should recognize the imperative to play a more substantial role. This could include the launching of a strategic dialogue with China and Taiwan about the consequences of an unprovoked attack or conflict. The unavoidable globalization of both economic and security policies compels Europe - together with the U.S. and Japan - to shoulder a greater diplomatic and political burden than it has in the past.

Furthermore, Japan is now confronted with an increasing ballistic missile threat from China and North Korea, as the North Korean missile test of August 1998 demonstrated. At least twelve Chinese and North Korean theater missile systems can now reach Japan.

Security of Sea Lanes and Japan's Role

The significance of the South China Sea and open Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) is crucial for the economic survival of Japan, as well as other North- and Southeast Asian nations. More than one-third of the world's merchant ships sail through the Southeast Asia SLOCs and over 80 percent of Japan's oil imports reportedly pass through this region. No other major power in the world is probably so dependent as Japan on the import of raw materials and the export of finished goods to pay for them. With the encouragement of the United States and other Western powers, Japan has also widened the tasks and missions of its Self Defense Forces by contributing troops to the peacekeeping operations of the UN in limited roles (especially in Cambodia in 1991). The renewed security treaty with the United States in April 1996 and the negotiations to review the "Guidelines for Defense Co-operation" in 1978 are another indicator of Japan's gradually growing political role in East Asia. This is explained, inter alia, by the relative decline of American power and a relative rise of other powers in the region due to the evolution of a more pluralist structure of the international system after the end of the Cold War.

Increasing Concern over U.S - Chinese - Japanese Relations

The public silence in most East Asian states in regard to the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) during the Taiwan crisis in 1995-96 contrasted significantly with private relief at the demonstration of an American counterbalance to China, but with still remaining doubts about its durability. Other lingering disputes in the areas of human rights and China's non-proliferation policies have plagued U.S.-China relations, which have found their expression in the debates over renewing China's most-favored-nation trade status.

Meanwhile, China's growing trade surplus, which has further increased by 20 per cent to almost \$60 in 1998 and even \$90 in 1999, has therewith surpassed that of Japan with the U.S.

The immediate specter of the U.S.-China confrontation during the Taiwan crisis and the longer-term question of coping with China pose broad and multiple challenges to the region and to global stability. China's missile firings during the Taiwan crisis in 1995-96 came dangerously close to major shipping lanes that violated another enduring vital American and Japanese security interest: freedom of navigation. China's policy of using armed forces for pursuing political objectives, the evolution of these new multilateral co-operation processes in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Council of Security Cooperation in Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) and stability of the Asia-Pacific region still depend on the future national roles, missions and challenges within the triangular relationship among the United States, China and Japan. Thus, the question of whether or not the three major powers can produce a stable and lasting co-operative relationship has still fundamental implications for the entire Asia-Pacific region.

The Redefinition of the U.S.-Japanese Security Alliance and its Implications for the U.S. Role in Asia-Pacific Stability

The bilateral U.S.-Japanese security alliance has played a key role, for Japan, and for international peace and stability in the region and on a global level. However, the *raison d'être* for the U.S.-Japan security alliance began to dissipate with the collapse of the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the rusting away of the once mighty Soviet Pacific Fleet. Some Japanese scholars and U.S. experts began to doubt the need for a U.S. military presence in Japan and particularly in Okinawa. The first Clinton administration appeared more interested in domestic problems and was looking for a reduction in its global military burden. Against this background, the forced withdrawal of the U.S. troops from the Philippine military bases in 1992 signaled for many East Asian states the beginning of a military-political disengagement and a progressive withdrawal of the United States from the region.

Against this background, experts as well as the public in both Japan and the United States began in 1995 to initiate a more intensive debate about the future of the U.S.-Japanese security alliance.

In the absence of an evident threat, the first Clinton administration began to give priority to restoring economic competitiveness at home and promoting traditional values of democracy and human rights overseas in the wider concept of economic interdependence. In the view of the Chinese political elite, U.S. policy appears to be a strategy for keeping China weak and divided, rejecting its status as a great power and the legitimacy of the political and ideological regime in Beijing. It appears to be a U.S. "containment strategy" to keep China weak.

Evaluation of the Pax-Americana and Continuity in U.S. Policy

Nonetheless, the U.S. domestic discussions and the new post-Cold War environment have called for a transformation of Pax Americana in Europe and Asia. They have forced the U.S. and Japanese government to redefine the structuring of the bilateral security alliance, as well as Japan's regional and international role, which seems to undermine the alliance. At the same time, Japan's growing international role and the

need to reduce the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific have also become new imperatives for the continuation of the U.S.-Japan security alliance and a Pax Americana in the wider Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. role as “balancer” and “broker” in Asia is - as in Europe - still necessary in the post-Cold War era. Given the still existing mistrust towards Japan in other Asian states, and increasing nuclear proliferation threats in the region and elsewhere, the U.S. continues as a “cap in the bottle” against the military resurgence of Japan, armed with nuclear weapons.

In this light, Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye in 1995 launched an effort to refocus Clinton’s Japan policy away from singular contentious trade issues towards renewing the security relationship. The U.S. Security Strategy for the East Asia Pacific Region, released in February 1995, spelled out in detail the new U.S. strategy of engagement in the region and underlined the need for a forward-based troop presence of 100,000 U.S. troops in East Asia. The central objectives of the new U.S. strategy are to foster political stability, maintain access to regional markets, ensure freedom of navigation, and prevent the rise of any hostile inclinations or the development of a policy of aggression towards other nations. It also reflects the economic importance of Asia for the U.S. The region now accounts for more than 40 per cent of U.S. trade - over half a trillion dollars annually. A proper mix of forward-deployed forces, pre-positioned equipment, and military interaction is, in the view of U.S. defense experts, still needed.

But for the U.S. revisionist Chalmers Johnson, only “an end to Japan’s protectorate status will create the necessary domestic political conditions for Japan to assume a balanced security role in regional and global affairs”. In this light, he has repeatedly favored the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Japan in general and Okinawa in particular. Together with isolationists and Sino-centric Asian strategists, revisionists like Chalmers Johnson have thus increasingly criticized the U.S.-Japanese security alliance, Japan’s “free riding” on the alliance and any U.S. military entanglement in Asia. But hitherto, those critics of the U.S.-Japanese security alliance still represent a minority in the U.S. strategic community.

The U.S. - Japanese Alliance

The U.S.-Japan alliance and the other four solid bilateral defense relations of the U.S. with the Philippines, Thailand, Australia and South Korea remain the bedrock of security and stability in the region as the official U.S. East Asia Strategy Report 1998 has confirmed: “The United States will remain globally engaged to shape the international environment; respond to the full spectrum of crises; and prepare now for an uncertain future.” These bilateral defense alliances provide a reliable insurance mechanism if preventive diplomacy should fail, as is the case in Europe with NATO and its interlocking institutions of OSCE and the EU/WEU.

The U.S. and Japan need to demonstrate that the aim of their alliance is the preservation of security rather than the containment of China. At the same time, Japan should play a constructive and visible role in the multilateral security institutions for easing tensions on the Korean peninsula or in other potential flashpoints. Therefore, the U.S.-Japanese security alliance must be harmonized with the U.S.-South Korean alliance. The U.S. can neither address the proliferation challenges on the Korean peninsula or other security challenges in the region nor can it credibly engage China or maintain open and SLOCs without Japanese assistance. Such a harmonization between these two security alliances has also important foreign, security and defense implications for Japan and South Korea. It would also allow a greater bilateral and trilateral security and

defense co-operation towards the North Korean security challenges on the peninsula and significantly open a way for a much closer relationship between Japan and South Korea.

Given its traditional strategic security culture of “reluctant realism” as a guiding determining factor and philosophy of Japan’s international relations after World War Two, Japan will to some extent still remain a “reluctant power” in the foreseeable future. Institutional enhancements such as the establishment of the Japan Defense Intelligence Headquarters in 1997 and a strategic planning unit in 1998 are also indicators of a more active national and independent defense policy. To this extent, the Japanese role within the alliance is clearly growing, and Japan is at the same time becoming a more equal partner for the U.S., into the 21st century. In this regard, Japan is following Germany’s growing role in Europe and NATO.

Perspectives of the Asia-Pacific Region: A Shifting Balance of Power? - Implications for Regional Stability and the Role of Europe

Despite the fact that the US has retained 100,000 troops in the Asia-Pacific region as evidence of its commitment, political errors or misconceptions seem to have driven Southeast Asian countries closer to China and Japan. Washington’s muted response to the regional economic crisis added to old suspicions and fuelled conspiracy theories and anti-American sentiment. It was particularly the slow speed of the US response that made it possible for China to strengthen its influence at the expense of the US and as a counterweight to the US-Japan alliance. It looked as though the balance of political influence had increasingly tipped in favor of China, which was trying to capitalize on ASEAN’s weakness and Japan’s lack of leadership.

In reality, however, neither Japan nor China have replaced the US as a stabilizing force, principal balancer, and “benign hegemon” in the region, nor will they do so in the foreseeable future. China certainly has the political will to take over this role, but it still lacks the economic power to assume Japan’s role as an economic leader. Beijing will be confronted with unprecedented socio-economic challenges that could severely impact on the stability of the PRC’s political system. China is also suffering from widespread unemployment with 100-130 million people.

The USA Remains the Stabilizing Factor

In the security field, the US as a “status quo power” had expanded its military-to-military cooperation not only with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan but also with ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. Maintaining the forward presence of the US armed forces in the Asia-Pacific has been facilitated by activities such as port calls, repair, joint training, and logistical support. In sum, Southeast Asia’s economic, political, and military-strategic dependence on the US has increased rather than declined as a result of the multiple crises affecting the region.

Japan or China as Regional Leader and the U.S. Dimension

Whereas all ASEAN countries perceive China as the major potential long-term threat to regional stability, Japan is being viewed in more positive terms as Tokyo does not totally dominate regional economies, accepts partners as equals, and does not unilaterally extend its military role to Southeast Asia.

Nonetheless, by its own standards, Japan is in the midst of a “revolution” in terms of its future regional security and defense policies. In February 2000, the Japanese foreign ministry announced that Tokyo would be willing to contribute armed coastguard vessels to multinational anti-piracy patrols in the Malacca Straits. Japan has thus interpreted its constitutional notion of “self-defense” as including waters more than 2,000 miles away from Tokyo. The steady extension of the defense perimeter mirrors the strategic importance of SLOCs and the South China Sea for the economic survival of Japan as well as the increasing strategic and geopolitical rivalry with China in East Asia and beyond. Tokyo’s ongoing search for a future role in the region, presently reflected in an unprecedented debate over the possible revision of the anti-militaristic and pacifistic Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, is a sign that Japan has been slowly coming to grips with a reality it used to deny: “It (Japan) is a great power with strategic interests as pressing as its economic ones.”

Tokyo can only assume more responsibility by maintaining its alliance with Washington and abstaining from unilateral approaches. Against this background, and given China’s suspicion of a redefined US-Japan alliance, Washington and Tokyo need to demonstrate that their pact aims to preserve regional peace and stability rather than contain the PRC. Ultimately, regional stability will depend on a strong and sustained US engagement. China’s future internal stability and the direction of its foreign policies as well as ASEAN’s political coherence will largely determine to what extent the Association will be able to raise its voice in the region and on the global level. The more China follows an assertive or even aggressive policy as it has in the South China Sea, the more ASEAN’s relations with the US and Japan, will again assume a greater importance. And the more ASEAN becomes dependent on these two powers, the more it will ultimately obstruct or reduce its own independent influence in the region and beyond. In such circumstances, the Japan-China-US triangle would acquire even greater importance for the stability of the entire Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, Washington’s bilateral alliances, supplemented by multilateral security structures will remain the bedrock of regional stability. This is particularly so during times of socio-economic and political transition and the rise of China to potentially unprecedented economic, political, and military power in the region. In this context, the US-Japan alliance will remain the linchpin of ASEAN’s stability; Japan’s security in general; and preservation, for the time being, of Japan’s, South Korea’s and Taiwan’s non-nuclear weapon status.

Implications for Europe and the Transatlantic Ties

Against this background, Europe should ask herself whether it makes sense to continue a traditional foreign policy vis-à-vis the Asia-Pacific region that is almost exclusively defined by economic interests. This would run counter to the EU’s CFSP and strategic security interests in the region and worldwide. In this context, Europe still has to recognize that instability or armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula, in the Taiwan Strait, or in the South China Sea will directly and indirectly affect European and global security and stability. Therefore, it is time to define Europe’s strategic and security interests in the region as going beyond the present limited functional involvement in support of KEDO and multilateral “track one” and “track two” security meetings such as ARF and CSCAP. In regard to the question of impacts on the transatlantic ties, one has to take into account that in the U.S. perspective much more and more serious security challenges are arising in East Asia (despite NATO’s long-term engagement in Kosovo), especially with a rising Chinese power. Therewith, the U.S. will ask the EU to shoulder more of the

burden both in Europe and beyond in order to shift its strategic outlook to the Asian region (including to South Asia). However, that does not mean automatically that the U.S. will withdraw its troops or reduce its military-political engagement in Europe. But Washington may even become more political dependent and has to rely on political, military and other material support of its NATO allies for new security challenges outside of Europe. Therefore, it needs a strong NATO and the political will and support of its European friends.