

East Asia, Regionalism, and U.S. National Interests

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Abstract

The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US had a profound impact on American thinking about homeland security that is reflected in the presidential campaigns of both President Bush and Democratic challenger Kerry. One should be careful not to exaggerate the differences in approach and tactics advocated by Kerry. Basic assumptions about the vulnerability of the US, the need to move beyond deterrence strategy, and the responsibilities of allies cut across the Republican/Democrat divide.

In East Asia, Japan is trying to walk a fine line between the constraints of domestic opinion and the demands of its alliance with the US, China is trying to convince other countries in the region that their relations amount to a win-win game, and enthusiasm for regional institution building is growing stronger. This presents new challenges to the US's traditional hub and spokes approach to East Asia. American interests demand that the US support East Asia regional institutions, even those of which it is not itself a member.

How Much Change?

No one can be sure in what ways US foreign policy will change if John Kerry succeeds George Bush as President next January. If history is any guide, however, there will be far less change than either candidate cares to admit or that media coverage of the campaign tends to suggest.

It is important not to let wishful thinking drive an analysis of US foreign policy. The substance of policy – style is another matter about which more below – is driven far more by structural imperatives than it is by the personality of the President. That is why each new administration comes into power promising to make big changes in foreign policy and then before long finds itself close to where its predecessor had left off. If there are dramatic changes, it is usually because unforeseen events, such as September 11th, force policy change. In the absence of such shocks to the system, continuity rather than change across administrations characterizes US foreign policy for the simple if perhaps not always so obvious reason that national interests remain constant even when administrations change.

This is not to say that there are not important differences between the foreign policy of George Bush and what it would have been under Al Gore, or what it might be under John Kerry. If Al Gore had become president, the United States might not have launched a preemptive attack against Iraq. The US might not have come across as quite so arrogant and unilateralist and as a consequence anti-American sentiment might not be so widespread. The Bush Administration has unnecessarily antagonized people around the world, in the process squandering much of the goodwill toward the United States that followed in the wake of the September 11th attacks.

Even on matters of style, however, one has to wonder whether a Democratic President would entirely escape the kind of criticisms that are being leveled against George Bush. Bush is lambasted for his unilateralism and impatience with foreign governments that do not see the war on terrorism the way he does. In his State of the Union address he said pointedly that he would not wait for any foreign country or international institution to give him permission to do what he believed he has to do to defend the security of the American people.

Well, how different is this from what John Kerry had to say in a speech at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York last December: “As President, I will not cede our security to any nation or institution – and adversaries should have no doubt of my resolve to use force if necessary – but I will always understand that even the only superpower on earth cannot succeed without co-operation and compromise with our friends and allies.”

The tag ending about co-operation and compromise is a throw away line. Kerry made it clear that he is not about to share the president’s decision on how to protect the security of the American people with any foreign government or the United Nations. This leaves a lot of room for others to cooperate with the US but not much room for compromise. The Democratic critique of George Bush’s unilateralism amounts to a complaint that he does not try hard enough to convince others to do what the United States knows is the right thing to do. John Kerry is not saying that if he became president he would sit down with foreign leaders and have them take part in deciding what US policy should be. For American leaders of either party, multilateralism often means working with other countries to carry out jointly policies defined by the United States.

A clear-headed view of what drives American foreign policy must take into account the reality that September 11th, 2001, profoundly changed America. As important as Pearl Harbor was in overcoming the opposition of isolationists to America's entry into the Second World War and in setting the stage for postwar US internationalism, 9.11 is at least as important in changing the course of US foreign policy because it demonstrated for the first time ever, and in an especially devastating manner, the vulnerability of the American civilian population to external attack.

America is a nation spanning a continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans that has known virtually no fear of being attacked. Over the years of the Cold War, Americans became confident that the Soviet Union, the only country with the ability to attack and to inflict inestimable damage on the United States, could be deterred from doing so by the US ability to respond with an even more devastating attack of its own.

That confidence in the security of the American homeland is now gone. America is vulnerable and what makes it even more frightening, it is vulnerable to an enemy that cannot be seen, that is, to international terrorist networks and individual acts of terrorism, and that cannot be stopped by deterrence alone. In terms of American perceptions, September 11th has changed America's geopolitical realities, and as a consequence it is changing America's national security strategy.

There is a great deal of criticism, entirely justified criticism in my view, of George Bush's decision to launch a preemptive war against Iraq. There is far less criticism coming from the Democratic camp, however, of the doctrine of preemption itself. The view that the only way to prevent another perhaps even more horrific terrorist attack on the United States is to destroy the terrorists before they destroy you is one that is as strongly supported by mainstream Democrats as it is by Republicans.

Preemption is not a new doctrine, but it has acquired a new definition since September 11th, and it is one that is embraced by Democrats as much as it is by Republicans. In the past, preemption meant quite simply action taken in the face of an imminent attack. But in the face of terrorism, "imminent" has become a much more elastic term. It strains credulity to believe that a Democratic Administration, presented with credible evidence of the existence of a camp that was training terrorists to attack the United States, would refrain from attacking such a camp before the threat it posed became "imminent."

The doctrine of regime change, the neo-cons answer to the danger posed by rogue states, is no stranger to the Democratic Party either. After all, the idea that the way to make America safe is to make the world safe for democracy goes back to Woodrow Wilson. The neo-cons have their counterpart on the Democratic Left, which is from where the neo-conservative movement migrated in the first place, and the idea that it is a kind of manifest destiny of the United States to bring democracy to people suffering under the yoke of tyranny is well planted at the center of the Democratic Party as well.

John Kerry gave a speech at Drake University on December 16, 2003 entitled "Foreign Policy in a Post-Saddam World: Rebuilding Our Alliances." The speech had precious little to say about how to rebuild alliances. Kerry's main argument seems to be that if we expend more effort explaining to our allies what we are planning to do and why, then they will see the wisdom of our actions and support us. The idea that alliances should involve actually sharing the power to decide what to do to meet particular threats is nowhere to be found in that speech.

What is most important and intriguing about the speech is what Kerry decided to say in his lead paragraph where he introduces his vision of America's role in the world. It is this: "Shortly after he took office, Thomas Jefferson – America's first chief diplomat – laid out American foreign policy. 'We are pointing out the way to struggling nations who wish to emerge from their tyrannies.' For 225 years – and with gathering force during the course of the past century – these words have guided an America that has come to believe that the sure way to defend our people is to advance our ideals." Then, referring to the capture a few days earlier of Saddam Hussein, he added, "Saturday evening, halfway around the world, in a dark hole beneath a mud shack, Jefferson's promise was fulfilled again."

Neo-cons seem to be oblivious to the reality that their campaign for regime change, if turned into policy on the Korean peninsula for example, would succeed only at the price of unacceptable levels of death and destruction. However, belief that the US has a unique role to play to spread democracy and human rights emanates from deep within the American national psyche and is not something that will go away if the neo-cons lose their influence.

Vulnerability is the keyword driving US foreign policy and it has changed the definition of allies and friends. Prior to September 11, US alliances were premised on the understanding that helping defend other countries against Soviet aggression was in the vital national interests of the United States. The United States did not need allies to help it defend its own territory against attack; it needed allies so that it would not have to defend its own territory against attack. That US alliances involve essentially one way commitments by the United States to the defense of its allies did not create domestic political problems.

That is not the situation post-September 11. Allies are those who help when you are in trouble. Now the United States is a nation in trouble and at war with terrorism. President Bush has left no doubt that foreign countries that claim to be friends and allies of the United States have an obligation to support the United States. Here too it is hard to imagine that a different President would feel differently, although he might be more diplomatic and take less of an in your face, you are either with us or against us approach to seeking that support.

Allies and friends of the United States face a very difficult challenge. They have to demonstrate their commitment to cooperate with the United States on issues that Americans consider to be in their vital national interest without appearing to their own publics as simply being subservient to US demands. It is in American interests to pursue a diplomacy that helps them do just that.

The US in East Asia

The continuity of US policy across administrations is fully evident in regard to policy in East Asia. A decade ago Bill Clinton came into the presidency having bitterly criticized his predecessor, George Bush Sr. for "coddling the butchers of Beijing" who perpetrated the Tianamen incident, and warning that whether China would be given most favored nation treatment in trade would depend on its human rights behavior. By the time he left office, China had entered the WTO with American support, and Clinton was claiming that the US relationship with China was not only good but that it was evolving toward a "strategic partnership."

George Bush Jr. came into office as critical of Clinton's China policy as Clinton had been of Bush's father's. He declared in no uncertain terms that US policy would be premised on China being a "strategic competitor" rather than a potential partner. Now, a little more than

three years later, George Bush is as enthusiastic about China relations as Bill Clinton ever was. Who could have imagined that this conservative Republican President would openly criticize the democratic government on Taiwan for planning to hold a referendum asking voters whether the government should take further steps to defend itself in response to Chinese military provocations?

The Bush Administration came into office emphasizing the importance of Japan in its East Asia policy and the need to strengthen a “strategic dialogue” with Japan. Bush appointed people to key positions dealing with Asia whose knowledge and connections and sympathies were much more with Japan than with China.

This was a laudable effort to repair the damage done to US-Japan relations by the image of the Clinton Administration “bypassing” Japan to focus on its ties with China and its penchant for public, and to the Japanese condescending, criticism of Japanese economic policy. The shift was appreciated in Tokyo. A senior foreign ministry official who shall remain anonymous noted approvingly in a recent conversation that the Bush people were careful not to lecture the Japanese about what they should do. What a difference, he added in a tone of barely concealed contempt, from the Clinton years when people like Robert Rubin and Larry Summers never seemed to miss an opportunity to scold Japanese and lecture them on how they should run their own economy. “We don’t need Americans,” he said, “to teach us how to use chopsticks.”

Nonetheless, as sharp as this change in approach to Japan is, the odds are better than not that a rather similar shift would have occurred had the Democrats won the White House. After all, the blueprint for this policy shift was the so-called Armitage Report, carrying the name of the man who subsequently became Undersecretary of State. When this report was released, it was sometimes referred to as the Armitage-Nye Report. The group that wrote it was a bipartisan one, and if Al Gore had won the election and Joseph Nye had Richard Armitage’s job at the State Department, it is probable that the same report would have been put forward as describing the Administration’s basic approach to dealing with Japan.

Even on North Korea, the differences between the Bush White House and the Democrats are now less than meet the eye. Bush came in rejecting the Clinton approach to North Korea. Where Clinton seems to have been ready to visit Pyongyang and offer a variety of positive incentives to North Korea, George Bush argued that there really was nothing to talk about until the North gave up its nuclear weapons ambitions and took a less threatening posture toward the South. He agreed to six party talks on North Korea not so much because he believed that they would succeed but because he thought it was a way to avoid bilateral talks and keep the pressure on the North.

But that is not the Bush Administration’s position today. It has been pulled back to a more reasonable position, taking the six party talks seriously and moving away from its former position that there is nothing to talk about until the North gives up its nuclear weapons programs. Even celebrated neo-cons in the administration are talking publicly about the benefits the North would gain from giving up nuclear weapons.

Some South Korean and other Asian security specialists stress that part of the solution to the North Korean issue is finding a way for Kim Jong Il to save face as he retreats from his hardline position, something that Americans not sensitized to the nuances of Asian culture find hard to swallow. Cultural differences, however, are not always all they are cracked up to be. George Bush also has a problem and that is to figure out how he can save face as he moves away from his original we won’t talk with you until you capitulate position.

If Al Gore had become president, he would have inherited Clinton's North Korea policy, but it is very unlikely that he would have continued it once the full extent of North Korean cheating on the Agreed Framework became known. Some of those who were most directly involved with forging the Agreed Framework and who also were deeply involved in developing the Clinton Administration's North Korean policy feel betrayed by the North and are first among the hard liners when it comes to what to do now. So even on North Korea there is far less separating the Democrats and Republicans than one might think.

The Japanese Response to 9.11

Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi came into office in April 2001 promising to implement radical political and economic reforms and warning that he would take down his own Liberal Democratic Party in the process if that is what it took to get the job done. Ironically, considering how little he had to say about foreign affairs when he became prime minister, he is likely to be remembered more for the changes he wrought in Japanese security policy than he is for his modest accomplishments in pushing forward his domestic agenda.

Koizumi seems to have grasped, instinctively and quickly, that September 11th required a new kind of policy response that would demonstrate Japan's determination to support the United States in its effort to combat terrorism. From the passage of anti-terrorist legislation in the immediate aftermath on September 11th, which made it possible for Japan to provide rear area support for US forces in Afghanistan, to the decision in February 2004 to send Self Defense Forces to Iraq, Koizumi has been out in front of public opinion on expanding the mission of Japan's military forces. The public, for its part, has acquiesced for two different reasons.

One is the impact of what might be termed the Gulf War Syndrome. Japan was the single largest financial contributor to the US led campaign to repulse Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, spending more than thirteen billion dollars over the course of the war. This contribution by Japan was appreciated by the US far more and criticized far less than Japanese now remember. Nonetheless, the perception that the world despised Japan for being willing to put only money and not lives on the line came to dominate the Japanese understanding of how the world viewed its role in the Gulf War, especially when at the war's conclusion the government of Kuwait took out newspaper advertisements to thank by name the countries that came to its defense and neglected to include Japan. As a result, the Japanese public is broadly supportive of the government position that Japan should not again allow itself to suffer such a humiliation.

The other more immediate reason why Prime Minister Koizumi has been able to bring the public along with his efforts to expand Japan's military role in support of US policy is the perceived threat to Japan posed by North Korea's missile capabilities, nuclear weapons programs, and belligerent rhetoric. In September 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi traveled to Pyongyang for a summit meeting with Kim Jong Il in what he hoped would be the opening of a negotiating process leading to normalization of relations. But these plans were upended by Kim Jong Il's admission that the North Korean regime had abducted Japanese citizens in the past and its claim that only five of them were still alive. The five subsequently returned to Japan but their family members remain in the North. Public outrage over the abduction issue, fanned by the media's insatiable appetite for the story and by a well orchestrated lobbying effort by the families of the abductees and their supporters, has only intensified fear of the

North. There is broad public support for the idea that making sure that Washington remains responsive to Japanese concerns about North Korea is a matter of vital national interest.

Prime Minister Koizumi's policy on Iraq and the public reaction to it need to be seen in light of these factors. There is a widespread view in Japan that the US attack on Iraq was wrong, and that Prime Minister Koizumi's decision to support it was right. Once the decision to attack Iraq had been taken, there was far more for Japan to gain from supporting President Bush than from opposing him or, what would have been more in line with previous Japanese practice, taking a position of neither supporting nor opposing the American action. Opposition to Koizumi on support of the war was never very intense and it has declined in absolute numbers over time in part because Koizumi's support clearly has gained Japan benefits in its relations with the United States. It is unlikely, for example, that the US would have been quite so willing to raise the issue of the North Korean abduction of Japanese citizens in the six party talks if Japan had not stood fast with the US on Iraq. Given a realistic assessment of the options Japan faced in response to the US decision to go to war against Iraq, it is not difficult to understand why the Japanese public accepted Koizumi's decision to support Bush in a war that they opposed.

Koizumi's more recent decision to send self defense forces to Iraq raises a different issue that goes to the point mentioned earlier about governments needing to be skillful in cooperating with the US without at the same time appearing to their own publics as subservient and simply obedient to American demands. Whatever one thinks of the US decision to decapitate the Iraqi government and occupy the country, the reality on the ground now that Saddam Hussein's regime of terror is gone, is that the entire world has a high stake in bringing about Iraq's economic reconstruction and political development.

What is problematic about Koizumi's Iraq policy is not so much the decision to send the SDF to Iraq as it is the explanation he offers for why he is doing so. It is puzzling why he continues to go to such lengths to continue to justify the US decision to go to war in terms of the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction. Even the Bush Administration itself is busy trying to find other justifications for its action now that the WMD charge has been revealed to be mostly bogus. By putting an excessive emphasis on the importance to relations with the United States of the decision to send Japanese troops to Iraq, Koizumi himself is fueling anti-American sentiment in Japan by creating the impression that Japanese foreign policy is being made in Washington.

Koizumi's support for the US war on terrorism and its policy in Iraq has contributed to a perception of Japanese foreign policy becoming unhinged from its traditional moorings. There is no doubt that Japanese foreign policy is heading into uncharted waters and that a vague kind of consensus has spread across the political spectrum in support of the idea that Japanese foreign policy must change. However, this is a consensus without direction or a clear sense of purpose or vision. The result is not so much of a shift as a kind of drift in Japanese foreign policy.

This is not all that surprising when one considers that Japanese diplomacy remains inherently and decidedly reactive and continues to be firmly anchored to a tradition that emphasize the importance of making timely and pragmatic adjustments to accommodate the prevailing trends of the times. Japan is not a country that is out to reshape the world; it is striving to evolve its policies so that it can better cope with it while minimizing risks as much as possible. In that fundamental sense there is nothing especially new about recent

developments in Japanese foreign policy, and predictions that it is about to head off into a sharply new direction are certain to be disappointed.

Adjusting to the prevailing trends of the times, however, involves something in addition to keeping on the right side of the world's only superpower, the United States. It also requires adjusting to another profoundly important change in the world as seen from the region in which Japan lives. That is the rise of China and the related increased interest among all countries in East Asia in strengthening East Asian regional institutions.

The Return of the Central Kingdom

Until just a few years ago, Asian business and government leaders divided mainly into two groups in their views of China. On one side were the Skeptics who doubted whether China's modernization drive could be sustained and social stability maintained. On the other were the Doomsayers, those who believed that China's rise indeed was unstoppable and that it would result in the hollowing out of manufacturing industries in the rest of East Asia and China's emergence as regional hegemon. Throughout the region people worried out loud about the growing "China threat."

It is hard to find many Skeptics or Doomsayers in East Asia today. The entire region has become bullish on China. Businessmen and government leaders are hurrying to revise their view that economic relations with China amount to a kind of zero sum game, in which each Chinese success spells another country's defeat. Whether in Japan, Korea, or in Southeast Asia, private sector behavior and government policy are being driven more and more by the belief that relations with China can be turned into a win-win game, or to put it more precisely, that relations with China must be turned into a win-win game because that is the only way for countries on China's periphery to prosper.

China is on the cusp of replacing the United States as Japan's largest export market. Japanese exports to China and Hong Kong in the first half of 2003 were 75% of the value of exports to the United States. If Taiwan is included in the figures, Japanese exports to Greater China were 6.79 trillion yen, exceeding the 6.69 trillion yen in exports to the United States. Japan's exports to China and Hong Kong will exceed those to the US either this year or next.

Exports to China are the major source of profits for several of Japan's most important companies. Japanese business leaders, acting in accordance with the maxim that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, seem pretty much to have come to the conclusion that China has a relatively long period of high growth ahead of it and that a growing market of more than one billion people only a short airplane ride way from Tokyo and Osaka must offer untold business opportunities. China's economic boom has submerged almost all talk of a China threat.

A similar situation prevails in South Korea. There are more Korean students, some 30,000, in China than from any other country. Seoul has direct flights to twenty-four Chinese cities. In 2003 nearly half of all South Korean foreign direct investment went to China and total Korean investment in China, over \$2.5 billion dollars, is three times Korean investment in the United States. Korean exports to China last year jumped fifty percent over the previous year and two way trade, which was about \$50 billion last year, is about eight times larger than it was a decade ago.

It is not simply a matter of China becoming an important export and FDI destination for other countries in Asia. The pattern of trade and investment is creating production process networks that crisscross the region where parts, for example, manufactured in one country or another travel across borders to hook up with other parts manufactured elsewhere and then

move on to China for final assembly. The consequence is not only growing economic interdependence but the beginnings of significant economic integration.

Chinese leaders, especially since President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao have come into power, have been remarkably adept in taking steps to reassure China's neighbors that it is indeed engaged in a win-win game. China gets very high marks for diplomatic skill and subtlety, which is all the more remarkable when one considers how rigid Chinese diplomatic behavior was just a few years ago.

China initiated talks with governments in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to form a free trade area, and by making unilateral and immediate concessions on ASEAN exports to China it got ASEAN to agree to sign a basic treaty that commits both sides to move forward to signing an FTA. It has cultivated its South Korean ties and hosts the six-party talks aimed at resolving the North Korean nuclear issue.

Its most difficult relationship is with Japan. Prime Minister Koizumi's insistence on paying annual visits to Yasukuni Shrine, where not only the souls of those who died fighting for their country, but also those who died on the gallows after having been convicted of war crimes by the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal after the Second World War, are enshrined helps keep the "history issue" alive. That issue continues to be a major obstacle to the overall improvement of Sino-Japanese relations. There is no evidence, however, that either side has permitted it to get in the way of mutually attractive business deals.

China is reemerging, after an absence of more than a hundred years, as East Asia's central country, which is what the Chinese language characters for China mean, and all other countries in the region are trying to evolve new strategies to cope with this reality. Japan of course remains the dominant economic power in the region, and will continue to be so for some years to come. Its economy is still four times larger than China's and its level of technological development far in advance of anything China can hope to reach for the foreseeable future. But where Japan is seen as aging and rather tired and a difficult market for outsiders to penetrate, China is dynamic, the land of opportunity and increasingly an important engine of regional and global growth.

Sustaining economic relations as a win-win game will be politically difficult. As Americans know all too well, the opportunities for expanded trade with and investment in China are good for the overall economy but create intense political pressures for protection by those whose jobs are lost, lives upset, and communities hurt in the process. It is quite impressive how relatively little political heat Chinese economic competition has generated so far among adversely affected sectors in Japan and South Korea. But conflicts will no doubt arise.

The strategic response to China's rise among countries in the region appears to consist of four elements, the relative weight of each in the mix and the policy specifics differing country by country. One is to engage with China and ride the wave of its economic boom. A second is to compete with China by pushing forward economic liberalization and creating a leaner, more robust economy at home. A third is to entangle China in complex webs of interdependence. And the fourth is to reaffirm and to the extent possible strengthen relations with the United States, the largest customer by far of the final products produced in East Asia, and the only country capable of balancing growing Chinese political power.

The question that will face whoever is elected President in November, and one that neither candidate seems particularly interested in addressing, is how to respond to these new East Asian realities. The rise of China, the expansion of intra-regional trade and investment in

East Asia, and the growing sense among leaders and publics in East Asian countries that East Asia is indeed a region and should have a more extensive array of regional institutions all deserve more sustained and systematic attention by US policy makers. The US needs an East Asia policy.

Beyond Hub and Spokes

US foreign policy in East Asia for the past half-century has been based on the concept known as hub and spokes, with the US as the hub projecting its power into the region by means of bilateral alliances and arrangements with countries such as Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and others. America's bilateral relationships in the region, especially its alliance with Japan, remain critically important. But a hub and spokes approach is no longer adequate. Something more is wanted. There is a need for the US to rework the overarching security architecture for East Asia.

The hub and spokes strategy rested on two key assumptions. The first was that the US needed alliances in East Asia to contain the Soviet Union and communist China. The second was that a multilateral approach would not work in East Asia since the countries there, in contrast to the situation in Western Europe, had little in common to tie them together; the only realistic security architecture for the region would have to involve extending "spokes" country by country.

The situation is different today not only because the Cold War has ended but because East Asia is now becoming a region in ways it was not when the hub and spokes concept was formulated. There is ongoing a process of deepening of economic, political, and cultural relations among the countries of East Asia. The combination of economic development and growing intra-regional trade and investment, the spread of democracy, the emergence of an East Asian pop culture - spearheaded largely by Japanese and now increasingly Korean soft power, and growing enthusiasm for creating regional institutions create a very different East Asia than existed when US policy makers designed the hub and spokes approach to the region. Every country in East Asia places a high priority on relations with the United States, which itself has enormous interests at stake in the region. The US, however, is not an East Asian country. It needs a policy to deal with the region as a whole.

US strategy in East Asia needs to be rooted in three new assumptions. The first is that retaining bilateral alliances with Japan and Korea is of critical importance, not in order to contain any nation but to prevent a power vacuum from arising and to facilitate the rapid deployment of US military forces to meet contingencies as needed.

The second is that East Asian regionalism, like Western European regionalism, is not necessarily inimical to US national interests. The US needs to avoid a kind of knee-jerk reaction to proposals for regional institutions of which it is not a part. East Asian nations have a vital interest in having the U.S. maintain a political, economic, and security presence in the region. For Japan, alliance with the U.S. is essential for maintaining a balance with an ever more powerful China. For China, apprehension that the U.S.-Japan alliance is aimed at containing Chinese power is offset by the recognition that such an alliance is preferable to Japan trying to secure for itself the military capabilities that are presently provided by the United States under the U.S.-Japan security treaty. A strengthening of ties among East Asian countries and the emergence of regional organizations of which the U.S. is not a member do not change these realities.

The United States can afford to be more relaxed about the efforts underway to develop regional institutions in East Asia. The realities of East Asia's economic interactions, where the preponderance of manufactured exports are destined for markets outside the region and especially the United States, and where capital investment from non-regional sources are so critically important, create an interest throughout East Asia in maintaining an open form of regionalism.

On the security side, regional organizations for some time to come will be a modest supplement to the more important bilateral relations that countries in the region have with the United States. But regional security dialogues, even those that exclude the United States, can play a useful role, especially in increasing transparency of Chinese policies and enmeshing China in regional and supra-regional networks, which is a necessary part of any strategy to avoid having a wealthier and more powerful China become a destabilizing force in regional politics. In this regard, the US should welcome the proposal that has been floated in Tokyo for an annual summit of the leaders of China, Japan, and South Korea.

The third assumption underwriting US policy in East Asia should be that US interests are served by the development of new multilateral approaches to regional security. The six-party talks with North Korea may provide a useful model for institutionalizing a Northeast Asia security dialogue. China appears to be interested in exploring the possibility of creating a Northeast Asia regional security forum and similar proposals are popping up in Japan and South Korea as well.

The US should embrace and encourage such initiatives without attempting to take control of them. Skillful American diplomacy would engage regional players in the design and not just the implementation of such a regional security organization. No country is more important in this regard than Japan. America's most important ally in the region, Japan enjoys a far deeper level of trust and far more extensive formal and informal channels of communication with the United States than does any other country in that part of the world. Japanese pride themselves on their ability to forge consensus. Here is an opportunity for Japan to play a particular kind of leadership role, by bringing the United States and the rest of Asia to a common understanding of how to move forward to create a Northeast Asia regional security forum.

While President Bush and Democratic challenger Kerry argue about who is best able to wage war against terrorism, other foreign policy issues of critical importance to US national interests go unaddressed. East Asia is the dynamic growth center of the world economy, China's economic and political power is rapidly rising, Japan remains the world's second largest economy, and the Korean peninsula remains one of the most dangerous places on earth. The enthusiasm within East Asia for developing new forms of economic cooperation and new security dialogues is palpable. Regionalism is coming to East Asia. The United States needs to design a strategy to deal with these realities. And it needs whoever is elected President in November to make that one of his foreign policy priorities.