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54. East Asian Defense Commitments

The U.S. government should

- withdraw American military forces from South Korea over the next two years and terminate the mutual defense treaty at the end of that period;
- begin a four-year phased pullout of American troops from Japan, beginning with forces on Okinawa;
- replace the bilateral U.S.-Japanese defense treaty with an agreement that allows emergency base and port access and maintains joint military exercises and intelligence cooperation;
- drop proposals for enhanced defense ties with Singapore, eliminate the AUSMIN agreement with Australia, and make clear to the Philippine government and people that the Visiting Forces Agreement and anti-terrorist assistance do not commit the United States to military action on behalf of the Philippines, especially in any territorial disagreement involving the South China Sea;
- promote regional security cooperation through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other appropriate institutions;
- expand economic and limited security ties with China while pressing Beijing to accelerate democratic, human rights, and market reforms and to resolve international disputes peacefully; and
- drop Washington's implicit defense guarantee to Taiwan but sell Taipei any weapons it deems necessary for its defense.

After the end of World War II the United States established an extensive forward military presence and fought two wars in East Asia as part of its strategy to contain communism. The Cold War ended a decade ago,

but America's defense posture has changed little. The administration is committed to keeping at least 100,000 military personnel in East Asia and the western Pacific, apparently forever. The Pentagon's infamous 1995 assessment of security policy in East Asia (the so-called Nye Report) made the astonishing assertion that ''the end of the Cold War has not diminished'' the importance of any of America's regional security commitments.

Indeed, Washington has been *increasing* U.S. military ties, approving a new security treaty with the Philippines and involving special forces in Manila's fight against Abu Sayyaf guerrillas, for instance, and offering an implicit defense guarantee to Taiwan against China. Rather than expand America's military presence in East Asia at a time when credible security threats against the United States are diminishing, Congress should use its budgetary and legislative authority to initiate a phased withdrawal of American forces from South Korea and Japan and prepare to center Washington's reduced military presence in the central Pacific rather than East Asia.

Changed Threat Environment

American policy in the Far East has succeeded. For five decades Washington provided a defense shield behind which noncommunist governments throughout East Asia were able to grow economically (despite their recent setbacks) and democratically. Japan is the world's second-ranked economic power; Taiwan's dramatic jump from poverty to prosperity forced the leaders of the communist mainland to undertake fundamental economic reforms. South Korea now outstrips North Korea by virtually every measure of national power. After years of failure, the Philippines seems to be on the path of prosperity, while countries like Thailand have grown dramatically and will eventually recover from their temporary economic travails.

Serious threats to America's allies and interests have essentially disappeared. There is no more Soviet Union; a much weaker Russia has neither the capability nor the will for Asian adventurism.

Elsewhere real, tough-minded communism has dissolved into a cynical excuse for incumbent officeholders to maintain power. More than a decade after the Tiananmen Square massacre, China is combining support for greater economic liberty with respect for greater individual autonomy. So far Beijing's military renewal has been modest, and China has been

assertive rather than aggressive, though its saber rattling at Taiwan remains of concern.

Southeast Asia remains roiled by economic and political instability, but such problems threaten no one outside the immediate region. Only North Korea remains a potential threat, but it is no replacement for the Soviet Union. Pyongyang is bankrupt and starving, essentially friendless, and, despite its willingness to wave the threat of an atomic bomb to gain respect, will only fall further behind the South. Moreover, sporadically warmer relations between the two Koreas after the summit between the South's Kim Dae Jung and the North's Jim Jong Il offer the hope, though obviously not the guarantee, of growing détente between the two states.

Some analysts privately, and a few publicly, say that Japan poses a potential threat to regional peace. However, Tokyo has gained all of the influence and wealth through peace that it had hoped to attain through war and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in the 1930s.

Moreover, the lesson of World War II remains vivid to most Japanese: in recent years the nation has been convulsed by political debates over such modest actions as sending medical personnel to the Gulf War, providing peacekeeping troops to the UN operation in Cambodia, and authorizing military participation in civilian rescues.

Even mainstream politicians committed to a somewhat more assertive posture—which has become increasingly respectable—have routinely sacrificed military spending to budget concerns. The Koizumi government has moved to modestly expand Tokyo's defense responsibilities, but they remain far below both Japan's economic resources and its strategic interests.

Rethinking American Strategy

So far neither the Bush administration nor Congress seems to have noticed the many dramatic changes. Indeed, the Bush administration's proposed $46 billion increase in military spending for 2003 is more than any other country spends on defense. U.S. taxpayers spent roughly $13 trillion (in current dollars) and sacrificed 92,000 lives to win the Cold War. With the dramatic diminution of security threats and the equally dramatic growth of allied capabilities, the American people should no longer be expected to surrender more dollars and risk more lives to police East Asia for as long as friendly states believe it to be convenient. However much it might be in the interest of other nations for Washington to defend them—and what country would not naturally desire that the world's

remaining superpower subsidize its defense?—it is not in America's interest to do so.

Unless the administration acts, Congress should take the lead in adjusting U.S. overseas deployments. Legislators should reduce the defense budget as well as overall force levels and foreign deployments; Washington should develop a comprehensive plan for the phased withdrawal of all forces currently stationed in East Asia and the termination of U.S. defense guarantees to allied nations.

The starting point for a new East Asian strategy is disengagement from the Korean peninsula, the international flashpoint that could most easily involve the United States in war. Although North Korea remains unpredictable and potentially dangerous, the 2000 summit and intermittent diplomatic steps since then suggest that Pyongyang has decided on a more pacific course, probably out of economic desperation. In any case, the South should be able to defend itself. It now possesses twice the population of, around 40 times the gross domestic product of, and a vast technological lead over the North. Especially after having rebounded from the Asian economic crisis the South is well able to spend whatever is necessary to make up for the withdrawal of 37,000 American troops. The North could then choose to engage in meaningful arms control or lose an inter-Korean arms race.

The potential for a North Korean nuclear bomb is unnerving. Pyongyang's recent admission that it has covertly pursued a uranium enrichment program has significantly raised tensions. That program is a violation of the commitments North Korea made in the 1994 framework agreement. Washington should work with China, Japan, and Russia to get North Korea to end its violation. More generally, the United States should work to reduce tensions on the peninsula. Washington should allow Seoul to take the lead in dealing with the North, supporting rather than undercutting South Korean efforts to draw the DPRK into a more responsible international role. At the same time, Washington should not only lift trade sanctions against the North but also normalize diplomatic relations—modest concessions that would offer the North ongoing benefits in return for maintaining a peaceful course.

Although we should remain cautious about any promises by Pyongyang, engagement offers greater prospects of success than does plunging the peninsula into a new cold, or possibly hot, war. There are no good options if Pyongyang persists in attempting to develop an atomic bomb, and a continued American conventional military presence is certainly not one.

U.S. ground forces in the South would become nuclear hostages, enhancing the North's leverage over America.

Time for a Setting Sun

Washington should follow a similar strategy in Japan, which no longer faces a serious threat. Whatever dangers to Japan remain or might arise in the future, from, say, an aggressive China, could be met by a modest Japanese military buildup. Of course, many of Japan's neighbors have long viewed Washington's presence more as an occupation force to contain Tokyo than as a force to contain Moscow. But the Japanese do not possess a double dose of original sin; their nation, along with the rest of the world, has changed dramatically over the last half century. The Japanese people have neither the desire to start another conflict nor the incentive to do so, having come to economically dominate East Asia peacefully.

Moreover, Tokyo is unlikely to accept a permanent foreign watchdog, and tensions will grow as the lack of other missions for the U.S. forces becomes increasingly obvious. Popular anger is already evident in Okinawa, where American military facilities occupy one-fifth of the island's landmass. Washington should develop a six-year program for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Japan, starting with those in Okinawa. At the end of that period Washington and Tokyo should replace their mutual defense treaty with a more limited agreement providing for emergency base and port access, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing.

The United States need not expand base access elsewhere in the region. Washington should drop proposals to increase defense cooperation with Singapore and tightly circumscribe the scope of its Visiting Forces Agreement with the Philippines, which was promoted by former president Joseph Estrada and other Filipino supporters as a mechanism for drawing the United States into any confrontation with China. The United States needs also to limit any future military training missions, sharply insulating American forces from involvement in domestic conflicts, such as that involving the Abu Sayyaf, essentially a gang of bandits. The United States has suffered no damage attributable to the closing of its bases in the Philippines, which had become expensive anachronisms, in 1992. Instead of upgrading U.S. military ties, Washington should be transferring security responsibilities to its allies and friends.

Even less relevant is the Australia–New Zealand–United States (ANZUS) accord, which went into deep-freeze in 1984 after New Zealand blocked port access by nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered American

ships, and the annual Australia–United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN). ANZUS, created in the aftermath of World War II, was directed less at containing the Soviet Union, which had no military presence in the South Pacific, than at preventing a new round of Japanese aggression. But since Tokyo had been decisively defeated and completely disarmed, later to be fully integrated into the Western alliance, ANZUS was outmoded the day it was signed.

Which leaves AUSMIN. But Australia faces no meaningful threats to its security. An attack by a serious military power—China, India, Vietnam—is a paranoid fantasy. An Indonesian implosion might flood Australia with refugees, but not hostile troops. Anyway, Australia, blessed with splendid isolation and economic prosperity, can easily provide whatever forces it deems necessary to defend itself.

Washington should simply discard AUSMIN. Australia and America should maintain mutually beneficial military cooperation, such as intelligence sharing and emergency port access, and ink a free-trade agreement. At the same time, Canberra should enhance its own military role in the region.

Regional Security Cooperation

Indeed, the United States should encourage expanded regional security discussions. Through either ASEAN or another organization, smaller countries throughout East Asia should develop a cooperative defense relationship with Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and especially Japan.

Fear of the latter ignores five decades of dramatic changes. Tokyo could do much to improve regional security. A measured military buildup, focused on defensive weapons and conducted in consultation with Japan's neighbors, would help prevent the creation of a dangerous vacuum following the departure of American forces, as feared by proponents of continuing U.S. dominance. Washington's position should be that of a distant balancer, leaving its friends to handle their own affairs but poised to act if a hegemonic threat arises that allied states cannot contain.

The United States could aid in the creation of a more effective regional security framework by encouraging the peaceful resolution of various boundary and territorial disputes. None presently seems likely to lead to war, but all impede better bilateral and multilateral cooperation. To help dissipate international tensions, Washington should offer its good offices to help mediate the Japanese–South Korean squabble over the Takeshima/Tokdu islands, the Japanese-Russian quarrel over the ''northern territories''

(Sakhalin island), and the multifaceted dispute involving China and several other countries that claim the Paracel and Spratly islands. Most important, the United States should make clear that resolution of those (and other similar) controversies is up to the interested parties, not America. Such a ''tough love'' policy forced Australia to assume the lead role in establishing a UN peacekeeping force in East Timor in the aftermath of that territory's messy divorce from Indonesia.

The end of Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union allows Washington to take a more balanced position vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China (PRC). Washington should continue to promote good political relations, expand the military dialogue, and encourage additional economic reform.

However, the United States need not fear bruising the PRC's sensitivities when discussing China's foreign arms sales, human rights abuses, attempted bullying of Taiwan, and interference with America's internal affairs by seeking to block even private visits to the United States by Taiwanese officials. America should speak frankly on those issues, though Congress should resist pressure to limit trade with and investment in China. While nothing is inevitable, extensive economic ties offer what is probably the most powerful tool for weakening central communist control in the PRC.

Congress also needs to take the lead in repairing flawed administration policy toward the Republic of China (ROC). Relocated to Taiwan after the communist victory on the mainland in 1949, the ROC still claimed to be the legitimate government of all China until the late 1980s. Seven years after Richard Nixon made his historic trip to the PRC in 1972, the United States dropped diplomatic recognition of the ROC. Many other nations followed suit. Since then Taiwan has existed uneasily at the periphery of global politics—an economic powerhouse but a diplomatic midget.

The ROC's behaving increasingly like a sovereign state caused the PRC to rattle its sabers—or, more accurately, test its missiles—in early 1996. Beijing's threats led Washington to respond with a warning of ''grave consequences,'' meaning military intervention, should hostilities erupt. The election in March 2000 of Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party, which has long championed Taiwanese independence, further increased tensions across the Taiwan Strait.

The United States does not have sufficient interests at stake to risk war with nuclear-armed China over Taiwan. However, Washington, after making clear that it believes the status of Taiwan, whether reunified with

the mainland or independent, is up to the people of Taiwan to decide, should sell the ROC whatever weapons, such as attack submarines, Taipei desires to purchase for its own defense.

Conclusion

Asia, particularly East Asia, is likely to grow more important to the United States in coming years. That makes it essential that Washington simultaneously reduce the military burden on the American economy and force its trading competitors to bear the full cost of their own defense. Otherwise, U.S. firms will be less able to take advantage of expanding regional economic opportunities. More important, the United States will be more secure if friendly powers in the region, rather than relying on America, are able and willing to contain nearby conflicts.

Jettisoning antiquated alliances and commitments and reducing a bloated force structure does not mean the United States would no longer be an Asian-Pacific power. After bringing its forces home from South Korea and Japan, America should center a reduced defense presence around Wake Island, Guam, and Hawaii. The United States would remain the globe's strongest military power, with the ability to intervene throughout East Asia if necessary. However, American policy would be dictated by the interests of the American people, not those of the populous and prosperous security dependents that Washington has accumulated throughout the region.

Suggested Readings

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