

31. East Asia

Despite the end of the Cold War, there has been only a minimal reduction in the U.S. military presence in East Asia. Washington continues to treat Japan, South Korea, and other nations in that region as protectorates, at a cost of more than \$35 billion a year to American taxpayers. A change in policy is both possible and desirable from the standpoint of American interests. The following steps should be taken:

- **All U.S. forces should be withdrawn from Japan and South Korea over the next three to four years, since both nations have the economic resources to build and maintain whatever forces are needed for their own defense.**
- **Washington should announce that the mutual defense treaties with both Japan and South Korea will be terminated by the end of the decade.**
- **U.S. air and naval forces in the Pacific should be reduced and the remaining forces redeployed to rely more on bases in Guam, Wake Island, and other U.S. territories in the Central Pacific.**
- **The ANZUS alliance with Australia and New Zealand is a Cold War relic that should be terminated with one year's notice.**
- **Washington should refrain from trying to establish new military access agreements with such nations as Singapore and the Philippines.**
- **The United States should carefully monitor China's military modernization program; Congress should not impose economic sanctions on China over human rights issues.**
- **The United States should offer to help mediate a settlement of the dispute between Russia and Japan over the status of the northern territories.**

- **Washington should encourage the major nations of East Asia, which are the most threatened by North Korea's nuclear program, to take the lead in dealing with that problem.**

The Changed Threat Environment

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States maintained an extensive military presence, and fought two wars, in East Asia as part of its strategy to contain communism. Today, despite the end of the Cold War, little has changed, as more than 100,000 U.S. troops remain stationed on land and ships throughout East Asia and the Pacific. The Clinton administration proclaims its commitment to keeping significant forces in Japan and Korea indefinitely, and some analysts press for more extensive military ties with Singapore and a revived defense relationship with the ANZUS countries and the Philippines. As part of its effort to provide better defense at less cost, the 104th Congress should reject any new security commitments in the region, endorse a phased withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea and Japan, and prepare to center America's military presence in the Central Pacific rather than East Asia.

In an important sense, American policy in the Far East has proved to be a brilliant success. Behind the U.S. defense shield noncommunist governments throughout East Asia have become economic tigers and moved toward democracy. Indeed, Japan has become the world's second-ranking economic power, and South Korea vastly outstrips communist North Korea by virtually every measure of national power. Taiwan's dramatic success helped force Beijing to begin its reform course. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations' members such as Thailand and the Philippines also seem to be moving toward strong, self-sustaining growth. That new reality alone would suggest reshaping America's military commitment to the region.

Equally fundamental, however, has been the reduction in the potential threats to America's allies and interests. Most obvious, the USSR has collapsed. A much smaller Russia is suffering from economic problems, ethnic unrest, and military weakness; its once powerful Pacific fleet is rusting away. The fear that Russia might attack any of its East Asian neighbors is now a paranoid fantasy.

At the same time, communism in the Far East has been steadily weakening. China is growing economically but faces an uncertain political transition and increasing pressure to yield additional power to provincial govern-

ments. Despite some military modernization—a development that bears watching—China is led by a faction-ridden gerontocracy and has neither the ability nor the will to pose a serious threat to neighboring countries for years to come.

Other problems in the region may be important to the parties involved but hardly pose a threat to America's security or even to regional stability. The continuing disorder in Cambodia is tragic but threatens no other nation. Vietnam, though still formally communist, is enthusiastically seeking American investment and no longer has credible expansionist ambitions. Only North Korea remains a potential threat, but that menace is not even remotely comparable to the threat once posed by the Soviet Union. Pyongyang is desperately poor, possesses no reliable allies, and has been reduced to using the threat of an atomic bomb to gain any attention in the international community.

The only other conceivable threat to regional peace is, of course, Japan, judged by some to have a double dose of original sin and still feared by many nations in the region. However, Tokyo has gained all of the influence and wealth through peace that it had hoped to attain in the 1930s by establishing the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere through military force; it has nothing to gain, and everything to lose, from war. Moreover, divisive internal debates over such modest initiatives as sending medical personnel to the gulf war, providing peacekeeping forces for UN operations in Cambodia, and authorizing its military to participate in humanitarian missions suggest that neither Japan's politicians nor its citizens have any stomach for aggression or militarism.

A New U.S. Policy Is Needed

The Clinton administration, like its predecessor, has not fully appreciated those dramatic changes. To the contrary, the president's concern over his weak military image has apparently caused him to offer categorical promises to maintain American forces in the region for as long as U.S. allies desire their presence.

But American taxpayers spent roughly \$13 trillion (in 1994 dollars) and sacrificed 113,000 lives to win the Cold War. With the demise of the superpower that threatened the United States and its allies, both directly and through surrogates, the American people should not be expected to surrender more dollars and risk more lives to police East Asia for as long as U.S. allies deem convenient. Although it might be in the interest of other nations for Washington to defend them—and what country would

not want U.S. citizens to subsidize its defense?—doing so is not necessarily in America's interest.

Congress therefore needs to take the lead in adjusting U.S. deployments overseas. That change includes gradually withdrawing all U.S. forces currently stationed in East Asia and eventually terminating Washington's defense guarantees to allies in the region.

A Constructive Policy toward Russia and China

The starting point for a new Pacific strategy is to encourage Russia to further reduce its military and settle outstanding disputes with its neighbors, particularly the question of Japan's "northern territories." As Moscow's bases and forces in the region diminish, the risk of aggression by Russia, and thus regional tensions generally, will further dissipate. If both parties are willing, the United States should even offer to help mediate the dispute.

The end of the Cold War also allows Washington to take a more detached view of the People's Republic of China. Although Washington should promote good political relations, expanded trade, and continued economic reform, it need be less concerned about bruising Beijing's sensitivities when negotiating about China's foreign arms sales, respect for human rights, and relationship with Taiwan. At the same time, Congress should resist pressure to limit American trade with and investment in China. Those economic ties are doing much both to improve the lives of the Chinese people and to weaken the central communist government in Beijing, a trend that could significantly inhibit China's potential for aggression in coming years.

Stop Smothering Japan

Washington should quickly phase out its troop presence in Japan, which no longer faces a serious threat. Whatever residual dangers remain can be met by Japan's already potent "Self-Defense Forces." Of course, many countries in the region have long viewed Washington's military presence as containing Japan as well as Moscow. But Tokyo is unlikely to tolerate a permanent foreign occupation for that purpose, and tensions will grow as the lack of other missions for the U.S. forces becomes increasingly obvious. Moreover, there is no compelling need for the United States to act as a watchdog over Japan. A repetition of the Japanese aggression that led to World War II is utterly improbable. Japan has no interest in another conflict. Moreover, democracy, however imperfect at times in practice, seems to have firmly taken hold, and the Japanese people seem genuinely horrified by the prospect of war.

The United States should, however, try to help assuage the fears of Japan's neighbors by encouraging greater regional cooperation. (So far the Clinton administration has been more helpful in that regard than its predecessor, which had criticized regional arrangements that did not include the United States.) American officials should also drop their pressure on Japan to hike its military spending. Tokyo need not engage in any sustained arms build-up, because the major threat to its security, the USSR, has disappeared.

Ending South Korea's Perpetual Dependence

Although North Korea remains a potentially dangerous international player, there is no need to maintain 37,000 American troops in the South. The Republic of Korea has twice the population and approximately 16 times the gross domestic product of the North and a vast technological lead over Pyongyang. The ROK has also been outspending the North militarily for years. If Pyongyang refuses to engage in meaningful arms control while American troops are being withdrawn, Seoul has ample financial resources to further strengthen its military.

The potential for a North Korean nuclear bomb is unnerving, but U.S. ground forces in the South are more likely to encourage rather than discourage the development of a bomb, since they would act as hostages, enhancing the North's leverage over the United States. Washington should continue to work with China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea to discourage North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons, but it should encourage those countries to take the lead in formulating policy since they have the most at stake.

Although many Republicans have sharply criticized the Clinton administration's recent accord with Pyongyang, they have offered no better alternatives. Sanctions imposed on a country as economically isolated as North Korea are unlikely to work, and launching preemptive military strikes would be a "solution" far worse than the problem. There are no good options if Pyongyang violates the accord and proceeds to develop atomic weapons, but keeping U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula as potential nuclear hostages is an especially bad course of action.

Terminating Other Security Relics

Washington should calmly accept the demise of its bases in the Philippines, which were expensive anachronisms. There is no credible mission that would warrant a return to those facilities. Indeed, Washington no

longer needs permanent basing facilities anywhere in East Asia and should not pressure other ASEAN countries, such as Singapore, to substitute for the Philippines.

Even less relevant is ANZUS. That alliance was moribund even before the end of the Cold War. The United States put it into deep freeze over New Zealand's refusal to grant docking rights for nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered U.S. warships. Neither Australia nor New Zealand requires American protection, and a formal alliance is not necessary for other forms of military cooperation, such as augmenting U.S. communications and monitoring capabilities.

Toward a More Cost-Effective Strategy

The Far East is likely to grow in economic importance to the United States in coming years, but that makes it even more essential for Washington to simultaneously reduce the military burden on the American economy and force its trading partners to bear the full cost of their own defense. Otherwise U.S. firms will have difficulty taking advantage of expanding economic opportunities in the region.

Jettisoning antiquated alliances and commitments does not mean the United States would no longer be a Pacific power. After withdrawing its forces from Korea and Japan, America should center its reduced force structure around Wake Island, Guam, and Hawaii. That strategy would maintain forces in the Central Pacific, with an ability to move farther west if an unexpected threat to America's security emerged. But the United States would no longer be subsidizing wealthy allies who face fading threats. After decades of protecting other nations from an enemy that no longer exists, it is time for America to develop a more cost-effective defense strategy in East Asia.

Suggested Readings

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—*Prepared by Doug Bandow*