

STRATEGIC TRENDS

Asia at a Crossroads

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The areas of maximum danger and instability in the world today are in Asia, followed by the Middle East and parts of the former Soviet Union. The strategic situation in Asia is more uncertain and potentially threatening than anywhere in Europe. Unlike in Europe, it is possible to envisage war in Asia involving the major powers: remnants of Cold War ideological confrontation still exist across the Taiwan Straits and on the Korean Peninsula; India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, and these two countries are more confrontational than at any time since the early 1970s; in Southeast Asia, Indonesia—which is the world’s fourth-largest country—faces a highly uncertain future that could lead to its breakup. The Asia-Pacific region spends more on defense (about \$150 billion a year) than any other part of the world except the United States and Nato Europe. China and Japan are amongst the top four or five global military spenders. Asia also has more nuclear powers than any other region of the world.

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Asia’s security is at a crossroads: the region could go in the direction of peace and cooperation, or it could slide into confrontation and military conflict. There are positive tendencies, including the resurgence of economic growth and the spread of democracy, which would encourage an optimistic view. But there are a number of negative tendencies that must be of serious concern. There are deep-seated historical, territorial, ideological, and religious differences in Asia. Also, the region has no history of successful multilateral security cooperation or

arms control. Such multilateral institutions as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the ASEAN Regional Forum have shown themselves to be ineffective when confronted with major crises.

In judging the strategic future of Asia, we should learn from previous failures of assessment and refrain from overconfident, straight-line extrapolations. After the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, there was great fear that communism would spread quickly to the rest of Southeast Asia and that the dominoes would fall. That did not occur. In the 1980s, we were told that the coming Japanese economic superpower would soon outstrip the United States; instead, Japan has recorded barely one-third of the economic growth of the United States since 1990. Less than five years ago, it was being forecast that the so-called “Asian economic miracle” would inevitably give the region a larger economy than the United States and Europe; that view was destroyed by the Asian economic crisis. There have also been predictions that China will be the new economic giant and that its gross national product will be bigger than that of the United States by 2010. But by most measures, China’s economy is only a fraction of that of the United States.¹

This article assesses the strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific region over the next five years, which is the period of most relevance to policy. It analyses the geopolitics of the region, the strategic outlook and balance of power, and the risk of military conflict in such places as the Taiwan Straits, the Korean Peninsula, and the Indian subcontinent. It also examines the prospects for Indonesia’s security and what that might mean for Southeast Asia as a whole. The article concludes by analysing, from the viewpoint of a prudent defense planner, America’s policies toward the region and by assessing whether they need improvement.

THE GEOPOLITICS AND MILITARY GEOGRAPHY OF ASIA

There is a fashionable view that geography and geopolitics are no longer relevant in the post–Cold War era. That is demonstrably untrue in Asia, where there is a fierce sense of national sovereignty, enormous variations in culture and civilisation, and a struggle for power and influence among the region’s great powers. There are more than two dozen outstanding territorial conflicts in this part of the world; some of them—such as those between China and Taiwan, between the two Koreas, and between India and Pakistan—are potentially very dangerous. Whilst it is the case that globalisation and the information revolution are having an increasing impact on Asia, the assertion of old-fashioned nationalism and state sovereignty undermines the argument of those who assert that the importance of the state is declining.

The strategic environment of Asia is characterized by the presence of three great continental powers: China, India, and Russia. An arc of maritime powers, many of which are allies or friends of the United States, flanks them. Except for

Japan, most of these countries are middle-sized or small powers: South Korea, Taiwan, the ten ASEAN countries, Australia and New Zealand, and the small island nations of the South Pacific. Almost half of the world's maritime trade passes through the confined straits and archipelagic waters of Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. The United States has traditionally been the dominant naval power in this part of the world. Neither China nor India will have a true blue-water navy over the next five years—although they will both seek to extend their naval influence, and therefore their strategic ambitions will overlap in Southeast Asia. This is an area of great strategic significance for the United States and its allies—especially Japan, which transports nearly all of its oil imports through the area's chokepoints. China too is becoming more dependent upon sea lines of communication as its trade increases, and China will need to import more oil and gas to meet its energy requirements.

The political makeup of Asia is highly varied, and this adds to the geopolitical complexity of the region. Unlike Europe, where a broad swathe of democracies now occupies most of the continent, Asia has four of the world's five remaining



communist countries: China, North Korea, Vietnam, and Laos. Whilst there has been an encouraging rise of democracy in recent years in South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and the Philippines, authoritarian regimes are firmly in power in Pakistan and Burma, and the governments in Malaysia and Singapore practice forms of “soft authoritarianism.” As for Indonesia, it remains to be seen whether democracy will survive there. In any case, the trend toward democracy in the region, if it continues, does not necessarily imply easier relationships with the United States, as the New Zealand case demonstrates. The highly questionable proposition—which has become an article of faith in

some quarters in Washington—that democracies do not go to war with democracies may be disproved one of these days in Asia. In any case, deep-seated historical, cultural, religious, and territorial differences in Asia suggest that, irrespective of the development of democratic institutions, the dangers of armed conflict remain. Late in 1999 there was a risk that military conflict would erupt (over East Timor) between Australia and a newly democratic Indonesia.

As the “revolution in military affairs” spreads to Asia and introduces longer-range and more accurate weapons supported by good surveillance information, the geography of Asia will be compressed. The introduction of long-range cruise missiles and the development of ballistic missiles will make smaller countries much more vulnerable if deterrence fails. The risk then will be either of an escalating proliferation of ballistic missiles, or of the acquisition from the United

States of a protective ballistic missile defense, which in turn may lead to the multiplication of offensive missile systems. The ballistic missile proliferation challenge for the United States and its allies will be more acute in Asia than anywhere else.

The ready availability of advanced conventional weapons not only compresses but alters the geography of the region. For instance, the proliferation of supersonic antiship cruise missiles will make it more dangerous for the United States and its allies to operate militarily in the littoral environment of many states of the region. Thus although the long lead-times in acquiring major military platforms are likely to keep the overall orders of battle of regional countries from changing much over the next five years, capabilities in many instances can change quickly through the acquisition of quite limited numbers of relatively cheap, long-range, and accurate tactical missiles.

The structures and doctrines of many of the region's armed forces are also changing. In particular, there is less emphasis on land forces and greater attention to developing small but capable navies and air forces. There is also a trend toward the development of amphibious troops for the protection of offshore territories and assets. Fielding modern air forces and navies is becoming increasingly expensive; the cost of acquiring and operating military platforms approximately doubles with each new generation. But newer platforms are in many instances able to deliver more lethality and firepower. The ready availability of satellite photography with a resolution of one meter or less, together with accurate Global Positioning System information, will mean that even small powers can have credible deterrent forces.

Nonetheless, the gap between the military technology of the United States and that of potential peer competitors will, if anything, widen over the next five years. The central question for America's Asia-Pacific allies will be whether they will be able to keep up with U.S. military forces in terms of basic interoperability of communications and weapons systems.

THE BALANCE OF POWER IN ASIA

The Asia-Pacific region has entered a particularly complex strategic situation; a new balance of power may be evolving. The Asian economic crisis, tension between China and the United States over Taiwan, North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, the risk of war between India and Pakistan, and the possibility of Indonesian disintegration have all arisen suddenly, and they serve to underline the basic insecurity of the region. But whether Asia remains a peaceful region will largely depend upon the struggle for power and influence between the major powers: China, Japan, India, Russia, and the United States. It is not in the interests of the United States or of its allies to see the region dominated by any one Asian power or by a concert of them.

China is a rising power that sees itself as the natural leader in Asia. It perceives its aspirations in this regard as being thwarted by the American military presence in the region and the U.S. alliance network. China is acquiring, with assistance from Russia, modern military equipment that will enable it to prevail militarily in the South China Sea against any regional power, if it so wishes. Were China to succeed in asserting sovereignty over the South China Sea, it would be able to penetrate deeply into Southeast Asia and influence events there. Thus there are serious questions surrounding the rise of China to power. Will China be a responsible and cooperative member of the international community, abiding by the community's rules of nonaggression? Or will China become an expansionist power, as have other rising powers in the past?

World history has been marked by the rise of ambitious new powers seeking to displace weaker powers. China is many decades away from being a peer competitor of the dominant world power, the United States; already, however, the main danger to the region is the risk that the next military confrontation will be between the United States and China. David Shambaugh stated in early 2000

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that growing "strategic competition" is likely to characterize Sino-American relations for most of the coming decade, whatever American administration came to office in 2001.² The greatest danger is over Taiwan: war

between the United States and China in the Taiwan Straits might well draw in America's allies, including Australia. Washington would expect its other allies, particularly Japan and South Korea, to support it, and such expectations could seriously damage its alliances in the region.

Short of such cataclysmic events, the main danger is that pressure might increase for individual nations to side with either China or the United States in their respective struggles for influence, thereby dividing the region. Some countries, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, would probably climb on the U.S. bandwagon. Others, such as Malaysia and Thailand, might incline toward China. Indonesia has traditionally been hostile to China, but President Abdurrahman Wahid has talked recently about a triangular relationship with China and India that would offset Indonesia's former close relationship with the United States. The future course of Indonesia's relations with China will be followed with the utmost scrutiny, not least by Australia. The purchase by Indonesia of arms from China, for instance, would raise alarm.

There is the further issue that China does not accept the rationale for the U.S. forward military presence in Asia. It explicitly calls for the abrogation of all alliances, arguing that they are not conducive to peace and security in the

post–Cold War world; Chinese officials have openly called for the removal of U.S. forces from the region. Before his visit to Australia last year, President Jiang Zemin proclaimed that alliances were “obsolete.” However, China must accept that the United States is not going to withdraw from Asia and that America’s alliances are not going to disappear. China needs to understand that Asia without the United States would be an especially dangerous place, vulnerable to conflict between China and Japan.

As China’s influence in Asia grows, India—which wants to be accepted as a major power—will seek to compete with China. Until recently, India’s poor economic performance, its preoccupation with Pakistan, and earlier its alliance with the former Soviet Union served to limit its interest elsewhere in Asia. But the Indian economy now seems set on a path of reform and is growing strongly.



INDONESIA

The military balance on the subcontinent now firmly favors India, and with each year that passes its superior economic performance will improve its military advantage. India, therefore, will be able to lift its strategic horizons. Southeast Asia is a natural area for its future focus; India has

long-established ties to that region and has territories, including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, in close proximity. Already India is seeking to strengthen its old relationship with Vietnam, as well as with Japan. The United States could become a useful partner for India in its upcoming competition with China.

Japan is by far the most important power economically in Asia; its economy accounts for 60 percent of Asia’s gross national products. Nonetheless, China—whose economy is less than a fifth the size of that of Japan—has a higher political profile in the region. Japan spends more on defense than any other Asian country, and it has the most modern navy (both surface combatants and submarines) and air force in the Asia-Pacific. Japan, however, continues to be unwilling to use its military forces except in the most modest of United Nations peacekeeping operations. Japan’s resulting inability to provide leadership in Asia commensurate with its economic power is a worry. Partly, this has to do with lingering memories of Japan’s aggression in the Second World War. It also stems from Japan’s preoccupation with its domestic problems; its economy has been virtually stagnant for a decade. Moreover, as was demonstrated during the Asian economic crisis three years ago, the United States is not willing to allow Japan to become the financial leader in the region. Still, it is important that Japan take on more of a leadership role in order to offset the growth in China’s influence. When it does, Japan will face a challenging strategic environment,

marked by the rise of China's power and by the prospect of a unified Korea—over seventy million people who see Japan as a traditional enemy.

The most crucial strategic relationship in the region will continue to be the alliance between the United States and Japan. This relationship has recently been reaffirmed and reinterpreted to provide for greater logistical support to U.S. forces operating in the area. It remains to be seen, however, whether in fact Japan would support American military operations on the Korean Peninsula or across the Taiwan Straits. For the rest of the region, including China, the United States–Japan alliance provides an essential assurance that Japan will not dangerously rearm. Japan could double its conventional military forces within five years, or produce nuclear weapons. Neither will occur as long as Japan continues to have confidence in the United States and in its military presence in Northeast Asia. Even so, there are already signs that for the first time in over fifty years Japan is beginning to develop its own strategic concepts and dedicated force-structure elements, such as military satellites and a defense intelligence organization. The Japanese are also beginning to worry about the durability of the U.S. commitment in Northeast Asia and about America's tendency to go over Japan's head in dealing with China. What must be prevented at all costs is an erosion of Japan's confidence in the United States and a consequent military confrontation (or strategic accommodation) between Japan and China.

Russia, which is the other major power, is unlikely to be a significant player in Asia for the foreseeable future, even though it possesses important military assets in Northeast Asia. It will remain preoccupied with its internal political and economic affairs and the situation along its borders, especially in Siberia and the former Soviet Central Asian republics. Russia's ability to supply advanced conventional weapons to China and India is, however, a matter of concern. Arms exports are one of the few competitive products of the ailing Russian economy. Russia has the capacity to upset the regional military balance, and it is already doing this through its arms shipments to China.

POTENTIAL FLASHPOINTS AND TROUBLESPOTS

The most dangerous part of Asia at present is, as we have noted, the Taiwan Straits. There seems to be in the domestic politics of Taiwan an inevitable dynamic that leads the island to assert its international status as an independent state and to challenge the "one China policy." The situation is exacerbated by growing tensions between the United States and China over this issue, as well as by unease in Washington over China's nuclear weapons program, and in Beijing over the U.S. desire to deploy national and theater ballistic missile defenses. Dispute over these issues brings with it real risks of miscalculation. China lacks the conventional military capability to mount an amphibious invasion of Taiwan,

and this will remain the case for at least the next five years.³ But there are other options open to China, including a naval blockade and the use of ballistic missiles. War across the Taiwan Straits would inevitably bring in the United States, and then (as already mentioned) involve enormously difficult choices for U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific region—hence the strong desire by those allies to see the current tensions between China and the United States over Taiwan resolved by peaceful means.

The situation on the Korean Peninsula remains fraught with danger, as it has been for almost fifty years. The possibility of a North Korean attack is ever-present, despite the recent lessening of tensions. Even so, the outbreak of war is unlikely. Unlike in the early 1950s, North Korea could not now count on military support from China and Russia; it would face the bleak prospect of total defeat by the United States and South Korea. Still, miscalculation by the North Korean regime cannot be discounted, nor can a sudden collapse of the North,

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which would present the South with the horrendous costs of creating a unified nation.⁴ The most likely scenario for the next five years is a continuation of a man-

ageable degree of tension. Developments in relations between the two states since June 2000 suggest that there may now be some prospect of direct peace negotiations between them. Should war break out, however, the United States would naturally expect its allies quickly to provide tangible and useful military contributions. If Japan were to refuse to do so, it would put at risk its relationship with the United States.

India and Pakistan have been in confrontation with each other since their creation as separate states in 1947. The possession of nuclear weapons by both these countries and their development of ballistic missiles have produced a dangerous situation. Their religious and territorial differences, as well as the fact that the military balance between them is moving in favor of India, may result in a highly volatile scenario in which the use of nuclear weapons is a real possibility. There is a serious lack of early-warning technologies and of nuclear weapon command and control arrangements in both countries. If the world ever experiences exchanges of nuclear weapons, the first may well be between India and Pakistan.

In Southeast Asia, the most crucial question is the future of Indonesia. Indonesia is in the middle of a dangerous political transition; the central issue is whether Indonesia will remain a cohesive nation-state or disintegrate. There is a better than even chance that Indonesia will muddle through and retain its basic territorial integrity, although the provinces of Aceh and Irian Jaya (West Papua) are high-risk regions. Were Indonesia to disintegrate, the implications

for neighboring countries—especially Singapore and Malaysia, as well as Papua New Guinea and Australia—would be serious. These nations would be faced with an unstable and violent neighbor. Relations between Indonesia and Australia have already become strained over the East Timor issue; friction between the two is now higher than it has been for many decades. There are those at senior levels in the Indonesian armed forces (the TNI) and foreign ministry who believe that Australia's next step will be to destabilize West Papua.⁵

The most optimistic scenario leads over the next two to three years to a stable, democratically elected central government in Jakarta. But transition from an authoritarian military regime to democracy is always dangerous. The Indonesian defense minister, Juwono Sudarsono, has said that the shift will be gradual, that it could take ten to fifteen years.⁶ There is no doubt that the creation of a rules-based civil society will take a very considerable amount of time. Those in the United States who want to push Indonesia quickly in this direction need to learn more patience.

The reaction from the TNI to any attempt at creating independent states in Aceh or Irian Jaya would be intense and might well put an end to democracy in Indonesia. The focus of the external powers, as well as of such major international institutions as the International Monetary Fund, must be on helping Indonesia to recover economically and build a democratic society. This will be no easy task. As a 1998 World Bank report commented, "Indonesia is in a deep crisis. No country in recent history, let alone one the size of Indonesia, has ever suffered such a dramatic reversal of fortune."⁷ The Indonesian economy remains very vulnerable to another economic crisis, just when the political situation in Jakarta has become so volatile. A combination of religious fervor and strident nationalism in a failed Indonesian democracy would be of great concern to Indonesia's neighbors, especially if aggressive foreign policies were the outcome. A more extreme Islamic stance in Indonesia, when similar sentiments are emerging in Malaysia and the southern Philippines, would be deeply disturbing. A unified, secular, and democratic Indonesia is in the region's interest.

Another dangerous part of Southeast Asia is the South China Sea, where there are overlapping territorial claims between China (which claims all the islands and reefs), Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Indonesia. The United States is not a principal party to these territorial disputes, but it must make it clear to China that it will not tolerate Chinese territorial hegemony over the South China Sea. Regular demonstrations of the naval capabilities of the United States and its allies would be useful reminders to China that its proper course of action is negotiation with the countries of Southeast Asia.

The South Pacific has traditionally been the most stable part of the Asia-Pacific region, but it now comprises a number of failed states. Papua New

Guinea, which shares a common border with Indonesia, has a fragile economy, high levels of corruption and violence, and an active secessionist movement on Bougainville. If Bougainville secedes, New Britain, New Ireland, and regions adjoining Indonesian Irian Jaya may also separate. The peoples of Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya share a Melanesian origin and a dislike of Indonesia. In the event of conflict between Indonesia and its Irian Jaya province, the Papua New Guineans—who have a security treaty with Australia—would side with their Melanesian brothers.

Several of the other South Pacific islands are scarcely viable economically and have regimes noted for corruption. In the Solomon Islands there is an active insurrection between the peoples of Guadalcanal and Malaita, which has led to the overthrow of the elected government. Fiji has experienced its third coup since 1987, and ethnic tension between the indigenous Fijians and the Indian community has resulted in widespread violence and disenfranchisement of the Indians; George Speight's coup was no more than the act of an armed thug. Harsh diplomatic and economic sanctions have been applied by Australia and New Zealand.

New Zealand, which is Australia's oldest ally, is no longer a member of the ANZUS alliance and has so reduced its defense capabilities that it is capable of little more than peacekeeping operations. As a result, Australia, which confronts an arc of instability stretching from Indonesia and Papua New Guinea to the Solomon Islands and Fiji, will increasingly see New Zealand as more of a liability than a useful defense partner.

UNCERTAIN U.S. POLICIES

American political power and military presence is the key to maintaining a peaceful balance of power in Asia over the next five years.⁸ Only the United States has the power, credibility, and distance (both geographical and cultural) from the region to maintain the regional balance. Other contenders for this role would not be acceptable locally: China is feared as a potentially dominant—and perhaps expansionist—power; great suspicion still surrounds any ambitions for regional leadership that Japan might have; India is seen as essentially peripheral to East Asian affairs; and Russia is a weak and distracted power.

U.S. credibility is based not only on its military presence but also on its long historical ties to the region, extending back a hundred years. Most countries in the region, apart from China, agree that the departure of the United States would leave the region open to fierce contention between China and Japan or India, possibly leading to war. But the United States is distracted these days by domestic events and Europe. It is also much more severely stretched than in earlier decades; it must react to crises across the globe with a military little more than half the size it was in the Cold War.

For that reason, there must now be some doubt whether the United States can fulfil its much-vaunted East Asian strategy, based on a capacity to handle two regional conflicts “almost simultaneously.”⁹ Inability by the United States to cope with a major crisis in, for example, the Korean Peninsula at the same time as it was fighting a regional adversary elsewhere, perhaps in the Middle East, would be disastrous for its alliance system. The United States is the only nation with the power to enforce security across the region. No reasonable ally, however, can expect Washington to be a perfect arbiter and enforcer of security, and indeed, there is a growing perception that the United States tends to carry out its military duties only after armed conflict has broken out.

This uncertainty over the speed of a U.S. response has consequences for countries in Asia that expect the United States to maintain regional peace and security. Many in Asia believe that the United States will not necessarily be on the spot (except in Korea) at the moment when conflict breaks out. It may—depending on the degree of strategic interest and the nature of domestic reaction—turn up quickly, and it might ultimately restore the status quo ante, but this will be of little comfort for nations whose territory has been threatened in the meantime. Moreover, the manner in which the United States intervenes will be strongly shaped by domestic considerations: it will seek to respond to an armed conflict in the most domestically acceptable way—in other words, with airpower. But in some of the more likely regional scenarios, ground forces would be essential.

Strategic inconsistency was evident in the U.S. response to the Asian economic crisis. Asia’s multilateral institutions—APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), ASEAN, and the ASEAN Regional Forum—failed to play any role in addressing the crisis, underscoring how heavily regional economic and strategic stability relies on the policies and initiatives of the United States. This means that Asia’s welfare depends critically on the depth of strategic understanding in Washington. But it appears that U.S. policy makers still weigh strategic significance in Cold War terms: South Korea received quick and substantial economic assistance, because it faced a communist North armed with nuclear weapons; Indonesia did not, because, the Cold War being over, the world’s fourth-largest country is no longer important to the United States as a bastion against communism in Southeast Asia. Instead, Washington let the IMF impose dangerously destabilizing measures on Jakarta. Apparently, human rights rather than geopolitics dominate the United States–Indonesia relationship today. While human rights have an undeniably important place in international diplomacy, they should not dominate relations with an Indonesia struggling to maintain its social and political cohesion. For the sake of the stability of the

whole of Southeast Asia, the United States needs to focus more on the critical importance of Indonesian unity and cohesion.

The United States does not appear to have developed a new standard by which to measure the strategic significance of countries such as Indonesia. A decade after the end of the Cold War, it is time for Washington to develop a more refined process for deciding the policy response to crises in Asia—some of which will determine the future of the region. Washington should cease allocating economic and political support on the basis of Cold War strategic values and devise new tenets for its strategic engagement policy in Asia.

There is also growing unease in the region about America's longer-term commitment to keeping about a hundred thousand troops deployed in North-east Asia, which has been the position of U.S. administrations for the last decade. Adding to the sense of uncertainty is open discussion in the United States about how emerging military technologies, particularly in long-range precision strike, could lessen the need for forward operating bases. The total number of U.S. troops in South Korea and Japan and at sea with the Seventh Fleet is in any case now much closer to ninety thousand; the figure of a hundred thousand is becoming increasingly less credible. Thought also needs to be given to the im-

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impact on the American presence of a future unified Korea, both in Korea itself and in Japan. This is not to argue that there are no imaginable political circum-

stances in which there could be a phased reduction of American forces in North-east Asia. But the implications for confidence within the region of a sudden and large-scale reduction suggest that any drawdown would need to be planned in advance, in consultation with allies.

There is no unifying enemy like the Soviet Union to keep the United States and its European allies together, yet the Nato alliance has adjusted, by rejuvenating its charter and expanding its membership. Will the United States and its allies in the Asia-Pacific region similarly devise a new common security concept? Or will there be a gradual weakening of the bilateral alliances with Australia, Japan, and South Korea? The alliance in the Asia-Pacific should no longer be threat based but rather should emphasize shared interests in the maintenance of regional stability.¹⁰

There seems to be growing interest in the United States in multilateral security. Admiral Dennis C. Blair, the commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, has promoted the concept of "security communities." The idea here is to encourage "collective efforts into resolving regional points of friction; contribute armed forces and other aid to peacekeeping and humanitarian operations to

support diplomatic solutions; and plan, train, and exercise . . . armed forces together for these operations.”¹¹ According to Admiral Blair, these security communities may be alliance-treaty signatories, participants in nonmilitary organizations like the ASEAN Regional Forum, or simply groups of nations joined by geographic considerations or common concerns. The communities would be committed to policy coordination—including combined military cooperation on specific regional security issues—to advance peaceful development over time without major conflict.¹² The problem with this idea is that it risks diluting the primacy of strong bilateral security alliances in the region, and that it may be seen as being aimed, eventually, at the creation of a multilateral security enterprise in Asia.

Asia has not had a good track record with multilateralism. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, which was created in 1954 and dissolved in 1977, was not an effective organization. Unlike Nato, it never had standing forces that could be committed in the event of conflict. The ASEAN Regional Forum started off in the early 1990s with much fanfare and with the aim of progressing steadily from military confidence-building measures to preventive diplomacy and, eventually, conflict resolution. But in the eight years of its existence it has not progressed much beyond discussing basic confidence-building measures.¹³ Many of the military forces in Asia are highly secretive, declining to publish even the most basic information about their capabilities. They resist arms-control ideas and transparency measures, even those of kinds common in Europe. It is difficult therefore to be optimistic about the outlook for multilateral security cooperation in Asia. American ideas in this regard need to be better thought through, and they need to avoid any appearance of being aimed at containing China.

GUIDELINES FOR U.S. POLICY MAKERS

Strategic developments in Asia are not likely to pose fundamental challenges to American military power and influence over the next five years, as long as the United States retains a credible forward military presence and is not found wanting in a major military crisis involving its allies. However, the United States and its allies need to do more together, given the unpredictability of the strategic situation in Asia and the speed with which adverse events could unfold.

There is no doubt about the fundamental economic strength of the United States and its allies in the region, or of the military superiority of the U.S. alliance system. The concern is the cohesion of America’s alliances in an era when there is no common threat but doubts exist about the political will of leaders to use force if confronted with military adventurism in Asia. Any perception of wavering or ambiguity in the U.S. military commitment to the region could lead to rapid destabilization. America’s allies need to do much more to provide for their

own security, to develop military forces that can deal with crises in their immediate neighborhoods and that can also make useful contributions to U.S. operations farther afield.

With these guidelines in mind, let us proceed to some specific policy recommendations. First, United States security planners and their allied opposite numbers need to *prepare for less benign strategic futures* in Asia, not relying on comfortable predictions that the region will experience prolonged stability and peace. These alternative futures obviously embrace such scenarios as war between the United States and China over the Taiwan Straits, and conflict on the Korean Peninsula. But planners should also examine what the United States should do in the event of nuclear war between India and Pakistan; of Chinese use of military force in the South China Sea against a friendly ASEAN country; and of the emergence in Indonesia of a strongly nationalist regime that antagonizes its neighbors.

There is a clear implication here for *allied intelligence services*: the size of the task in the Asia-Pacific region suggests more (rather than less) in the way of intelligence cooperation. But the sheer outpouring of data from overhead collection systems threatens to overwhelm our analytical capabilities. Allies need to do more about training good minds who are expert on Asia and who are not afraid of challenging conventional intelligence wisdoms.

From a defense planning perspective, it is important to understand that in the Asia-Pacific region potential military operations *will be essentially maritime* in nature. Apart from the Korean Peninsula, U.S. military forces are not likely to be involved in large-scale ground-force operations. The dominant geopolitical change in the new security environment has been the virtual elimination for military

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planning purposes of allied continental commitments; the emerging struggle for power in Asia will focus on political fault lines that are maritime rather than continental in aspect. The development of China's military power and the response to

it of India and Japan are likely to put pressure on the chain of America's friends and allies in the long littoral extending between South Korea and Taiwan in the north to the ASEAN countries and Australia in the south.

The new *technological challenge* in this maritime environment is the growing threat from high-speed, precise cruise missiles—both air and sea launched—and long-range ballistic missiles that can threaten fixed forward operating bases.¹⁴ These technological changes mean that the U.S. and allied forces operating in the complex littoral and archipelagic waters of the region will be more vulnerable than they have been; maritime battlefields in the

Asia-Pacific will become more lethal. For America's allies who want to operate in joint task forces, there will be force-structure implications in the cost of platforms, like air-warfare-capable destroyers, that can operate in high-threat environments.

While no peer competitor to the United States will emerge over the next five years, the *political challenge* is that alliance relationships in the Asia-Pacific region will be less predictable, and less committed to allied war-fighting, than they were in the Cold War. America's key allies in the region (Japan, South Korea, and Australia) would be most reluctant, for example, to commit forces in a U.S.-led coalition war with China over Taiwan. Also, America's aversion to casualties suggests that the United States will be most unlikely to commit forces on the ground in Southeast Asia—as was demonstrated in East Timor.

The United States will continue to hold the balance of power in Asia over the next five years, but its policies will come under increasing scrutiny by its friends and others. It is important in this context *that American policy not demonize China* as the next “evil empire.” Neither Japan, South Korea, nor Australia would be willing parties to such an ill considered approach. Of course, America's allies must make it clear to China which side they are on and that they will not tolerate Chinese interference in alliance relationships. However, the United States needs to develop much more thoughtful policies toward China, including in such areas as ballistic missile defense.¹⁵

The commitment of the United States to forward basing in Northeast Asia and to the maintenance of a nominal hundred thousand troops needs careful handling over the next five years. The new administration will most likely review the question of U.S. forces based overseas. At least until the Korean question is settled, *it would be unwise to announce any hasty withdrawals*. Care also needs to be taken following any U.S. withdrawal from South Korea with any subsequent effects on the American military presence in Japan and on inclinations in Tokyo to build up its own capabilities. While Japan should be encouraged to improve its defense forces over the coming years in order to become a more useful security partner of the United States, this should be done gradually and with due regard for the sensitivities of other countries in the region.¹⁶

Given the greatly reduced size of the U.S. Pacific Fleet since the end of the Cold War, and the much broader range of potential contingencies in which it could be involved, the *United States should expect more of its allies*. Japan and Australia in particular could significantly supplement the Pacific Fleet's surface ships, submarines, and maritime patrol aircraft.¹⁷ While these platforms will not generally be of the same combat capability as those of the United States, they should be adequate for littoral operations in mid-intensity

conflicts. Some, like the conventional submarines of Japan and Australia, have operational advantages not possessed by those of the United States.

In general, the United States needs to develop *more coherence and predictability* in its Asia-Pacific security strategy. This applies especially to its policies toward China, as mentioned, but the United States also needs to give greater attention to Southeast Asia and, especially, Indonesia. The central importance of Southeast Asia to the maritime trade of the entire Asia-Pacific, the fact that the ten ASEAN countries have a combined population of over 500 million, and the key role of Indonesia all point to the need for Washington to give greater attention to this part of the world. For instance, Australia cannot be left essentially on its own, with only episodic U.S. interest and involvement, to help Indonesia emerge from its current acute political and economic difficulties.¹⁸ As we have seen, the future of that country will profoundly affect peace and stability in Southeast Asia. Its potential to interfere with freedom of passage in the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits should be a matter of concern to defense planners in the United States as well as Australia.

Finally, the United States needs to take *great care in developing multilateral security ideas*, such as “security communities.” While the intention may be to prepare for peacekeeping and humanitarian relief operations, there is a growing unease that well tried bilateral alliances will be eroded in the process. There is already a view in the region that America’s key alliances are nowhere near as important to it as they were in the Cold War, that vital American national security interests are no longer clearly defined, and that Washington involves itself unpredictably in some overseas episodes and not in others. In these circumstances, there is a risk that the alliance framework in the Asia-Pacific will begin to fray.

In light of the uncertain strategic future facing the region outlined in this article, the United States and its allies need to do more together to shape the regional security environment to their advantage. With better coordination they are well placed to do so—but they need to develop habits of franker strategic dialogue about contentious issues. The United States should listen more carefully to its allies and friends who are in the region and who well understand the nuances of strategic developments there.

NOTES

1. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, China’s economy is about the same size as that of Canada.
2. David Shambaugh, “Sino-American Strategic Relations: From Partners to Competitors,” *Survival*, Spring 2000, pp. 97–115.
3. For a somewhat contrasting view, see Jianxiang Bi, “Managing Taiwan Operations

- in the Twenty-first Century: Issues and Options,” *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 1999, pp. 30–58. Dr. Bi agrees that Chinese capabilities for a cross-Strait assault are inadequate but senses that Beijing might feel itself obliged to make the attempt notwithstanding.
4. One estimate puts the cost to South Korea of reunification at one-third of its annual budget over a decade or more.
 5. Indonesia’s foreign minister, Alwi Shihab, is quoted as saying that “Indonesia’s foreign policy places Australia as an external factor that endangers its national integrity, especially in Papua.” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 2000, p. 11.
 6. Associated Press, 11 April 2000.
 7. *Indonesia in Crisis: A Macroeconomic Update* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1998), p. 1.
 8. This section draws on Paul Dibb, “The Strategic Environment in the Asia-Pacific Region,” in *America’s Asian Alliances*, ed. Robert D. Blackwill and Paul Dibb (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 1–17.
 9. This is defined as the ability “to deter and defeat nearly simultaneous large-scale, cross-border aggression in two distant theaters in overlapping time frames, preferably in concert with regional allies.” William S. Cohen, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2000), p. 7.
 10. See Paul Dibb, *Will America’s Alliances in the Asia-Pacific Region Endure?* Working Paper no. 345 (Canberra: Strategic and Defense Studies Centre, May 2000).
 11. See House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, statement of Admiral Dennis C. Blair, U.S. Navy, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, *On U.S. Security Concerns in Asia*, Washington, D.C., 8 March 2000, p. 12.
 12. Ibid.
 13. For a balanced discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the ASEAN Regional Forum, see Khoo How San, ed., *The Future of the ARF* (Singapore: Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, 1999).
 14. See *Mobile Targets from under the Sea*, MIT Security Studies Conference Series (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Security Studies Program, 2000), pp. 6–16.
 15. For a comprehensive discussion of this topic see Zalmay M. Khalilzad et al., *The United States and a Rising China* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1999).
 16. See Robert D. Blackwill, “An Action Agenda to Strengthen America’s Alliances in the Asia-Pacific Region,” in Blackwill and Dibb, eds., p. 130.
 17. Between them, Japan and Australia have twenty-two submarines (the U.S. Pacific Fleet [PACFLT] has thirty nuclear attack submarines); sixty-six destroyers and frigates (PACFLT has fifty-three major surface combatants); and 109 P-3 maritime patrol aircraft (PACFLT has seventy-seven). International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1999–2000* (London: Oxford Univ. Press for the IISS, 1999).
 18. Blackwill, p. 123.