

POST COLD WAR U.S. POLICY TOWARD ASIA

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INTRODUCTION

There is an ongoing debate among American scholars and politicians on the United States foreign policy and its changing role in East Asia. This debate is the result of several factors; The end of the cold war and the associated dramatic changes in international relations in East Asia, the instability associated with the shifting balance of power in the world and Asia, international and U.S. domestic economic developments, the rapid growth of China as both an economic and a military power, and the relative decline of the United States. This debate is also taking place within a domestic political context in the U.S. associated with the upcoming presidential election, and more generally a growing conservative movement in American society.

The end of the Cold War undermined the rationale for U.S. foreign policy that had lasted nearly five decades. There are four factors that have contributed to the erosion of the Cold War consensus on U.S. foreign policy. Two factors are international in scope. First, the end of the Cold War, dramatized by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, changed the entire international context within which debates over foreign policy take place. This gave rise to a second factor: from an international perspective, it is now much more difficult to justify the active involvement of the U.S. around the world in places that many Americans do not consider vital to America's national interests.

The two domestic factors concern economic issues and ideological questions. The serious federal budget deficit makes it increasingly hard for national leaders to rationalize a large defense budget, the deployment of U.S. troops abroad, and foreign aid. The budget deficit is also linked to the U.S. foreign trade deficit. This is particularly important for U.S. East Asia policy because of the large and persistent trade deficits with Japan and China. The second domestic factor is the growing strength of the conservative movement in the U.S. Cultural nationalism is growing and this has resulted in wide spread support for more conservative economic and foreign policies. All of these factors have resulted in calls to reexamine the fundamental orientation of U.S. foreign policy and has led

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to a debate among international relations scholars and within policy making circles in the U.S.

In the discussion that follows, I will outline the four basic options that stem from contending perspectives on U.S. policy toward East Asia. The four options can be summarized as: contain a rising hegemony, transform Asia in America's own image, return to isolationism and protectionism, or pursue multi-lateral engagement. The contending perspectives and associated options are deeply rooted in America's strategic culture and therefore are reminiscent of earlier perspectives, but also new ones that have emerged as a result of post cold war changes in East Asia.

After first outlining the various perspectives and policy options, I will offer a critique of each. I will conclude by arguing that the age of bilateralism is coming to an end and it is necessary for the United States to adjust its outmoded cold war perspective and assumptions upon which its policy was based since World War II. Realism and the promotion of American ideals are not incompatible but can both be pursued through what is being called a policy of "comprehensive engagement"? This policy is not founded on idealism, but rooted firmly in realism and self-interest. The United States is militarily and economically strong enough that it does not have to overreact to the ongoing post cold war power shift in East Asia.

CONTAIN A RISING HEGEMON

The first option advocated is based on the perspective of realism. The collapse of the Soviet Empire and the relative decline of the United States have left a power vacuum in East Asia that will inevitably be filled by an emerging power. The geographic size, large population, abundant resource endowment, and its dynamic economic and military development make China a potential superpower and contender for hegemonic leadership in East Asia. Those who support a policy of containing a rising hegemony focus on China's political culture and anti-democratic politics and conclude that China has the potential to become a menacing hegemony. From a historical perspective these realists also argue that China naturally has ambitions to regain its position at the center of a new Sino centric world order.

This realist perspective calls for the U.S. as the remaining superpower, to counterbalance China, the greatest regional strategic threat in East Asia. From this perspective, containing China should take precedence over economic issues such as market reform and political concerns such as human rights. This

policy also calls for containing a “totalitarian Communist China” while at the same time making concerted efforts to prod China forward on issues such as economic liberalization and political reform so that over time China may be transformed into a liberal democratic society and not a menacing hegemonic power. In East Asia, North Korea is the only other country that fits a similar ideological profile as China, but in geostrategic terms North Korea is much less threatening and can be safely isolated. But China, as a major regional power requires a much more proactive policy for both containing it as a potential hegemony and over the long-term fostering social-political transformation.

Critique

This option of adopting a policy designed to contain a rising hegemony is premised upon the assumption that China does have superpower potential and hegemonic ambitions. However, this is not a foregone conclusion. Although China has adopted a confrontational approach over some issues such as Taiwan and to a degree in the South China Sea, China has actively participated in multilateral dialogue; arms control regimes, and regional for. China also played a positive role in setting the Cambodian conflict and in helping to achieve the nuclear framework agreement with North Korea. Its is pushing ahead in its efforts to open to the outside world and carry out economic reform.

A policy of containment would be diplomatically costly for the United States. The U.S. would be alone in its efforts to contain China because none of America’s Asian allies support a policy of containment. Popular opinion in America generally opposes the initiation of a “new cold war” and would not like to see the U.S. neglect the issue of human rights and other liberal ideals simply for the sake of pursuing a narrowly defined military security policy. Opposition within the U.S. to a containment policy is in part due to the enormous military costs of such a policy and also because it risks provoking new military conflicts when there is no clear perception of a threat to American national interests. American economic and commercial interests would also be severely hampered at a time when Americans are clearly aware that the internationalization of the American economy makes it necessary for the U.S. to be economically competitive on a global scale.

TRANSFORMASIA IN AMERICA’S IMAGE

The second option seeks to transform Asia in America’s own image. This policy option is deeply rooted in the perspective of American liberal idealism.

The United States has a great messianic tradition in foreign policy that is inspired by this perspective. Proponents of this policy option argue that the U.S. should actively engage in promoting the American model of democracy around the world in order to some day realize a global “democratic peace.” Advocates of this perspective believe that the post cold war world is much less menacing and argue that U.S. foreign policy should focus more attention on encouraging economic liberalization and political reform in areas such as human rights and this should take precedence over narrower military security concerns. The U.S. should use its economic leverage and political power to prod East Asian countries such as North Korea to initiate reform policies and use the same leverage to encourage other East Asian countries such as China and Vietnam to continue and even broaden their economic and political reform programs.

Critique

This policy option has both American and Asian critics. The rise of post-cold war nationalism in Asia also makes this option problematic. In opposition to United States messianic interventionism, some East Asian states have argued that for historical and cultural reasons, “Western” democratic norms are not suited to Asian states. They argue that “Asian ethics” provide the foundation for “neo-authoritarian” political structures that are better suited to East Asian political culture and economic development.

An interventionist policy designed to transform Asia in America’s own image still resonates among Americans generally, but when the political and economic costs are calculated, is a less attractive option. Americans are unwilling to use limited financial resources or risk American lives to promote a messianic mission of Americanization. Furthermore, some American intellectuals are sympathetic to the Four Asian Dragons’ political and economic development model. In recent years also there is rising criticism of liberal free-trade ideology and growing support for a national industrial policy among American scholars and within policy circles.

RETURN TO ISOLATIONISM AND PROTECTIONISM

The third option supports political isolationism and economic protectionism. This option is an echo of the past with deep historical roots in American political culture. Proponents of this option conclude that the costs of engagement advocated by interventionists are too high and the benefits are minimum. And in any case, from their perspective the post cold war world is much less

threatening than assumed by realists. Therefore, strategically, the U.S. should limit its military involvement to the defense of the homeland and dramatically scale down its overextended military commitments. The U.S. should shift its efforts to the revitalization of its own economy and only use political and economic leverage to protect its own economy, not as a tool to reform other states. In extreme cases, the U.S. should simply refuse to deal with dictatorial regimes or use issues such as human rights to justify protectionism. Involvement and support for international organizations should be minimal because in any case such organizations are politically hostile to the U.S. and National interests can be better protected through bilateral relations.

Critique

In the post cold war world, a return to isolationism is nearly impossible, and in any case not in the United States long-term national interests. The growing economic interdependence of the global economy and the necessity of multilateral cooperation on development and environmental concerns makes isolationism too costly. Historically, a period of American isolationism was followed by a period of very costly trade wars and military conflict making it impossible for the U.S. to stand idly by. The role the U.S. assumed in working to end the military conflict in Bosnia, the necessity for American leadership on issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, and the crucial leadership of the U.S. in international monetary and trade issues all demonstrate that the United States must continue to assume global leadership for the foreseeable future.

MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENT

The fourth policy option calls for multilateral engagement. This option is based on the perspective that believes the post cold war world is moving toward multiplicity and complexity. Advocates of this policy conclude that the more realistic alternative to isolationism is multilateral engagement. This option is also referred to by many as cooperative multilateralism or comprehensive engagement. It calls for the U.S. to actively participate with all East Asian states in fostering the post cold war “new order” in Asia. In the long-term, multilateralism promotes international integration and domestic economic and political liberalization through diplomacy and dialogue.

Supporters of this option argue that the shift in the relative balance of power due to the dramatic economic and military rise of East Asian powers necessitates this type of cooperation. Organizations such as Asia Pacific Eco-

nomic Cooperation (APEC) and Asian Regional Forum (ARE) should all be actively supported as multilateral organizations that can provide the foundation upon which new post cold war economic and security structures in East Asia can be developed. Programs such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Tumen River project should be actively supported. Ideals such as human rights can still be addressed, but done more effectively through an organization like the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

Critique

From the realist perspective that advocates a containment policy, multilateral engagement is not a practical policy. Realists argue that given the diversity of East Asia, multilateral organizations are unlikely to be successful and American national interests can be realized through bilateralism, especially with Japan, the United States' major military ally and economic partner in the region. Conservative realists believe that "engagement" is "soft" and not a sufficiently vigilant policy appropriate for a post cold war world that remains unstable and menacing as demonstrated by North Korea's efforts to develop a nuclear capability or China's resent flexing of it military muscle across the Taiwan Straits and in the South China Sea. Isolationists oppose multilateral engagement because they believe it is not only financially expensive, but also ineffective.

CONCLUSIONS

The policy options outlined above range from a proactive policy to contain China on one hand to multilateral engagement in East Asia on the other. And from a retreat to isolationism at one extreme to a proactive foreign policy in an effort to promote the American model of democracy at the other extreme. The advocates of the polar positions of isolationism or containment are not satisfied by a policy of multilateral engagement or efforts to transform Asian countries in America's own image.

However, I maintain that from a realist perspective, multilateral engagement is the best option. The forces of internationalization in Asia make U.S. engagement necessary. I also believe that the rise in post cold war nationalism, especially in China, means that an interventionist foreign policy in efforts to transform Asia according to the American model will only provoke a strong anti-American reaction. I believe that for both domestic economic reasons and taking into consideration international economic and political factors, the U.S. must be actively engaged in and even lead, multilateral cooperation in East Asia.

Furthermore, multilateral engagement will, in the long run, accomplish the U.S. objective of the peaceful transformation of Asia into a zone of economic prosperity and democratic peace.

As the most dynamic economic region in the world, the U.S. cannot afford to ignore the Asia-Pacific region. Also, despite the end of the cold war in Europe, many aspects of the cold war linger in East Asia. No clear security structure has been developed and the potential for conflict in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia still is a major concern. The potential for conflict associated with the continued division of Korea, relations across the Taiwan Straits and territorial disputes in the South China Sea are all issues important to American national security and national interests. Despite this, the nature of international relations in East Asia has changed and even the U.S.-Japan alliance, as the cornerstone to U.S. East Asia policy, is being called into question by both Japanese and Americans.

Multilateral engagement also requires East Asian states to forsake outmoded views of national sovereignty and move beyond the rhetoric of multilateralism and actually engage in practical economic and military cooperation, such as joint development of disputed territory in the South China Sea, the Tureen River development project, North and South Korean dialogue, expanded and direct cross-Straits exchanges between mainland China and Taiwan, and a region-wide security dialogue along the lines of the Northeast Asia Regional Security Dialogue to promote confidence-building measures and greater transparency in strategic planning.

The United States does have a role to play in all of these economic and security issues and therefore cannot retreat into isolationism, continue with outmoded bilateralism, overreact by adopting a policy of containment, or pursue an overbearing American messianic policy of interventionism. Multilateral engagement is not easy and there will be setbacks, but it is certainly in the fundamental interests of the United States and the East Asian states who all share the same common interest: long-term peace and prosperity.