

President Bush in Asia

By John Gershman | October 17, 2003

President George W. Bush's trip to Asia offers an opportunity to reflect on how U.S. policy toward Asia is changing. His trip will bring him to Japan, the Philippines, Australia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Bangkok for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit.

What a Difference a Decade Makes

Most notable, perhaps, is APEC's transformation. Founded by dozen countries in 1989, it has developed into a forum of twenty-one countries that addresses economic issues in the Asia-Pacific region. This diverse group includes the U.S., Canada, China, Taiwan (officially Chinese Taipei), Hong Kong, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, South Korea, Papua New Guinea, Mexico, Chile, Peru, Russia, and Vietnam.

Until 1993, APEC was a relatively quiet forum of ministers, but in that year, with the negotiations to complete the Uruguay Round floundering, President Bill Clinton invited all the heads of state of APEC's member countries to Washington and inaugurated what became the first annual summit, held right after APEC's Ministerial Meeting.

An ambitious vision of regional trade and investment integration was first raised at the 1993 meeting. The Bogor Declaration, adopted in 1994, proclaimed the elimination of all trade and investment barriers by 2010 for APEC's wealthiest countries and by 2020 for its poorest ones. Subsequent meetings led to a refinement of these goals in terms of individual and collective action plans with the actual liberalization commitments.

Subsequent efforts at pursuing liberalization floundered primarily due to opposition from Japan, and some covert resistance from some Southeast Asian countries. Since 1998, liberalization has been on a back burner. The annual meetings since then have been dominated either by regional political events (the Asian crisis in 1998 in Kuala Lumpur and East

Timor at the 1999 meeting in Auckland, terrorism in 2001) or more technical issues of economic cooperation. This year's meeting, while noting the various technical activities of APEC and calling for progress in the global trade negotiations at the WTO, will also have a heavy focus on economic-related anti-terrorist measures including airline and container security.

During the Clinton administration, the U.S. used APEC meetings as part of an effort to strengthen momentum for new initiatives under the World Trade Organization. While there will likely be some diplomatic genuflections in this area, the main U.S. push on economics will be in bilateral meetings with Japan and China, pressuring both countries to strengthen their currencies vis à vis the dollar.

More recent developments, such as the expansion of U.S. efforts to negotiate bilateral and regional trade and investment agreements (including with Singapore and Australia), as well as various regional efforts (including an acceleration of the ASEAN Free Trade while China and India are both negotiating separately with ASEAN) have accelerated the possibility of a patchwork of bilateral and regional trade and investment agreements. Even Japan and South Korea, previously opponents of such agreements, have gotten into the act.

Security in Command

While economic issues are the APEC's ostensible *raison d'être*, security issues will likely dominate Bush's agenda at the APEC meeting and in his country visits. The war on terrorism and occupation of Iraq top the agenda, with North Korea an important, but distant, third.



Bush will be using the new UN Security Council resolution as ammunition to try to garner additional commitments from countries who have to date been reluctant to commit troops or finances to the U.S.-led occupation. While Japan had already promised \$1.5 billion and the first-ever deployment of troops to a combat zone since World War II, Bush is still trying to get commitments from other countries to provide troops and finances for the U.S.-led occupation. With the UN resolution, countries such as the Philippines, which had been awaiting such a resolution, will be asked to provide troops.

In the Philippines and Thailand, the Bush visit is likely to strengthen the closer ties that have been forged between those governments in the context of the war on terrorism. Cooperation between Thai and U.S. officials led to the arrest of a top leader of Jemaah Islamiah, who had allegedly been planning to set bombs at the APEC meeting.

In Manila, the president will address a joint session of the Philippine Congress, the first U.S. president to do so since Dwight David Eisenhower in 1960, and this will be his second meeting with Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in six months, signifying the closest relationship that the Philippines has had with the U.S. since the end of the cold war. The Philippines was named “major U.S. non-NATO

ally” in early October, fulfilling a commitment that Bush made to Arroyo during her state visit in May this year. This designation, which provides the country with privileged access to weapons and sharing of intelligence, includes such countries as Australia, Bahrain, Japan, Israel, Egypt, South Korea, and Argentina. It is expected that during this trip Thailand will also be designated as such an ally.

Joint military exercises in the Philippines continue to increase dramatically, but closer ties to the Philippines extend well beyond operations aimed at groups such as the Abu Sayyaf. Last year the Bush and Arroyo administrations signed a Mutual Logistics and Support Agreement that facilitates the sourcing of supplies in the Philippines. One of many such agreements the U.S. has signed worldwide, the agreements are part of the Pentagon’s efforts to insure its global reach through “places not bases”—enabling long-range military operations without the financial cost and political opposition created by permanent U.S. bases.

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Recommended citation:

John Gershman, “A Whirlwind Tour: President Bush in Asia,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, October 17, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0310asean.html>

Production Information:

Writer: John Gershman, IRC
Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

