

From Iraq to Asia—the Butterfly Effect

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | July 8, 2004

Media attention in late June focused on the European Union summit in Ireland, the NATO summit in Turkey, and the surprise early transfer of “sovereignty” to the Iraqi interim government. As noteworthy as each of these might have been, equally significant events were occurring or being planned in East Asia, ones that, in an interdependent world, affect and were affected by what transpired elsewhere.

Six-Party Talks on North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons Program

Perhaps the most important event was the June 23-26 Six-Party Talks in Beijing. At the end of the working group and senior delegate meetings, all participants—North and South Korea, Russia, Japan, China, and the U.S.—agreed that “progress” had been made. If nothing else, the six countries agreed to meet in September.

In diplomacy, “progress” means different things to each participant. North Korea welcomed the modification of the U.S. demand that Pyongyang acknowledge its two weapons programs and begin “complete, verifiable, and irreversible” dismantling before Washington extended economic or diplomatic incentives. Pressured by South Korea, China, and Japan, the U.S. proposed a three-month “good-faith” test during which South Korea and Japan would provide heavy oil to alleviate the North’s energy crisis. In return, North Korea would have to pledge to fully disclose and halt all weapons development programs. On the basis of this promise, the U.S. and South Korea would guarantee that neither country was planning to invade or in any other way cause regime change in the North. Once Pyongyang began to dismantle its weapons programs, destroyed any weapons it had, and readmitted inspectors to verify that the weapons and programs were being irreversibly

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destroyed, Washington would move forward on a number of fronts such as normalizing diplomatic relations, removing North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terror, ending sanctions, and offering economic aid.

Pyongyang’s representatives, after asking for time to consult with their superiors and to study Washington’s plan, presented a proposal expressing the North’s willingness to freeze its weapons programs in exchange for immediate—particularly energy—aid.

Once this assistance began, negotiations could turn to the particulars related to dismantling the North’s plutonium weapons program. The North also offered greater “flexibility” on all issues in return for U.S. participation in the oil shipment program with the South. The U.S. declined, a position re-iterated July 1, 2004 by Secretary of State

Colin Powell during a twenty minute “sidebar” meeting with North Korea’s Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun while both were attending a meeting of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum.

At first glance, the U.S. call for a North Korean “pledge” to acknowledge and end its weapons programs might be considered equivalent to the North’s “freeze.” But the stumbling block is the alleged existence of an enriched uranium program in the North, a disparity so fundamental that it is the proverbial immovable object to real progress. The U.S. believes



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the program started in 1998 and is continuing while the North (backed by China in the absence of seeing proof from the U.S.) insists it has only a plutonium-based weapons effort. Moreover, in the familiar “two steps forward—one step back” pattern of these talks, Pyongyang’s chief diplomat at the talks reportedly suggested that his country might test a nuclear device if their demands were not met.

Other Complications Affecting U.S.–Korean Relations

Non-nuclear considerations complicate the U.S. position in the six-party talks. Within South Korea itself, anti-U.S. feeling appears to be growing. Korea-watchers are convinced that Seoul was pressured by the U.S. to send 3,000 additional troops (for a total of 3,600) to Iraq because the U.S. needed help. The U.S. is also considered by many to be an obstacle to better relations with the North. Thus the unexpectedly clear-cut pro-government result of the South’s recent elections is seen as a vote for President Roh Moo Hyun’s policy of increased openness to the North, symbolized by the removal of propaganda billboards and loudspeakers along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), increasing tourism to and investment in the North, new measures to avoid clashes between warships, and the start of regular military-to-military discussions.

The reassignment of 3,600 U.S. soldiers to Iraq duty, the possibility that additional troops will be withdrawn by next year as part of a global U.S. realignment of forces, as well as the re-positioning away from the DMZ of the U.S. forces that remain in South Korea, are raising questions about the continuing commitment of the U.S. forward presence in Northeast Asia. The U.S. Army says it is committing \$11 billion to improve its technical prowess on the

peninsula, and the U.S. Air Force is deploying a squadron of F-117 stealth fighters to the South for three months on a training rotation. But high tech equipment is expendable if need be, and airplanes can fly out as easily and quickly as they fly in. And given the high probability that neither Iraq nor Afghanistan will stabilize quickly, it now seems likely that the U.S. personnel footprint will be reduced permanently in the Western Pacific. The two battalions of Marines sent from Okinawa to Iraq, and possibly more, may be re-positioned in the U.S. when they rotate from Iraq back. The Navy is already in the process of building forces that will be based at Guam—submarines and an aircraft carrier battle group—complementing Air Force assets already there.

The U.S.-China-Taiwan Triangle

As the U.S. works with China and Japan to diffuse the standoff with North Korea, further south a sequence of planned military exercises involving Taiwan, Japan, and the U.S. on one side and China on the other serve notice that volatile and conflicting national interests remain unresolved. A few weeks ago, when Taipei held a computerized military exercise

simulating an invasion attempt by Beijing, some 60 U.S. officers and “experts” from Pacific Command in Honolulu reportedly participated. Simultaneously, the U.S. and Japan held another computer exercise, leading to speculation that the two meshed at some level. China, in turn, staged its own exercise, which included an amphibious assault on Chinese-held islands, ostensibly to prove the People’s Liberation Army could mount this type of attack. As July began, seven countries—Australia, Canada, Chile, Great Britain, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S.—launched the bi-annual RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific) exercise which this year is much larger than in 2002 as fewer U.S. ships are in the Persian Gulf. Then, in mid-July,

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Operation Summer Pulse 04 will test the U.S. Navy's innovative "Fleet Response Plan." This envisions "surging" as many as six to nine carrier battle groups within 30 days and two more in 90 days in response to crises rather than maintaining two or three battle groups deployed forward around the clock. Some observers see the exercise, which some reports suggest will include representatives from Taiwan's military, as a reminder to China that the U.S. fully intends to help Taiwan should Beijing use force against the island. Strangely, what wasn't mentioned in the media accounts is the fact that the Navy exercise also holds implications for any attack contemplated by North Korea on the South.

U.S. and Other Asian Countries

Washington has not fared well recently with other Asian allies. Thailand has announced it will reduce its 460 member military presence in Iraq because of the deterioration in the overall security situation, although the size of the cuts was not revealed. Pentagon appeals to Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan for troop contributions for the multinational force in Iraq continue to be rebuffed.

In early June, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, traveling in Asia, undertook damage control after Admiral Thomas Fargo, Pacific Command commander, told Congress he thought that Marines on "fast patrol boats" should help patrol the 550 mile-long Strait of Malacca through which travels a third of all world trade. Only Singapore expressed any support; Malaysia and Indonesia, the other two countries straddling the Strait, objected strongly. While the proposal was couched in terms of fighting terrorists and pirates, critics of Fargo's proposal saw it as an attempt to broaden the arena of action for the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) whose stated objective is interdicting shipments of illegal nuclear materials, warheads, and missile systems but whose unstated objective is to close down North Korea's

ability to export these items for cash. Rumsfeld claimed that the proposal really centered on providing information to local forces.

Unfortunately, Rumsfeld's offer was tarnished by CIA chief George Tenet's resignation which is widely seen (although denied by official Washington) to have been the result of the Iraq debacle.

Conclusion

As recent disclosures have made clear, since September 11, 2001, everything the U.S. does, wherever it acts, whatever it says, Iraq—and by extension the administration's "war on terror"—has operated as its defining paradigm in international relations. This in turn has acted as a set of blinders that narrowed the field of vision of Washington policy-makers. The result, predictably, is that officials, locked into the recurring rut of military "solutions," cannot perceive the non-military, socio-economic, and nationalistic pressures and aspirations that influence the perceptions of allies, friends, and even adversaries. Only *in extremis* does Washington acknowledge and seriously consider that the national interests of others do matter and do affect the achievement of U.S. goals.

For the administration, the real challenge at this juncture may be deciding whether it can add one more ball to its juggling act. From the perspective of the White House, with Iraq "liberated," Iran reluctantly opening its nuclear facilities to international monitors, and North Korea still engaged in the six-party talks, the "Axis of Evil" has been blunted even though bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and al-Qaeda-like organizations still pose a threat to U.S. interests. But this threat is not to long-term U.S. dominance; that, in pre-September 11 administration rhetoric, comes from only one quarter: China.

And the butterfly?

On June 28, when he was handed the paper transferring sovereignty from the occupation authorities back to Iraqis, Ghazi al-Yawer, president of the new Iraqi interim government, told reporters: “I felt a butterfly inside my heart.” It is a metaphor Washington would do well to remember, for the flutter of that butterfly’s wings in Iraq at the end of June may someday cause a typhoon in the Pacific.

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