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Interhemispheric Resource Center
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Asia/Pacific

by Matt Miller, San Diego Union Tribune

This overview of U.S. foreign policy in the Asia/Pacific region is excerpted from the recently published IRC/IPS book, Global Focus: A New Foreign Policy Agenda 1997-1998. It is one of several regional and topical overviews published as part of the Foreign Policy In Focus series.

For the cold war generation, U.S. foreign policy toward the Asia/Pacific region was simple, straightforward, and secure. In the minds of America's foreign policy and defense elites, the only point of reference that mattered was the Soviet Union; everything else flowed from there. That proved true whether Washington was taking sides in the long-standing dispute between India and Pakistan, warming to China, or reacting to Japan's growing trade imbalance. It was true whether the U.S. was dealing with any of the three subregions: Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, or South Asia.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, U.S. foreign relations got decidedly messier. No more did the U.S.-Soviet rivalry subsume every other external relationship. No more could Washington ignore growing grassroots demands for foreign policies based on, say, human rights, democratization, or the environment. No more could the U.S. government dismiss calls for an aggressive international trade policy with an all-knowing eye cocked on Moscow.

With the demise of the "evil empire," the old Cold Warriors retreated into their bunkers muttering that we had won and that it was the end of history. Most everyone else didn't quite know where to start. Nowhere was this confusion more evident than in the domain of Asian relations. In the spring of 1990, some of the most eminent scholars in the field met at the University of California at San Diego to hash out U.S.-Asian relations in the post-cold war era. After two days, they couldn't even agree on whether the cold war had ended in Asia.

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That was a sign of things to come. The end of the cold war held out the promise of Washington creating a new, multidimensional, and more humane foreign policy toward Asia. Instead, what emerged was reactive and often vacillated wildly. During his first term in office, President Clinton personified this approach. He whipsawed between confrontation and appeasement. He declared the primacy of strategic relations one day and economic relations the next. He extolled the importance of human rights in one speech, then cast it to the wasteland in the next. With candor, some policy makers admitted they were taking a hit-and-miss approach to post-Cold War Asia. "These are massive shifts," explained one Clinton official candidly. "You can't expect anybody in just a few years to really come up with a wonderfully overarching strategy." Yet many in the Clinton administration continued to maintain an attitude of "we know what is best for the region." This particularly American bluster may have been self-delusional, but it certainly didn't fool many on the western side of the Pacific.

Washington's policy establishment made several efforts to fill the breach. The most significant was a 1995 position paper by Joseph Nye, then a Department of Defense Assistant Secretary. At the center of the Nye report was the assertion that a continued U.S. military presence—at the present level of 100,000 troops—well into the twenty-first century was essential for the Pacific to remain peaceful. It was the classic status quo solution. But what made it more alluring was the support such a pronouncement has in Asia. Most Asian governments would like nothing more than to have U.S. troops stick around to keep a lid on some regional disputes and, in effect, to protect these regimes from internal unrest and from each other.

Another Washington attempt at coming to grips with the highly complicated world of post-cold war Asia has been to peddle what Washington calls "constructive engagement." This approach casts the U.S. as a superpower with only benign intentions and one whose mission is to find common ground with the Asia/Pacific nations. Washington's support for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) illustrates this

approach, even if it is only displayed once a year. Again, constructive engagement has a certain appeal within Asian capitals. As Beijing has demonstrated, Washington's desire to be a "team player" lessens the need among the region's autocrats to respond to external pressure in the areas of democracy and human rights.

Concurrent with constructive engagement has been an increased willingness to accept the belief in "the Asian way." Sometimes wrapped into notions of neo-Confucianism, this attempts to explain away authoritarianism in the region as a kind of genetic condition. Singapore leader Lee Kuan Yew is a leading exponent of this self-serving doctrine.

An equally popular approach to dealing with modern Asia is relying on the theology of the marketplace. Highly touted in American boardrooms as well as among conservative policy circles, this kind of post-cold war religion has as its primary—if not sole—article of faith that free markets will solve the world's problems. Clinton, himself, embraced this tenet in 1996 when he declared that "freer enterprise will fuel the hunger for a more free society." That's a comforting dogma, since even the most dictatorial regimes in Asia now embrace free-market capitalism.

All these are simplistic attempts at replacing what was the equally simplistic cold war formula. What has yet to emerge from Washington is a multilayered and nuanced approach to the region—one that takes into account everything from the shifting power blocks within Asia to the likelihood of massive political upheaval. This would be a policy that promotes engagement, not in terms of military bases or multinational business, but in cultural and linguistic understanding.

It is a policy that assumes the U.S. can provide an ethical beacon without being bellicose or bullying. It is a policy that pays as much attention to the region's needy as to its affluent, as much focus on Asia's environmental degradation as on its economic health. It is a policy that should, first and foremost, begin in the U.S. The domestic litany of needed changes is well-known and includes everything from better job training to universal health care. But when it comes to comprehending Asia, nothing is more important than education. In our schools and our universities, far more attention must be paid to Asian history, cultures, and languages. Far greater recognition must be made as well of the role—past, present and future—that Asian Americans have played in providing a transpacific bridge.

Part of Washington's difficulty in formulating a comprehensive Asian policy is its desire to simplify the region, which stretches from Afghanistan in to Japan. Over the past decade, Asia has made enormous strides toward regional integration. Intra-Asian trade is now more important than trade across the Pacific. Regional groupings are gaining in number and clout. Especially important is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Membership has expanded and now includes Vietnam as well as the founding countries: the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and, later, Brunei. The association has declared that by 2008, its collective territory will constitute a giant free-trade zone. Beginning in 1994, ASEAN also moved into the realm of defense and away from a strictly economic agenda.

Yet Asia remains extraordinarily fractured. This should be expected in a land mass that contains almost half the world's population. The world's economic center of gravity has moved steadfastly west and is now unquestionably located in the Pacific. But so, too, are some of the poorest pockets of humanity. The region is divided by class, by history, by culture, by language, by economics. Only by understanding Asia's complexities can the U.S. ever expect to evolve a policy appropriate for the twenty-first century.

Greater China

When Bill Clinton campaigned for president in 1992, he lashed out at the "butchers of Beijing." After he was elected, the president put the Chinese government on notice that it must improve human rights or risk losing critical access to the American market. Then, two years later, Clinton reversed course, delinking China's trading status from the human rights issue. The November announcement of reciprocal state visits in 1997 and 1998 is the culmination of this approach. In the eyes of Washington, intellectual property rights are more important than human rights.

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Clinton's oscillating response reflects the American perception of China, a country viewed in the most extreme terms imaginable. To some—especially in the business community—it is the next capitalist El Dorado, with more than one billion eager consumers waiting in the wings. This born-again China lobby explains away China's repressive government with the notion that growing material wealth will, axiomatically, bring with it democratic reforms.

To others, China is on course to take the place of the Soviet Union as the "evil empire." They cite mounting evidence. China seems perfectly willing to sell missiles to rogue regimes such as Iran, or assist Pakistan in developing nuclear weapons. Beijing has already shown a willingness to subjugate its own populace. The next step, the thinking goes, is an expansionist drive that could imperil much of Asia.

One view is based on fear; the other, largely, on wishful thinking. The reality, of course, is much more complex. Yet, it is true that China could make or break the region. The U.S.-China relationship could well become the most important and difficult one Washington faces in the dawning of the new millennium.

The starting point for Washington in attempting to understand the world's most populous nation is to remember its imperial past. When a powerful emperor died, the nation often underwent wrenching, dynastic change. So it could be when China's long- ailing leader, 92-year-old Deng Xiaoping, finally dies. Jiang Zemin may appear to have secured succession; he holds concurrent titles of president, general secretary of the communist party, and chairman of the Central Military Commission. But many China scholars believe that Jiang's grip on power is far from assured and that his strength is illusory, more a function of factional manipulations than personal appeal.

Much of Jiang's actions can be explained by his own desire to retain power. A socialist platform holds no mass appeal; Maoism has long since become a quaint anachronism. Jiang has instead seized on Chinese nationalism as a means to rally his countrymen. This may be obviously manipulative, but it has widespread appeal. Many Chinese are acutely aware of China's humiliating treatment by Western powers in the 19th Century. Issues such as Hong Kong and Taiwan are being increasingly framed by this nationalist dogma.

With the U.S. reducing its pressure on Beijing to ease up on human rights violations, the Chinese government has moved to crush any democratic dissent. The stiff prison sentences given prodemocracy activists, despite pleas from Washington, show Beijing's resolve. That doesn't mean, however, that prodemocracy advocates have abandoned their quest.

Where China's booming, but highly uneven economy may be headed is also a matter of intense speculation. Here again, there are no easy answers, but the statistics are extreme. Tens of millions of urban workers along the coast have been enriched by rapid industrialization. Tens of millions of farmers in the hinterland still struggle to survive. Tens of millions of poor peasants have uprooted themselves and, in flocking to the cities, constitute one of the biggest migratory movements in human history.

When Washington issued a visa to Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui so he could attend a Cornell University gathering in June 1995, it set in motion a series of events with enormous implications for regional security. Beijing was incensed. Its missile tests and military maneuvers were none-too-subtle attempts to intimidate Taiwan. Washington responded with a naval presence off the Taiwan Strait, upping the stakes even more. What Beijing demonstrated was that it was unwilling to allow what it considers its own territories to move beyond certain limits. That message was directed as much toward Hong Kong as Taipei.

These two islands represent two sides of the same problem. Taiwan has moved to augment its economic power with a newfound political freedom. An increasing number of Taiwanese identify themselves as just that, a people separate from those on the mainland. Hong Kong is moving toward the opposite. The moment Hong Kong reverts to Chinese control on July 1, 1997, individual and institutional freedoms will almost assuredly be curtailed. It's equally certain that Beijing will try its best to suppress the uniquely Hong Kong identity.

Japan

An extraordinarily difficult country for the U.S. to fathom, Japan has long been the world's second largest economy. But many Americans continue to see Japan through a gauze that seems left over from World War II and the immediate postwar period.

There are two distinct aspects to U.S.-Japan relations: trade and security. It seems almost inevitable that as one gains prominence, the other recedes. Through much of the cold war, Japan as a strategic friend overshadowed its role as an economic foe. But then, as the cold war waned, as Japan's industrial machine cranked out more and more exports, and its flush capitalists bought up numerous trophy properties in the U.S. in the mid-to-late 1980s, exhortations to curb Japanese economic influence became practically an American war cry.

With much less fanfare, that course reversed direction as well. The U.S. economy recovered, but Japan's stalled. Many of the same investments that were supposed to lead to a Japanese takeover of corporate America were put on the sales block, with cash-strapped Japanese companies forced to take huge losses. Key political defections, coupled with domestic dissatisfaction with the government, led in 1993 to the end of the Liberal Democratic Party's nearly four-decade-long grip on

power, with a hope—not yet achieved—of political and economic reform.

The rape of a schoolgirl in Okinawa in 1995 by three American military personnel made inevitable a refocus on security. But again, Washington's response was geared to maintaining America's huge military presence on the islands—U.S. bases occupy about one-fifth of Okinawa's land mass—rather than planning for a withdrawal. There is a fundamental conflict between America's steadfast belief in the status quo and a growing movement within Okinawa to expel all troops. Anti-bases activists cite the lessons learned in the Philippines' Subic Bay: it's possible to stand up to the U.S. presence, force bases to close, and prosper.

There's a growing probability that at least some American troops will vacate Okinawa. Such a withdrawal would likely compel Japan's military to play a more active role in regional security. This would have enormous implications for the U.S. and the rest of the Pacific, where memories Japan's aggression in World War II are still strong. How the U.S. could lessen its troop strength and still convince Japan and other countries in Asia not to mount a regional arms race is one of the thorniest issues Washington will face.

So, too, must the entire region understand the probable change in Japan's economy. Japan's long recession—which is only now ending—revealed major structural weaknesses in banking and finance. The strong yen hastened an end to such fundamental underpinnings as lifetime employment. Many Japanese factories moved offshore, particularly to other countries in Asia. But it would be folly to dismiss Japan as an over-the-hill economic power. The lesson learned during the last period of trade tension was that the U.S. must match Japan's industrial policy with a new approach to national economic development. Otherwise, the two countries will be doomed to periodic trade battles that could erupt into a trade war.

Korea

The Korean peninsula often tops the list of international flash points. Some two million soldiers—including more than 30,000 U.S. military personnel—face each other across the most hostile of borders. The southern capital would have only seconds to respond to a missile or air attack from the North, where an unstable, unpredictable—and possibly ailing—dictator lords over a closed and ever poorer society.

Yet there's also an increasing sense among U.S. policymakers of inevitability that North Korea is doomed and will end up like East Germany—a historic asterisk. There is much speculation about the pace and nature of North Korea's demise. Washington's policy must be geared toward maximizing the likelihood of a gradual reunification of North and South without a violent preface.

Most South Koreans agree that their country would be far better off if the North has a soft landing. Their concern is pragmatic. They saw how difficult it was for West Germany to absorb its eastern twin. South Korea has made remarkable economic progress during the past three decades, but lacks the wealth of West Germany; North Korea is far poorer than East Germany.

But there's also a growing concern that the South may not have the luxury of gradual absorption. Sketchy reports from the North indicate growing famine and disease. It is difficult to predict how 23 million North Koreans will react if conditions continue to worsen or how long the North Korean military will sit back and allow Kim Jung Ill to manage the deepening crisis.

American policymakers and the U.S. media have focused on North Korea's purported nuclear weapons program. This symbolizes the rogue nature of the Kim regime and is often used to justify a continued U.S. military presence. But it's a focus that elevates North Korea's military potency far out of proportion to the country's overall strength and avoids the need to plan for the day when American troops are no longer needed.

South Korea, meanwhile, is struggling with its newfound democratization; one that may well intensify the pressure on the U.S. to scale back its troop levels. The arrest and convictions of former Presidents Roh Tae Woo and Chun Doo Hwan on treason charges express both political opportunism on the part of the current government of Kim Young Sam and a genuine attempt to right a past wrong.

Southeast Asia

The East Asian nations of China, Taiwan, and South Korea are inevitably cited when passing out laurels for economic development. Growth in Southeast Asia has been every bit as dramatic. Many of these nations have moved from sleepy agricultural lands to industrial dynamos within a generation.

Yet this economic transformation has not been without serious problems, and the U.S. must anticipate the possibility of even greater upheaval to come.

First, there is the question of unequal progress. While the wealthy have prospered and the middle class is growing, a significant percentage of many Southeast Asians remain mired in poverty. Severe environmental destruction only heightens this division. The degree of inequality varies from country to country, as does the government resolve to do something about it. Singapore and Malaysia have truly moved into the ranks of middle-class dominance. But for millions in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, the affluence in the cities means nothing.

The pressure for political transformation will intensify. So far, the U.S. hasn't played a particularly active role in

promoting democratizing forces in the region. In some countries, such as the Philippines, democratic institutions are struggling to overcome feudal underpinnings. In others, such as Thailand, the military is always just off-stage waiting in the wings. In Southeast Asia's largest nation of, Indonesia, President Suharto, 75, sits as one of the world's longest reigning autocrats and shows no sign of any willingness to give up power. Any political dissent is crushed; cronyism and corruption run rampant. So, too, in Burma, where ruthless soldiers are still attempting to crush one of the world's most powerful symbols of democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi.

Vietnam is the biggest question mark in the region. It is, like China, a jumble of contradictions. It is desperately poor and authoritarian; the legacy of the war casts a long shadow. But Vietnam is eager to hitch its future to some of its wealthier neighbors. What's more, it is looking toward overseas Vietnamese—especially those in the U.S.—for assistance. That should hasten some political change as well. Washington's belated recognition of the Vietnamese government in 1995 provided a much- needed sense of closure to the war years. America's willingness to provide assistance to Vietnam will help allay the horrific cost and suffering that resulted from the war.

South Asia

Nowhere in Asia was there a better opportunity for the U.S. to fashion a more positive post-cold war world than in the Indian subcontinent. Nowhere have the results been more disappointing.

For the better part of two decades, the U.S. maintained a frosty view of India and openly tilted toward India's neighbor and longtime rival Pakistan. Much of this animosity stemmed from India's warm relations with the Soviet Union, although India was never in the Soviet orbit. In the 1980s, Pakistan's willingness to shelter and arm Afghan rebels fighting the Soviets helped seal this partiality.

This was a dangerous game. In late 1985 and again in 1990, India and Pakistan came perilously close to armed conflict that could well have led to the use of nuclear weapons.

The period immediately following the end of the cold war brought to South Asia monumental changes, some of which were only coincidental to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 by radical Sri Lankan Tamils ended the Nehru family's dynastic rule of postindependent India. A severe financial crunch prodded Gandhi's successor, P.V. Narasimha Rao, to truly begin opening up India's lumbering economy. With the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan beginning in 1988, the U.S. government finally started to pressure Pakistan to stop its illicit nuclear weapons development—an open secret for years—and, in 1990, suspended the sale of F16s to the Pakistanis.

This could have led to confidence building in India and the beginning of a more balanced approach toward the two nations. It didn't happen. At best, Washington was slow to take advantage of new developments in South Asia; at worst, it was negligent. The Clinton administration failed to place an ambassador in New Delhi for more than a year. And even after appointing one, Washington continued to approach India with unnecessary caution and second-class status. It did little to accord India either a show of real friendship or a recognition of its vital international importance. It's as if the world's largest democracy—and, in the coming decades, the world's most populous nation—had to prove itself anew. The result was predictable. India refused to sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and single-handedly torpedoed three years of negotiations.

Recent events have more than demonstrated the dangers inherent in an unstable region. In war-ravaged Afghanistan, factions continue to hammer each other, almost as furiously as they fought the Soviet invaders. No one faction enjoys popular support. For the moment, the fundamentalist Taliban faction occupies Kabul, but Afghanistan appears doomed to years of more fighting.

Pakistan—once America's hope for the region—is perilously close to a complete breakdown; the dismissal of the Bhutto government in November 1996 by President Farooq Leghari demonstrated just how ineffective the rulers have become. The country is racked by corruption, awash in arms, battered by feudal rivalries with only 23% of its women literate and a population growing at about 3% a year, Pakistan should be concentrating on basics, like development issues. Instead, its political parties have been playing an endless game of J'accuse.

This same exhortation should be made to American politicians. Don't divine Asian policy through pollsters. Don't react to an everchanging Asia/Pacific with naivete, mystified confusion, or enraged ignorance. Ironically, the only way to understand the complexities of the region and to evolve a more sophisticated policy is to get down to basics. The first task is to learn.

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