

December 14, 2009

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Posted: December 13, 2009 05:33 PM

Old U.S. Allies Are Hedging Their Strategic Bets

Much of the recent pre-occupation of foreign policy wonks in Washington has been on whether the preeminent geo-strategic status of the United States will be challenged by China, India and other emerging economies and by assertive and antagonistic regional powers like Russia and Iran. The conventional wisdom among pundits and experts has been that the international system is moving beyond America's post-Cold War unipolar "moment" and that a new multi-polar structure will eventually emerge under which the United States will have to contend with economic and military competition from rising and aggressive powers. But according to the same conventional wisdom, no dramatic changes in the global balance of power would take place until these powers, and in particular, China, will have both the will and the capability to undermine American hegemonic position.

After all, with U.S. defense expenditure now accounting for just under half of the world total, not even a coalition of global powers has the capacity to counter-balance America's dominant military standing. At the same time, while the recent financial crisis has eroded U.S. economic power, the United States still has the largest and most advanced economy in the world.

From that perspective, those analysts warning of American global decline aka "declinists" have been criticized for overstating what has been seen as their *idée fixe* -- the notion that American military and economic power has been eroding since the end of the Cold War; and that it may be reaching bottom now, in the aftermath of Iraq War and the financial meltdown in Wall Street. As the anti-declinists see it, while America's economic growth has been overtaken by other powers since the 1950's, the reports about the decline and fall of the United States have always been exaggerated. It ain't going to happen any time soon. And in any case, U.S. decline is not inevitable.

It is true that the declinists may have been crying wolf for too many times in the past. But then, recall that the wolf did show-up at the end of that story. The pestering declinists, like those annoying hypochondriacs, may prove to be right --- sooner or later, as suggested by that tragic-comic inscription on the tombstone located in the cemetery in Key West, Florida, "I Told You I Was Sick!"

But while the United States will not collapse with a bang a la Soviet Union, a process of gradual waning of American power has been taking place for a while, with the notion of a U.S. monopoly in the international system being replaced with the concept of oligopoly of great powers. The United States will cease being Number One and will start playing the role of first among equals -- or *primus inter pares* -- for some years to come. In fact, that process is already taking place, and some of the governments that are sensing that America is starting to lose its *mojo* include two staunch U.S. allies, Japan and Turkey, whose leaders have been trying

to adjust their policies to the realities of the changing balance of power, as they hedge their strategic bets and diversify their global portfolio in response to the waning Pax Americana.

In Japan, the election defeat of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which had ruled Japan for more than four decades, and the landslide victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) led by Yukio Hatoyama, has marked a peaceful revolution in that nation's politics as well as the start of a transformation in the relationship between Tokyo and Washington and their 50-year-old bilateral security alliance that had been established at the beginning of the Cold War.

In a way, both LDP's electoral dominance and the security agreement with the United States were seen as integral part of the same anachronistic order created after World War II and under which Japan's political and economic system was controlled by an iron triangle consisting of the LDP, the bureaucracy and big business while its foreign policy was based on the alliance with Washington which obliged the Japanese to comply with U.S. strategic dictates in exchange for an American nuclear umbrella.

Notwithstanding the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S.-Japan alliance -- not unlike the Energizer Bunny - kept going and going and going, as the two sides focused on new common threats, including China and North Korea; for Washington, the status-quo helped perpetuate its hegemony in Northeast Asia by maintaining its military presence, while for the Japanese it permitted continuing the free-riding on American military protection against China's strengthening military might and North Korean nuclear arms.

But China's economic and military ascent at a time when United States seemed be shifting its attention from East Asia, coupled with American military blunders in the Middle East and the U.S.-made financial crisis, has ignited a debate in Japan about whether the time may have come to replace that nation's traditional dependency on Washington with a more Asian-oriented strategy that would place a new emphasis on the relationship with China and the rest of Asia and help create the foundations for an EU-type regional system (which may not include the United States as a member). That view seemed to be shared by Hatoyama and some of his advisors who decided to suspend an earlier agreement to relocate American Marine bases on the island of Okinawa, a move that ignited an angry response from the Pentagon and created a sense that the special relationship between Washington and Tokyo may be over.

Like Japan, Turkey was a leading strategic ally of the United States during the Cold War. Turkey was not only an important member of NATO but it also helped the Americans contain the threat from the Soviet Union and its allies in the Middle East while maintaining close military ties with Israel. And like in the case of U.S.-Japan relationship, both Ankara and Washington seemed to be interested in maintaining their alliance after the Cold War had ended. While the Americans promised to assist Turkey in its efforts to join the European Union (EU), Turkey expressed its willingness to cooperate with the United States in containing the Islamic Republic of Iran and other radical Islamist forces in the Middle East.

But dramatic political changes in Turkey in the form of the growing influence of political Islamic movement that challenged Turkey's traditional secular and pro-Western orientation, and in particular, the 2002 electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) that is committed to an Islamist ideology, seemed to be raising doubts about the continuing viability of the U.S.-Turkey alliance while the failure of Washington to help bring Turkey into the EU played into the hands of those Turks who were questioning their nation's ties to the West.

But it was the Turkish decision not to support the American invasion Iraq in 2003 and its refusal to allow U.S. forces to cross Turkish territory on their way to Iraq that marked a turning point in the relationship between the two countries. The AKP-led government headed by Prime Minister Recep Erdogan insisted that the ousting of Iraq's Saddam Hussein and the Americans attempts to 'remake' the Middle East ran contrary to Turkish interests by creating political instability and leading to new military conflicts in the Persian Gulf and the Levant (that prediction proved to be on target).

Indeed, the collapse of the U.S. hegemonic project in the Middle East and the rise of Iran as the new regional power, has created incentives Turkey to fill the strategic vacuum by strengthening its political and economic ties with Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq and other Arab governments as well as with Iran (Erdogan has defended that country's nuclear program) and even with old-time foes like the Armenians and the Kurds, while distancing itself from Israel. In a way, not unlike Japan, Turkey seems to be in the process of reorienting its relationship from the United States as it attempts to re-establish itself as a regional power.

But the new foreign policy direction that seems to be embraced by Turkey and Japan is not an indication that these two governments are pursuing an anti-American agenda or are embarking on a civilizational confrontation with a U.S.-led. Turkey is not about to join Iran or anti-American governments and groups to force the U.S. out of the Middle East. Instead, it is responding the erosion in the power of the U.S. there by creating new partnerships that could help stabilize the region: helping other Sunni governments to counter-balance the rising power of Shiite Iran's; trying to serve as a peace mediator (between Syria and Israel, for example); preventing the disintegration of Iraq by strengthening ties with the Kurds; and facilitating trade and investment.

Similarly, there is clearly no support in Japan for becoming part of a Sinic-dominated regional system or for ejecting America from East Asia. Like Turkey, Japan does not want to put all its strategic and economic eggs in an American basket that seems to be full of so many holes. It has no interest in being perceived as an American proxy intent on containing China. And it wants to benefit in terms of trade and investment from the economic rise of China and the integration of the region.

Hence, Washington should welcome these steps towards strategic adjustment being pursued by its allies and refrain from any attempt to force them to re-embrace to the old subservient approach towards the United States. The United States lacks the power to impose its agenda on these allies. And if it insists on doing that, it could turn them from partners into rivals.

Books By Leon T. Hadar

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