

11-29-2009 16:50

+ - PRINT

## Policy Change for East Asia

By Doug Bandow

U.S. President Barack Obama made his first official trip to Asia in November. The results were thin.

Unfortunately, his agenda focused on reinforcing the status quo and "strengthening" the usual ties with the usual allies. Worse, the administration is dedicated to maintaining and even expanding Washington's Cold War-era security ties.



The U.S. achieved its dominant position in East Asia after defeating Japan in World War II. Washington created a network of alliances to both prevent any imperial Japanese renaissance and contain Soviet and, later, Chinese expansion.

But that world has largely disappeared. Japan has recovered and created the world's No. 2 economy. The Soviet Union is gone. Maoist China lives on only in propaganda images.

Vietnam has joined the global economy. South Korea has raced past the decrepit Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Other countries, ranging from Australia to India, are expanding their regional roles.

The potential for conflict remains. However, without any link to a global hegemonic competitor like the Soviet Union, such instability would pose little threat to the U.S.

Yet Washington's Cold War alliance structure remains essentially unchanged. The U.S. maintains one-sided "mutual" defense treaties with Japan and South Korea.

That the U.S. must remain militarily dominant is taken for granted. In Washington, the People's Republic of China's apparent determination to create a military capable of deterring U.S. intervention along its border is treated as a threat to American security.



What has ever been must ever be appears to be the basis of U.S. foreign policy.

The Obama administration should pursue a different course, a transformational agenda, emphasizing economic integration while promoting military detachment. America still has a major economic role to play, but should increasingly devolve defense responsibilities on countries in the region.

The most important relationship for the 21st century will be that between the existing superpower and the potential superpower. Washington should strengthen economic and trade ties with China.

Moreover, Washington must forge a cooperative relationship on difficult regional issues like North Korea. The PRC has much at stake on a stable Korean Peninsula; it

also has much to gain from taking the lead in promoting diplomatic solutions of regional problems. The president should press for a more active PRC policy to support reinvigorated U.S. engagement with the North.

Washington should speak frankly about the importance of human rights, while recognizing America's limited ability to influence the PRC's behavior. An improved bilateral relationship is more likely than isolation to encourage greater respect by Beijing for the liberty of its citizens.

The president should treat Japan as a full partner. In economics, that means proposing a free trade agreement. On defense, rather than merely adjusting its controversial Status of Forces Agreement, Washington should withdraw its garrisons from Japanese soil and turn defense responsibility for Japan over to Tokyo.

The U.S. also should encourage greater cooperation between Japan and its neighbors. World War II ended more than six decades ago: The Japanese do not have a double dose of original sin and America should no longer play geopolitical wet-nurse for nations that long ago developed the means to protect their own interests.

Washington should engage North Korea over its nuclear program. At the same time, the U.S. should inform the North that full international integration requires the participation of South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia as well.

The Obama administration should coordinate South Korea, Japanese, and U.S. policies regarding Pyongyang. However, Washington should allow the Republic of Korea to lead the nonproliferation campaign.

Seoul has the most at stake in maintaining a peaceful peninsula. As the U.S. steps back from its dominant military role, the ROK and its neighbors should step forward.

At the same time, Washington should seek to tighten regional economic integration. The starting point should be a push to ratify the FTA with South Korea.

President Obama needs to promote a changed attitude as much as offer new policies. The Japanese government apparently is interested in promoting a regional order, called the East Asian Community, apart from the U.S. Washington should embrace rather than resist such an approach.

The U.S. will be most secure if friendly states in East Asia work together to confront sources of instability, promote respect for human rights, and encourage the peaceful settlement of disputes. Such a cooperative venture also would help channel China's rise in peaceful directions.

The U.S. will remain engaged in East Asia. America's cultural and economic ties are long-lasting and mutually beneficial.

But Washington no longer has any need to attempt to preserve regional military hegemony.

And at a time of economic crisis the U.S. is losing its financial ability to do so. President Obama should begin moving the region into a new era of less security dependence on Washington.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of several books, including "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire" (Xulon). He can be reached at ChessSet@aol.com.*

