

WebMemo



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It May Be Time for Asia to Position for the Next Administration

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The perception in East Asia of declining U.S. commitment to the region is doggedly and frustratingly persistent—despite the Administration's best efforts to reassure America's friends and allies otherwise. Policymakers and analysts often puzzle over this state of affairs, considering the extent of U.S. commitment: five treaty allies, the Pacific fleet, 80,000 troops, multiple major military exercises, military assistance, development assistance, and billions of dollars in trade and investment.

Decisions made by the Bush Administration over the last several weeks, however, are a perfect illustration of why, even in the face of these tangible assets, the impression of disengagement is so exceedingly difficult to shake.

U.S. Miscues. Last month, the Administration approached U.S. ally South Korea with a "take it or leave it" deal to revise an already sealed free trade agreement. In presenting the new deal, the Americans were clear that they would entertain no amendments from the South Korean side, would offer no quid pro quo, and required a near-immediate answer. To say the least, the approach was ugly. But it gets worse: The Koreans swallowed the revisions—only to find the leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives all but quash the agreement's prospects.

The Bush Administration surrendered many principles in formulating a "bi-partisan" trade policy. Among other things, the new policy proposes cumbersome, litigious labor and environment standards that have more to do with restraining trade

than freeing it. Now, with a deal in hand, it looks like the Administration may ultimately have more bad news to deliver to South Korea.

The situation in Southeast Asia is equally dispiriting. During a May visit to Washington, D.C., by Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, President Bush accepted an invitation to visit Singapore in September to meet with heads of state from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This was no flyby invitation, and its acceptance was likewise well orchestrated. Negotiation and planning for what was billed as the first ASEAN-U.S. summit had been underway for months. It was a welcome sign of U.S. engagement with the region. All concerned were making it as easy as possible; the events would have required only a few short hours on the way to Sydney for the annual APEC meetings.

Unfortunately, last week, President Bush changed his mind. The summit is now officially "postponed," with a new date undetermined.

In a similar manner, having missed the annual meeting of the ASEAN foreign ministers and their dialogue partners two years ago, Secretary Rice made amends by pledging to attend in 2006. She

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did indeed attend. Unfortunately, most relieved observers did not read the fine print. The pledge was only good for one year. It looks like Secretary Rice will again take a pass in 2007. Apparently, not even the prospect of convening an unprecedented ministerial-level side meeting of the vaunted Six-party Talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons will persuade her.

This brings up the last in this series of disappointments. The Administration has jumped through every hoop the North Koreans have put in front of them in their effort to engage on the nuclear issue. At the news of the successful transfer of \$25 million in formerly frozen North Korean assets, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Chris Hill grabbed headlines with a long-anticipated trip to Pyongyang. Less well known is that in his rush to make the trip, he reneged on a meeting with his ASEAN counterparts in Washington marking the 30th anniversary of U.S.-ASEAN relations.

The Perception of Waning U.S. Commitment.

Governments in East Asia firmly believe they are witnessing the long, steady decline of the U.S. commitment to their region. To them, the latest series of decisions appear to be part of a pattern dating back to the pullout from Clark Air Base and Subic Bay in 1992. They are familiar with the overwhelming draw on U.S. attention from Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. They are also witnessing up close a China that, if it is not yet a superpower, is emerg-

ing as first among equals in the region. The calculation is not an idle exercise; governments in East Asia are determining where their future lies and whether they can rely on the United States for the next 50 years in the same way they relied on it for the previous 50.

No power can match the breadth and depth of the U.S. position in East Asia. But the signals of U.S. disengagement are becoming at least as strong as the assets that prove its commitment. Cancelling a meeting here or there may not seem like a big deal, but the slights are piling up. To anyone watching from Asia, they point past the current position of the United States to a future without it.

Conclusion. Making the case that America cares has become nearly impossible. The Administration has made a concerted effort over the last two years to convince the nations of East Asia otherwise—for which it has been commended. The missteps of the last several weeks, however, are a severe setback. Unless the Bush Administration can quickly get back on track, the game is over; it will fall to the next President to revitalize the U.S. commitment. If the Administration cannot make the adjustment, the best one can hope for is that America's friends and allies in the region will withhold judgment on the long term and will position for a new team that will put East Asia higher on its list of priorities.

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