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United States: U.S. Leadership—Prevailing Strengths Amid Challenges

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UNITED STATES

U.S. LEADERSHIP: PREVAILING STRENGTHS AMID CHALLENGES

Robert G. Sutter

ABSTRACT

Emphasis on China and Asia in the national security strategy of the George W. Bush administration gave way to a more reactive and less coherent U.S. approach driven by developments, particularly in Iraq, the war on terrorism, and Korea. U.S. policy can be diverted or challenged in many areas, foreshadowing a somewhat weaker U.S. policy stance in Asia. Given overall U.S. strengths in Asia, however, U.S. officials probably will continue to manage relatively effectively. The Bush administration has improved relations with the major Asian powers. The United States remains the partner of choice for most Asian governments. If the ongoing North Korean crisis were to combine with other possible significant complications for U.S. policy (e.g., failure in Iraq; U.S. economic downturn; decay in Pakistan, Afghanistan; India-Pakistan, China-Taiwan conflict; major terrorist attack on the United States) it would more seriously disrupt U.S. leadership and stability in Asia.

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Introduction

The George W. Bush administration initially emphasized China and Asia's central position in U.S. national security strategy, but by the second half of the president's term this focus gave way to a more reactive and less coherent U.S. approach to the region. The war on terrorism and a redirection of strategic interests to Southwest Asia became the new focal points of U.S. national security policy. In Asia, the administration was forced to react to North Korean provocations and crises in U.S. relations with both North and South Korea. U.S. defense, intelligence, and other officials remained wary of potential adverse trends in Asia, notably rising Chinese military power and assertiveness. U.S. forces were deployed to the western Pacific to improve the U.S. ability to deal with contingencies possibly involving China, as well as more immediate threats posed by North Korea.¹

The large-scale deployment of U.S. forces and resources to the Persian Gulf in the U.S.-led war against Iraq in 2003 showed that U.S. strategic focus would be in the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia for the remainder of President Bush's term. This added to U.S. leaders' preoccupation with homeland security, the global war on terrorism, and instability in frontline anti-terrorism states, Afghanistan and Pakistan, all of which shifted U.S. emphasis away from China and much of the East Asian periphery.² Chinese leader Jiang Zemin and newly appointed President and Communist Party leader Hu Jintao worked hard to reach common ground and avoid confrontation with the United States, easing U.S. leaders' concerns, at least for the time being. Southeast Asia emerged as a new front in the war on terrorism, but its importance remained secondary in U.S. policy priorities.³

North Korea took provocative actions in late 2002 and 2003, breaking declared non-proliferation commitments and reactivating nuclear facilities frozen under the 1994 U.S.-North Korea Agreed Framework accord. This posed a major challenge for U.S. policy that was not well anticipated by the U.S. government. The administration's reaction was complicated by deep internal divisions over how to handle North Korea and by strong differences in U.S. and South Korean policy toward North Korea and broader alliance relations.⁴ Tensions in U.S.-South Korean alliance relations and anti-American sentiment in South Korea rose markedly and were important factors in the election of South Korea's new president in December 2002.⁵ Subsequent U.S. and South Korean efforts to ease tensions, bridge differences, and solidify relations remained awkward in 2003, adding to the arguments of those claiming that the alliance was in crisis and poised for a major change in the next few years.⁶

U.S. administration differences with South Korea, China, Japan, and other concerned powers over how to deal with North Korea focused for

months on tactics dealing with the form of negotiation. At least for the time being, all agreed to pursue a diplomatic solution. The Bush administration in 2003 made some progress in forging a broader international consensus in the face of North Korea's provocations, notably seeing China play a more active role in trying to restrain the North. Nonetheless, differences among the powers and within the United States remained strong. Whatever delicate consensus was achieved could be shattered in the event the United States were provoked by North Korean proliferation activities, or for other reasons, to resort to military initiatives or other forceful action to deal with North Korea's nuclear program. U.S.-led efforts to monitor and intercept illegal North Korean trade and to seek political and perhaps other international sanctions against the North Korean regime elicited signs of strong reservations and opposition from both China and South Korea in mid-2003.

Asian elite and public opinion joined the worldwide complaints against U.S. unilateral actions and dominance in international affairs at the time of the U.S.-led attack on Iraq and repeated U.S. policy declarations supporting preemptive actions against adversaries.⁷ In practice, however, the Bush administration sought to deal with issues in most of Asia through consultation and engagement. Despite continued strong negative reactions throughout the region critical of U.S. foreign policy, most Asian governments reacted pragmatically and with restraint to the U.S. military assault on Iraq and other sensitive issues in U.S. foreign policy.⁸ China muffled past opposition to U.S. "hegemonism," contributing to the most significant improvement in U.S.-China relations in over a decade.⁹

The U.S. administration's overall record in Asia and the outlook for U.S. policy over the next few years are matters of debate among specialists. Many criticize the Bush administration for mishandling the Korean crises, for issuing unilateralist policy declarations adding to tension in the region, and for a lack of attention to economic, environmental, and multilateral measures seen as important to long-range Asian stability and smooth U.S.-Asian relations.¹⁰ They sometimes predict dire consequences, most immediately involving dangerous nuclear proliferation, war on the Korean Peninsula, rupture of the U.S. alliance with South Korea, and confrontation with China. Some add that the administration's tendency to "pre-empt" threats by attacking first could set a bad precedent for such Asian hot spots as the Taiwan Strait and Kashmir.¹¹

While such criticisms have merit, they need to be balanced by appropriate attention to the many favorable trends in Asia for U.S. policy and interests, which foreshadow a positive overall assessment of continued U.S. leadership in the region. At a time of U.S. preoccupation with other priorities, the Bush administration has adjusted in generally pragmatic ways to

unexpected challenges, notably on the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. ability to manage the crises with both North and South Korea without undue negative consequences, and to sustain U.S. leadership and other regional interests, seems good for the next few years. In particular, there are several important underlying strengths in the U.S. leadership position in Asia, and the Bush administration has succeeded in improving U.S. relations with each of the great powers in Asia. For at least the next few years the United States will remain by far the dominant power in Asia. Its realigned military forces backed by broad U.S. military and economic power and influence will be well positioned to deal with regional contingencies. Regional powers likely will remain domestically focused, mutually suspicious, and reluctant to confront the United States for some time. Of course, U.S. policy directions will be influenced by other developments, notably the situation in Iraq and nearby countries, the Korean crises, the broader war on terrorism, and U.S. economic conditions. Such preoccupations and diversions mean that significant U.S. policy initiatives or revival of the earlier Bush administration interest in focusing on China seem unlikely under prevailing circumstances.

Underlying U.S. Strengths in Post-Cold War Asia

Several key strengths in prevailing U.S.-Asian relations support the Bush administration's ability to manage Asian crises and to sustain U.S. leadership in promoting stability, development, and U.S. values in Asia. Government leaders on both sides of the Pacific continue to place a high value on the U.S. security commitment and military presence in Asia. There were few murmurings in the United States to withdraw from Asia after the Cold War, and U.S. resolve to remain actively involved in regional security has been strengthened since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The strong U.S. military presence is generally welcomed by Asian government leaders, and even Chinese leaders have notably modified their past criticism of the U.S. security role.¹² Debate over the size and deployment of U.S. forces in South Korea has become a key element in the crises facing U.S. policy on the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, Seoul and Washington appear determined to manage the debate without jeopardizing strong mutual interests supported by a continued U.S. military presence in the South.¹³ U.S. officials took pains to reassure South Korea and others in Asia that the proposed realignment of U.S. forces on the peninsula, and the broader U.S. realignment of forces abroad, would enhance rather than reduce the U.S. ability to deter and defeat foes. These assurances had more weight following the impressive U.S. military victories in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁴

The Bush administration has a less activist international economic policy than the Clinton administration, but the United States maintains open