Chapter 12

The United States and East Asia: Past and Future

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Chapter 1 focused on how regime changes have interacted with international and domestic events to change national identities and foreign and security policies in the China-Taiwan and Korean conflicts. This concluding chapter looks at U.S. foreign and security policy in the East Asia region. It reviews the historical development of U.S. policies, summarizes current and future challenges, and discusses policy responses.

It is argued that the traditional U.S. policy of protecting Taiwan is likely to persist, but to come under increasing strain as Chinese military power grows. To avoid future instability and possibly war, the United States must quietly encourage Taiwan to assume a greater share of her defense burden. In Korea, the North’s nuclear program has opened up important differences in U.S. and South Korean interests that did not previously exist. There is a danger that the United States and South Korea will allow the North to lever these differences into a breakdown of the U.S.-South Korean alliance, to the great detriment of both the United States and the South. For now, this danger seems to have been averted, as the United States accepts the South’s priority of avoiding war, and the South agrees to support the core U.S. interest in preventing nuclear proliferation from the North to rogue states and terrorist movements. These minimum common interests appear to be holding the alliance together. Finally, it is
argued that the China-Taiwan and Korean conflicts should not be allowed to distract attention from maintaining close relations with Japan, which is by far the most important U.S. ally in the region. U.S. policies toward Taiwan and North Korea have been and must remain conditioned upon maintaining a close alliance with Japan.

**U.S. Policy toward China and Taiwan: Enduring Dilemmas and Growing Dangers**

U.S. policy toward China and Taiwan has been shaped by the larger Cold War geopolitics of the East Asian region. Taiwan was not originally included in the post–World War II U.S. defensive perimeter in the Western Pacific—out of a desire to avoid unnecessary commitments and, from 1949, reach a *modus vivendi* with the new communist regime on the Mainland. This changed with China’s entry into the Korean War. Full-scale conventional war between Chinese and U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula led the United States to provide military protection, including a formal defensive alliance, to Taiwan’s Nationalist regime. This put an end to Mao’s plans to invade Taiwan and finish off his KMT rivals.

The next significant change occurred as a result of the Sino-Soviet split, which culminated in border clashes in the late 1960s. The Nixon administration capitalized by building relations with China against the greater, common Soviet threat. Continued by subsequent administrations, this led the United States to recognize the CCP regime rather than the KMT regime on Taiwan as the legitimate government of China, and to accept various constraints on its diplomatic and military assistance to Taiwan. The Carter administration went so far as to break formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan and terminate the defensive military alliance. The Reagan administration was more ideologically friendly to Taipei. But it did not reverse any of the changes favoring Beijing, because its fundamental goal was the containment and rollback of Soviet power and influence. During the latter part of the Cold War, then, the basic U.S. policy was to recognize Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, while discouraging Beijing from using military force to achieve this goal.

The end of the Cold War has not changed this policy, but has made it harder to implement. As discussed in previous chapters, the collapse of the USSR made absorbing Taiwan into Beijing’s main foreign policy priority. Successful market reforms increased the military capacity to do so, particularly when defense budgets were ramped up following