Chapter 5

Strategic Realignments in Asia

The Setting

By 1953, as the Korean War ground to a halt, the current security architecture for the East Asian region began to take shape. After some ambivalence in the late 1940s, the United States had projected its power across the Pacific with strong bilateral ties to Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea and with multilateral treaties in Southeast Asia (SEATO) and with Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS). Although SEATO did not last, the United States subsequently established bilateral security treaties with Thailand and the Philippines and numerous executive agreements with other East Asian states. This “hub-and-spokes” set of American commitments created links directly to Washington and has lasted, with minor adjustments, for 50 years.

The original rationale for the American commitments in the region was the “containment” of the Soviet Union and China and their Asian allies, North Korea and North Vietnam. After the Sino-Soviet split, the picture became more complicated, with the United States initially concentrating on the Vietnam War. Then, after 1971, the growing rapprochement with China facilitated an unusual pattern: the United States maintained its bilateral links with the noncommunist states of Asia, while working closely with China. This arrangement limited the expansion of Soviet influence in Asia during the 1970s and 1980s but left the hub-and-spoke aspects of American policy in place. Chinese worries about Japan and a preference, at the time, for U.S. oversight of Japanese defense capabilities facilitated this set of links.

After the Tiananmen Square crisis in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Sino-U.S. relations have moved through several cycles of more distant and then closer relations. China was no longer necessary as a balancer against the Soviet Union, and relations with the Beijing regime began to involve a complex calculus of trade, investment, human rights, and regional-influence issues. Although current relations between Washington and Beijing are stable, both sides recognize that their interests could diverge at any point. Thus, there is little likelihood that the United States will...
establish the kind of “strategic partnership” with China that it has maintained for two
generations with Japan and South Korea.

The question then arises, what could change this picture in a fundamental way? The answer is twofold: (1) important shifts are under way in relative economic strength among the Asian states that will affect their long-term ability to modernize their armed forces, and (2) the region’s three most critical flash points (China vs. Taiwan, North vs. South Korea, and India vs. Pakistan) could each lead to escalating tension and violence in the next decade. Hence, if there are fundamental shifts in economic strength and new balances of power in the principal crisis areas, the security architecture of the 1950s may have to be modified.

**Aspects of Asian Security**

Because the security arrangements in East Asia have been in place for very long and intraregional relations are clearly defined, analysis of regional security tends to emphasize three different, but important, factors: the persistence of bilateral ties, the overlap between economic links and political leverage, and the clear presence of strategic rivalry.

**Bilateral Ties Bind**

The bilateral treaties that the United States signed with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the Philippines have formed the backbone of its security links to Asia. James Kurth has noted that this pattern of bilateral ties is fundamentally different from the pattern of American relations with Europe. In U.S.-European security and economic treaties, the obligations are mutual and multilateral. The North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) is a collective security agreement, where an attack on any one member is considered an attack on all. Economic issues were first handled through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and are now dealt with in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

In Asia, many security treaties are one-way guarantees, where the United States is committed to defending its allies, but the allies are not necessarily obligated to defend the United States—unless U.S. forces are attacked within their sovereign territory or waters. So, for example, if China were to attack the United States mainland, Japan is not legally obligated to come to the United States’ assistance, whereas the converse is true.

Most American citizens do not know that the Japan-U.S. Mutual Security Treaty is not mutual and is not fully reciprocal. In fact, starting with President Carter and continuing to today, U.S. presidents have consistently tried to get the Japanese to commit more resources to defense and to come to the United States’ assistance in a broader range of circumstances. Similar efforts at “burden sharing” have been made with the other Asian allies.

In the 1980s, the Japanese prime minister Nakasone launched a major political effort to strengthen security ties with the United States and began the process of expanding Japanese military capabilities. The last two prime ministers of Japan, Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe, have taken the process much further. They not