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Professional Luncheon

The Bush Administration's Evolving Asia Policy

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The Bush Administration's Evolving Asia Policy

*Below is the edited text of Dean Harding's speech, transcribed from the tapes of the luncheon that took place on March 6, 2002 at the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Japan with the assistance of **The Asia Foundation** office in Tokyo. (For Professor Harding's bio and bibliography, please scroll down to the bottom of this file.)*

Professor Harding:

Analyzing the Bush administration's policy towards Asia is difficult, because this administration has so far been remarkably inarticulate when it comes to the exposition of policy. Mr. Bush is following in the footsteps of another great Republican President, Calvin Coolidge, known as Silent Cal, who when asked why he was so silent replied, "I never got in trouble for something I didn't say".

Take a look at the State Department website if you want to see what an inarticulate policy looks like on the web. There is nothing there, and the statements that are there, tend to go, in a very conservative way, country by country, giving the litany of bilateral issues and various relationships, but without giving an over-arching vision. . Since the Bush administration does not speak for itself, I have to infer what I believe its approach is. And I will do that by listing five basic principles or orientations. But I want to emphasize that this is my interpretation and I am not sure if I can in any fair way speak for the administration.

The Bush administration is in its anti-Clinton mode. It's far more skeptical [than the Clinton administration was] about multilateralism, and multilateral organizations, globally and regionally, especially in the security sphere. The basic concept was perhaps articulated best by Richard Haass, Director of the Policy Planning Office in the State Department, when he coined the phrase "multilateralism a la carte," which meant basically that the administration will pick and choose which multilateral organizations and commitments work for the United States and support American foreign policy interests and which do not.

Specifically with regard to Asia, we can find a sharp contrast between the Clinton administration and the Bush team. Winston Lord's concept of a new Pacific Community, a very multilateral approach to Asia, guided the entire Clinton administration, not just the Lord term as Assistant Secretary of State. Today, there is no talk about a Pacific community in the White House. Even though the President did attend the APEC summit in Shanghai last fall, there is relatively little enthusiasm for APEC and there is no enthusiasm at all for the ASEAN Regional Forum.

To the extent that the administration was prepared to act multilaterally, it saw the most appropriate form of multilateralism as a bottom up process of building connections among the like minded – that is, America's friends and allies -- as opposed to a top down universal vision of bringing everyone together in a common organization to discuss common problems. As one administration official once put it, that kind of

universal multilateralism assumes that all countries are created equal and, as the official went on to say emphatically, they aren't. So, we can see relatively little interest in multilateral institutions in the form that they have taken in Asia and of course the form that they have taken in the UN.

Secondly, the Bush administration is more cautious about the authoritarian regimes in Asia that may have fundamental conflicts of interest with the United States, particularly China and North Korea. The administration came into office explicitly contrasting its approach, which was to see China as a strategic competitor, with what it said was the Clinton administration's approach, which was to see China as a strategic partner. (In fact, the Clinton administration saw China as a "potential strategic partner," a distinction that was lost on the Bush administration and the Republicans partly because the Democrats did not really make it clear that their policy had been misinterpreted.) Thus we see that contrast in very stark form in two memorable phrases – China as partner or China as competitor?

There was also great skepticism about North Korea, and therefore skepticism about the feasibility of Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy towards the North at least insofar as Kim was conducting it. The Bush team viewed the Sunshine Policy as seeming not to demand reciprocity from the North and not to focus sufficiently on the issues of greatest concern to the United States: proliferation and the conventional balance along the DMZ.

It is not clear how far this skepticism towards China and North Korea goes.. Some in the Republican Party, if not in the administration itself, believe that our policy should be to try to secure the collapse of these regimes, or at least their fundamental transformation. Others are prepared to engage with them but on much tougher terms than the Clinton administration had been willing to do. In either event, the bottom line is: be far more cautious and skeptical about authoritarian systems in Asia that are potential adversaries of the United States.

Theme number three was that the United States should devote its energy to the task of building up and strengthening our alliances and quasi-alliances with democracies and like-minded states in the Asia Pacific region - especially with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and (this is where the word "quasi" comes in) India. All of these were seen as being far better partners for the United States than a country like China because of the common commitment of these countries to democratic institutions, and in the case of the first three, existing alliance relationships with the United States.

Now again, how far the administration wanted to go in this regard was not and is still not clear. Some, such as our new Ambassador to India, Robert Blackwell, had argued for "multilateralizing" these bilateral relationships into something that might begin to resemble an Asian version of NATO. Others saw the difficulty in doing that. But in either case, this third theme was articulated so as to focus on our friends, not on our potential adversaries. And here the tagline was that President Bush would never spend nine days in China without visiting our allies in North East Asia, South Korea and Japan, on his way to or from Beijing the way President Clinton did.

The fourth theme concerns relations with Taiwan. This theme can be summed up as follows:

- 1) Be more forthcoming with Taiwan, not because we can describe it as an ally, but because we see it as a friendly democracy and indeed the world's first undisputedly democratic Chinese state.
- 2) Be more forthcoming with regard to a security commitment to defend Taiwan if it is attacked by the PRC (People's Republic of China).
- 3) Be more forthcoming in terms of permitting a higher level of interaction between American and Taiwanese officials, while preserving the concept that we have an unofficial relationship with Taiwan.

Now again, how far the Republicans want to go was never clear. Some conservatives would like to abandon the "one China" policy. Some would like to call for the independence of Taiwan, or at least a referendum on Taiwan's future, and back it up with force. That view, I think, does not have majority support in the administration. But the basic gist is: be more forthcoming to Taiwan and do not reassert the so-called "three no's," which had been the unfortunate way in which Mr. Clinton had summarized our policy towards Taiwan.

And finally, there was an Asia dimension to a general theme of the Bush administration, which was to re-orient American strategic policy after eight years of alleged drift and decline in terms of our national defense. Although there was much speculation and not a great deal of evidence before the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) was published right after September 11, the buzz around Washington was that this would contain two elements that would be important to Asia:

- 1) A commitment to ballistic missile defense on a scale far larger than the Clinton administration had grudgingly agreed to in its final years in office, and
- 2) A shift of American conventional forces from Europe to the Western Pacific and East Asia, to reflect the fact that now our greatest strategic challenge was managing the rise of China, not maintaining stability in Europe.

These were the ideas that were expected to inform the QDR.

In summary, we can say that this was "anything but Clinton," and that much of it was defined as "doing the opposite of whatever Clinton had done." But, to the extent that there was a positive vision here, the policy was based on the recognition that Asia is a more dangerous place because of North Korea and because of the rise of China, and that the United States should be less naïve about the possibility of engagement with those countries. Rather, we should look at Asia in a hardheaded, neo-realist way; deal with uncertainties by building up military forces, both conventional and missile defense; and strengthen relations with our allies.

Now obviously those as well informed as you are in the audience can already see there are some contradictions here. To cite only one example, how could the administration talk about being more skeptical towards North Korea and at the same time talk about building up its relations with South Korea when the president of that country was committed to the so-called Sunshine Policy? Without belaboring the contradictions in the original vision, let me proceed to give you my views of how subsequent events have forced modifications in the Bush administration's initial approach

After September 11, the most common question I have gotten is: How did the terrorist attacks reshape American policy toward Asia, and especially toward China? Without denying the importance of September 11, it seems to me that with regard to China policy, there was a prior event that was equally important if not more so. This was the EP-3 incident on April 1, 2001. I am referring to the tragic collision of a Chinese Air Force plane with an American naval surveillance aircraft in international waters off China's Hainan Island. Without getting into the question of who was right and who was wrong, from a strategic point of view both the incident itself and the way in which the two countries handled it showed the risk of direct military conflict between the United States and China.

Since the two countries regarded each other as strategic competitors, and since their militaries had begun to operate in more assertive ways toward one another, an accident such as the EP-3 affair was just waiting to happen. Moreover, the ability of the two leaderships to manage what might initially be a very small event clearly had to be called into question. Both sides were smart enough to realize the risks the EP-3 incident showed, and understood the need to reduce those risks. Therefore it was after EP-3 that the Bush administration stopped -- and this was a deliberate decision -- talking about China as a strategic competitor, and, while they obviously could not return to the Clinton administration's formulation, they began talking about a constructive, cooperative and productive relationship with China as the goal of American policy. As self-avowed neo-realists, the Bush administration had to acknowledge the danger of competition between a rising power like China and a status quo power like the U.S.. But where they had once argued that this competition is inevitable, they now began to describe their policy as trying to prevent that kind of dynamic from playing itself out.

It is important to emphasize however, that even though the two countries moved very quickly to adopt this cooperative framework as the common construct for their bilateral relationship, the Bush administration has not made the kind of significant concessions to the PRC on the Taiwan issue which the Clinton administration felt it had to make in order to consolidate its relationship with China. As the President's trip to Beijing in February (2002) showed, the Bush administration has not felt the necessity or the desirability of doing this. There has been little drawback on American policy towards Taiwan. In fact, what concerns me is that the Taiwanese are euphoric about the way in which the Bush administration has restated or re-conceptualized our policy towards Taiwan. This may produce some problems with the PRC not so much because of what we said but because of what our Taiwanese friends are saying we meant by the Bush administration's formulation.

The EP-3 affair therefore served to stabilize US- China relations and put them back on a more cooperative footing. And of course September 11 had an even broader impact. Let me tick off some of the ways in which this has affected US policy towards Asia and relationships with Asia.

First of all it served to strengthen at least two important bilateral relationships: US-Japan and US-China relations. In the case of the US and Japan, the very rapid and (from Washington's perspective) forthcoming way in which the Koizumi government responded to the common threat of terrorism, gave Americans a great deal of satisfaction. The contrast between 2001 and 1992 (the Gulf War) was very real and very dramatic. So this showed to Washington that it had a cooperative, active and energetic Japanese ally.

In the case of China, obviously, there were few if any common military operations, but the way in which the Chinese after a very small amount of hesitation gave diplomatic support to the United States -- and from what we understand intelligence support -- was very gratifying. It showed that the United States and China had a common interest in a major security problem for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. That China was willing to work together with the United States to address this problem persuaded many Americans that while the rise of China might be a problem for the United States twenty years from now, the common threat of terrorism was a threat today. And that put the China threat hypothesis in a somewhat different perspective.

However, other American friends in the region were more nervous, even in the immediate aftermath of September 11. Many of the friendly nations in South East Asia that had significant Islamic minorities, and here I am thinking in particular of Malaysia, Indonesia, and even Singapore (although not the Philippines), were very nervous about the way in which US operations in Afghanistan would inflame ethnic problems in their own countries. India too, was quite disturbed. India had been hoping the new overtures from the United States would mean greater attenuation of the American relationship with Pakistan and of course the struggle against terrorism had just the opposite effect: a strengthening of American relations with Pakistan. So the Indians were quite nervous about September 11 and its consequences as well.

Broadly speaking, September 11 forced a refocusing of American security policy on the immediate problems of homeland defense as opposed to longer term broader balance of power issues. The specific reassignments or redeployments of American forces that were described when the QDR actually came out in September of 2001 did not show a massive shift from Europe to East Asia as had been expected. Instead, it announced the intention to shift forces to the Middle East, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Although the document was obviously drafted before September 11, enough tweaking may have been done to modify much of that part of the document. The focus had shifted to homeland defense and the Middle East and away from China and East Asia, although the commitment to ballistic missile defense remained intact.

And finally, of course, September 11 persuaded the administration that when it came to the struggle against terrorism, it had to act multilaterally in Asia. This meant that the President did go to APEC. This was his first post September 11 foreign trip, although it was cut short. He still showed what he thought about APEC when he tried to focus the meeting entirely on the struggle against terrorism. That's where multilateralism plays its role and I still don't see much enthusiasm [in the administration] about other kinds of multilateralism or the other purposes of APEC. But still, [the president's trip to APEC] did indicate that the administration realized that multilateralism did have its place, that sometimes it would reject it, but other times it would reinforce it and acknowledge its importance.

Let's turn finally, to the perceived victory in Afghanistan. It had a number of implications:

- 1) We could now begin to slowly resume a more normal diplomacy. The exclusive focus on terrorism from September 11 until January could now begin to decline and the President could reschedule his trip to the three countries of North East Asia that he took in February.
- 2) With the Afghan victory apparently achieved, the administration could now begin to talk about the so-called "Phase Two" in the struggle against terrorism. This expanded the struggle against transnational terrorist organizations to include unfriendly states that were developing weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems that could be given to, or fall into the hands of, terrorist organizations. This was summarized in the infamous three-word phrase, Axis of Evil, which identified Iraq, Iran and North Korea as in some sense the next targets.

There has been enormous concern especially in South Korea, but also in China and Japan, as to what this means -- what specifically our strategy is going to be. This has complicated American relations with much of the world until we clarify what this Axis of Evil strategy and the second phase [of the war against terror] imply. We also have to add that the first phase in the struggle against terrorism has expanded to other countries. The Philippines is one of the places where American forces are now operating, along with Georgia, Yemen and perhaps other places as well.

So that is how the Bush administration's Asia policy has evolved in the last year plus. To sum up what has been the net effect of the new policy plus the modifications:

- 1) A renewed desire to build a cooperative relationship with China although there is still considerable skepticism about China's intentions, a focus on a longer-term threat from China, and some reservations about the prospects for this more cooperative policy.
- 2) A preoccupation with terrorism and increasingly with so-called irresponsible or unfriendly rogue nuclear states, which has reinforced pre-existing skepticism about North Korea.

- 3) : Terrorism may have initially have strengthened our Asian alliances, but now as we go on to phase two, there are increasing differences between the US and its allies over the fight against terror. As we get back to something that more resembles business as usual, we may have differences with our allies on other issues as well.
- 4) And finally, there is still no over-arching vision, no clear sense of where the administration is going in its Asia policy as a whole.

Let me conclude with a final thought: Is [the reason the Bush administration lacks a definable policy] because it does not have a policy? Does it mean the administration simply feels that you get into trouble formulating grand theories? Or does it have a policy that it simply does not want to share with us, for example, a policy of establishing a unipolar world centered around the United States -- and that, of course, is something you don't talk about; it is something you do. I don't know the answer to my own questions, but I am increasingly frustrated, as one who cut his teeth on the analysis of foreign policy documents back when I was trained to be China watcher: The absence of an articulated vision of what America is about in Asia still worries me, and a year plus into the new administration, we still don't have one.

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