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The president is on his first official trip to Asia. Unfortunately, his agenda appears focused on reinforcing the status quo—“strengthening” the usual ties with the usual allies and forging an “enduring” American presence. Worse, the administration is dedicated to maintaining and even expanding Washington’s Cold War era security ties.

The United States achieved its dominant position in East Asia in the aftermath of World War II. Washington defeated Japan and created a network of alliances to both prevent any imperial Japanese renaissance and contain Soviet and, later, Chinese expansion. The Cold War with China, which went unrecognized for three decades, and North Korea, which remains unrecognized after six decades, was very chilly indeed.

But that world has largely disappeared. Japan has recovered and created the world’s number two economy. The Soviet Union is gone. Maoist China lives on only in the late dictator’s ubiquitous image. Vietnam has joined the global economy. South Korea has raced past the decrepit Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Other countries, ranging from Australia to India, are capable of playing a stabilizing role in the region.

The recent naval clash between South and North Korea demonstrates that the potential of conflict remains. However, without any link to a global hegemonic competitor like the Soviet Union, such regional instability poses little threat to the United States. Indeed, Pyongyang doesn’t even pose much of a threat to the Republic of Korea. How else to explain why the ROK has for years failed to further expand its own military while subsidizing its supposed antagonist?

Yet Washington’s Cold War alliance structure remains essentially unchanged. The United States maintains one-sided “mutual” defense treaties with Japan and South Korea. American

officials routinely resist host nation demands to reduce deployments and close bases. That America must remain both militarily dominant and guarantor of regional peace is taken for granted. In Washington the People's Republic of China's apparent determination to create a military capable of deterring U.S. intervention along its border is treated as a threat to American security.

What has ever been must ever be appears to be the basis of U.S. foreign policy and military deployment.

The Obama administration should pursue a different course, a transformational agenda, emphasizing economic integration while promoting military detachment. America still has a major economic role to play, but should increasingly devolve defense responsibilities on countries in the region.

The most important relationship for the twenty-first century will be that between the existing superpower and the potential superpower. Washington should strengthen economic and trade ties with China. That requires maintaining an open market at home while working through contentious disputes, such as the value of the Yuan. The United States also needs to address its own irresponsible fiscal practices which may discourage Chinese purchase of U.S. government securities and investment in private American companies.

Moreover, Washington must forge a cooperative relationship on difficult regional issues like North Korea. The PRC has much at stake in a stable Korean peninsula; China also has much to gain from taking the lead in promoting diplomatic solutions of regional problems. The president should press hard for a more active PRC policy to support reinvigorated U.S. engagement with the North. In that case, Beijing should be prepared to take forceful measures if Pyongyang rejects a peaceful solution. Successfully defusing the North Korean geopolitical bomb would offer some of the "strategic reassurance" which the administration has talked about.

The United States should speak frankly about the importance of human rights, while recognizing Washington's limited ability to influence the PRC's behavior. An improved bilateral relationship is more likely than isolation to encourage greater respect by Beijing for the liberty of its citizens.

Japan, with a new and untested government in Tokyo, is likely to be another tough test for the

president. He should treat Japan as a full partner. In economics, that means proposing a free-trade agreement (FTA). On defense, that means shifting to genuinely mutual security ties.

Rather than merely adjust its controversial Status of Forces Agreement, Washington should withdraw its garrisons from Japanese soil, turning defense responsibility for Japan over to Tokyo. The Japanese people must decide on the foreign policy and military forces which best serve their interests, but they should understand that the United States will no longer step into any resulting security gap.

Washington also should encourage greater cooperation between Japan and its neighbors. Some in East Asia continue to express disquiet at the thought of Tokyo taking on greater security responsibilities, but World War II ended more than six decades ago. The Japanese do not have a double dose of original sin and the Americans should no longer play geopolitical wet-nurse for nations which long ago developed the means to assert their own interests. Washington should engage North Korea over its nuclear program—in fact, bilateral talks are planned later this year.

At the same time, the United States should inform the North that full international integration requires the participation of South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia as well. The president should use this trip to begin a concerted effort to coordinate South Korea, Japanese, and U.S. policies regarding Pyongyang. However, Washington should allow the Republic of Korea (ROK) to lead the nonproliferation campaign. The South, with some forty times the North's GDP and twice its population, is well able to deter North Korean adventurism. Seoul also has the most at stake in maintaining a peaceful peninsula. As the U.S. steps back from its dominant military role, the ROK and its neighbors should step forward.

At the same time, Washington should seek to tighten economic integration. The starting point for that strategy should be an announcement—appropriately made at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum—of a push to ratify the FTA with South Korea and a campaign to promote further trade liberalization in a region that already has 168 FTAs in force, only two of which involve the United States (with Australia and Singapore).

President Obama needs to promote a changed attitude as much as offer specific policies. The new government in Japan appears to be particularly interested in promoting a regional order, called the East Asian Community, apart from the U.S. Washington should embrace rather than resist such an approach—which would represent genuine “change” from today's policy, which is

still rooted in a nonexistent Cold War.

America will be most secure if friendly states in East Asia work together to confront sources of instability, promote respect for human rights, and encourage peaceful settlement of disputes. Such a cooperative venture, backed by a willingness to commit real resources to defense, as reflected, for instance, in Australia's defense white paper earlier this year, also would help channel China's rise in peaceful directions.

The United States will remain engaged in East Asia. America's cultural and economic ties to the region are long-lasting and mutually beneficial. But Washington no longer has any need to attempt to preserve regional military hegemony. And at a time of economic crisis the United States is losing its financial ability to do so. It will take time to transform America's military role. But President Obama should begin moving the region into a new era of less security dependence on Washington.

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