

The Keystone of World Order

In September 1901, President William McKinley addressed the new century's world trade fair in Buffalo, New York, declaring, "God and men have linked nations together [and] no nation can longer be indifferent to any other." McKinley's attempt to move his country away from George Washington's advice, to avoid entering any "entangling alliance," was unfortunately preempted by his assassination the following day. That task fell to his successor, Theodore Roosevelt, to get the United States to recognize "the increasing interdependence and complexity of international political and economic relations [that] render it incumbent on all civilized and orderly powers to insist on the proper policing of the world." Forcing the United States to assist with the "proper policing of the world" took the next half-century. During that time, everyone had to endure U.S. efforts to police and protect the world against the dangers of communism.

Should the United States, at the dawn of a new century, heed George Washington's call to withdraw from all entangling alliances or, alternatively, others' advice to consolidate its Cold War victory, become the primary global power, and prevent the rise of any rival? What kind of role would we, the countries of Southeast Asia, wish to see the United States play, that of a withdrawn and isolated follower or an assertive and hegemonic global power? A highly desirable role for the United States in East Asia would be as the "keystone" of the world order, and more specifically of the East Asian region.¹ For the most part, Europeans treat the notion of sustained U.S. engagement in world affairs with either ambivalence or outright disdain. The mood in East Asia—with the possible exception of China—is significantly different.

Chong Guan Kwa and See Seng Tan are, respectively, head of external programs and assistant professor at the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies in Singapore.

Copyright © 2001 by The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
The Washington Quarterly • 24:3 pp. 95–103.

Traditional U.S. allies—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore—have long perceived the United States as the region’s great stabilizer and “honest broker,” albeit not a disinterested one. The end of the Cold War did little to change this perception, notwithstanding the forced closure of U.S. bases in the Philippines. At the time, rampant fears of an imminent reduction in the U.S. military presence compelled a senior State Department official in 1991 to allay Asian concerns of Washington’s intentions. “Our adaptation to new circumstances must not be interpreted as withdrawal. America’s destiny lies across the Pacific; our engagement in the region is here to stay.”² East Asians, for the most part, ac-

**East Asians
acknowledge the value
of the United States as
a ‘virtual buffer state.’**

knowledge the value of the United States as a “virtual buffer state” among the interests, actual or perceived, of regional powers such as China, Japan, and the two Koreas. The possibility that this perceived value might dissipate in the foreseeable future is highly unlikely, particularly in light of an ascending China.

Nonetheless, casting the United States as the region’s keystone or pillar is not without problems. After all, the United States is, among many other things, the land of the Monroe Doctrine and Madonna, where modern faith in the possibility of radical disjuncture from Old World cynicism (the doctrine) shares space with the postmodern virtue of endless reinventions of identity (the artiste). U.S. “exceptionalism” may be grasped as emancipation from the fetters of history; in a sense, it is to rewrite history by reinventing the United States and, by extension, the world. We recall, for example, Madeleine Albright’s impassioned plea, issued at her Senate confirmation hearings, that “we [the United States] must be more than audience, more even than actors; we must be the authors of the history of our age.”³

On one hand, such high-minded ambition—some would even say arrogance—is anathema to many East Asians,⁴ especially those who take issue with the evangelistic zeal of U.S. foreign policy makers to remake East Asia into an annex of Americana, or, failing that, an authoritarian Other: modern in the economic sense, but primitive in social and political realms. On the other hand, the fundamental significance of the U.S. presence in East Asia is unquestionable—a fact that East Asian politicians and pundits grudgingly acknowledge. Surely, criticisms of hypocrisy leveled against East Asian regimes are not entirely without justification.⁵ For example, throughout the “Asian values debate,” these regimes were criticized for rejecting U.S. demands for liberal democracy and human rights protection in their

countries, but accepting, or even insisting on, U.S. military protection and support for their territories. Notably, Singaporean contributions to that debate for the most part did not advocate the superiority of Asian values as much as “react to Western proselytiz[ing].”⁶ Exporting democracy and other liberal values is beneficial when tempered by an appreciation for the difficulties involved in transplanting political practices into a variety of historical and geographical contexts.⁷

The United States apparently understands this role, at least in foreign policy rhetoric if not in actual foreign policy practice. Warning “the enemies of liberty and our country” against presuming any imminent isolationist turn in U.S. foreign policy, President George W. Bush intimated in his inauguration speech that “America remains engaged in the world, *by history and by choice*, shaping a balance of power that favors freedom.”⁸ By these words, the president clearly means U.S. freedom. A United States as keystone of the “East Asian order,” however, precisely because of its deep appreciation for the interrelation of history and choice, may be required on occasion to regulate or restrain its own freedom voluntarily in the interests of international stability, similar to what Indonesia under Suharto had done for regional stability in Southeast Asia during the formative period of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁹

Sharing the president’s evident sensitivity for the U.S. role in the region—though not necessarily his policy preferences or his policy execution—we imagine the United States as a key regional pillar that exercises power and prerogative in accordance with its own interests, but with a fundamental appreciation for moderation and restraint and a deep sensitivity to the region’s immense complexities. The stakes are enormous; as a scholar once warned, East Asia, more than any other region in the post–Cold War era, constitutes a potential “cockpit of great-power conflict.”¹⁰ Clearly, whatever the ideal regional role for the United States is, it does not consist of pushing East Asia toward that calamitous end.

The Unbearable ‘Lightness’ of U.S. Leadership

François Heisbourg has usefully identified four visions of the United States that more or less comport with the ways in which non-U.S.—certainly European—public opinion views the United States in its conduct of foreign policy: “benign hegemon;” “rogue state;” “trigger-happy sheriff;” and “keystone of world order.”¹¹ Given the usually generous image of the United States held by many East Asians, the more odious of Heisbourg’s visions may not apply, at least not historically. If the ambivalence in regional news editorials is indicative, however, an incipient sense of unease among East

Asians lingers over recent U.S. conduct in East Asia, rendering those visions plausible.

French foreign minister Hubert Védrine's description of the United States as a hyperpower (*hyperpuissance*) implies that a benign hegemon (or, in another formulation, "benevolent empire") can at times appear to others as an

The United States partly underwrites the survival of small states such as Singapore.

insufferable bully.¹² Much of this perception involves Washington's post-Cold War gravitation toward a unilateralist foreign policy, notwithstanding President Bill Clinton's stated preference for "assertive multilateralism." Prior to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air campaign against Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999, for example, several European leaders objected to alleged U.S. hubris and its tendency "to go it alone." As Stewart Patrick has observed, since the end of the Cold War, the United States

"has demonstrated a growing willingness to act alone and to opt out of multilateral initiatives."¹³ A capricious regard for multilateralism, Patrick concluded, may complicate U.S. formulation and pursuit of a coherent foreign policy.¹⁴ Most recently, Washington's unilateral impulse manifested itself in the Bush team's insistence in the face of fierce opposition from strategic allies and others to proceed with plans to build and, conceivably in the near future, operate national missile defense (NMD) and theatre missile defense (TMD) systems.

Second, the notion of a rogue state, thanks to recent trends in U.S. foreign policy, naturally conjures an image of Iraq, Iran, or North Korea. As farfetched as the idea of the United States as a rogue state may seem, certain East Asian quarters are growing more concerned about U.S. "revisionist" tendencies, in the sense that the United States seeks to undermine the regional status quo. As U.S. national security adviser Condoleezza Rice opined, "Great powers do not just mind their own business."¹⁵ A key to this observation is the recent U.S. redefinition of China as a "strategic competitor" rather than, as had been the case for Bush's predecessor, a "strategic partner." In comparison with Clinton's engagement model, the differences in Bush's policy, as Secretary of State Colin Powell has taken pains to note, are more apparent than real, especially *vis-à-vis* trade issues. More disturbing, however, is unabashed U.S. support for Taiwan, an especially vexatious issue for China.

Equally troubling is the movement toward using Japan as an ally for balancing China. The so-called U.S.-Japan-China "trialogue" has an element of *déjà vu*,¹⁶ bringing back memories (unwanted for some, perhaps) of

Henry Kissinger's triangular, great-power balance, which involved the United States teaming with China against the Soviet Union.¹⁷ Although this activity surely is insufficient evidence to merit categorizing the United States as a malign hegemon, the unfortunate image of a dominant power willfully employing its vast assets and power to achieve its own ends—without much concern for what John Ikenberry has termed “strategic restraint”—implies a certain roguishness to its behavior. From this vantage point, Rice's position that “China is not a ‘status quo’ power” because it “resents the role of the United States in the Asia–Pacific region” clearly has an odd ring to it, because a similar charge can be made of the “revisionist” U.S. stance.¹⁸

The third vision brings a cheeky twist to Richard Haass's notion of the United States as a “reluctant sheriff” uneasy with the clarion call to guarantee world order in the post–Cold War era.¹⁹ A host of post–Cold War militaristic adventures—Panama; the Persian Gulf; Serbia; Kosovo; and most recently under Bush, the bombing of Iraqi targets—has encouraged the perception abroad of a trigger-happy sheriff. According to this view, the notion of U.S. reluctance to police the world is contested less on strategic grounds than on the U.S. proclivity toward a highly selective, incoherent policy. Hence, this sheriff is both quick on the trigger and fickle and unreliable, as U.S. indecisiveness over Bosnia in the early 1990s implied. Washington's unwillingness to risk U.S. lives in the pursuit of less than vital interests—an otherwise legitimate concern—may force the impression that, in games of “chicken,” the United States would invariably blink first. Such perceptions of U.S. unreliability, whether or not correct, could prove disastrous for its East Asian allies, some of whom, such as South Korea and Taiwan, face highly unstable and unpredictable situations.

An incipient sense of unease among East Asians lingers over recent U.S. conduct.

The fourth and final vision of the United States as the keystone or pillar of world order is not mutually exclusive of the earlier three visions. Many Europeans—and, needless to say, East Asians—still regard the U.S. role as salient to the existing international order. In other words, the United States is perceived as “the only credible ultimate guarantor of that order” and the “only global-scale exporter of security.”²⁰ Complaints of U.S. roguishness or trigger-happy behavior aside, there remains the strong if painful awareness that, if not for the existing security framework provided by bilateral and multilateral alliance commitments borne by the United States, the world could, or perhaps would, be a more perilous place.

Speaking of the relative success of alliances and other institutional frameworks, however, presupposes the existence of norms, principles, and rules. John Gerard Ruggie, for example, has argued that there exists, among the developed nations since the end of the Great Depression of the 1930s, a “common social purpose” to eschew the market failure of the depression pe-

riod by ensuring the maintenance of a liberal economic order.²¹ Ruggie called that common social purpose “embedded liberalism.” No nation, benign hegemon included, can successfully manage international order without the consensual support of other nations that results from a shared social purpose—unless, of course, it rules by fiat. How a common social purpose can emerge and be embedded without multilateral engagement by the parties involved is admittedly difficult to imagine.

Whether Washington can sufficiently restrain

itself from an excessive unilateral impulse and engender the necessary social and political capital for the role of guarantor of international order is unclear, as is whether Washington, under Bush, views pursuing such a role as desirable in the first place.

In contrast to Europe, East Asia has no corresponding alliance commitments and institutions. In this respect, the most ambitious and extensive framework in the region today, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), is precisely that—a security forum, or “talk shop,” not a defense arrangement. Worse yet is the uncertainty about how the Bush administration’s reticence over multilateralism in East Asia would affect the future of the ARF. The recent flap over the commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Command Admiral Dennis Blair’s idea of forming “security communities” in East Asia rendered explicit to the Bush administration the ostensible wisdom of its stated reliance on (in Powell’s words) “the bedrock” of bilateral alliances to cement U.S. influence in the region.

“Alliances,” as Bush’s campaign-trail mantra went, “are not just for crises.” This stance also places doubt on the future of Blair’s “parallel diplomacy,” which, by most accounts, has achieved some genuine progress in the promotion of multilateral cooperative security in East Asia. In fairness, not only Washington’s reluctance regarding multilateral engagement is at issue here. Some East Asians are tepid toward prospects of further multilateralization in their own backyard, as evidenced by Chinese suspicions over the alleged U.S. effort to “contain China,” or the overworked rationalizations of some ASEAN member nations regarding the importance of doing business “the ASEAN way.” Nor, as some have argued, do East Asian

It is precisely this element of self-moderation that seems lacking in current U.S. policy.

countries have the kind of common social purpose that is found among their European counterparts.²² Nonetheless, what most of East Asia does seem to have, as noted earlier, is an appreciation for the United States as the region's stabilizer and honest broker for mediating regional relations in an interested but, for the most part, fair way.

U.S. Self-Images and Adopted Roles

Whatever hopes we in Southeast Asia may have for the United States will ultimately have to correspond to U.S. images of its role. Without links between our hopes and U.S. aspirations, our hopes become illusory. On a personal level, no one who switches on a personal computer today to log on to the Internet is unaware of the power of U.S. technology. Everyone who invests in stocks watches with interest and concern the cycles of the Nasdaq index. At the national level, we scrutinize the pronouncements of Alan Greenspan for its possible impact on our economies. This economic preponderance and technological singularity gives the United States the wherewithal to manage its relations with the rest of the world unilaterally. On the other hand, doubts about its ability to police the world and its preoccupation with domestic issues—particularly drugs, crime, and the environment—might lead the United States to look inward rather than outward. As in the 1930s, the option to isolate itself from the problems of the world may appear increasingly attractive.²³

Most of Southeast Asia would not want to see the United States go home. Indeed, one of the implicit goals of the ARF is keeping the United States engaged in the Asia-Pacific region. The challenge of this task is ensuring that the United States is a self-restrained power and does not become a “rogue” superpower that the rest of the world must then contain.

Robert Zoellick, Bush's erudite trade representative, has cogently argued that a key presidential responsibility is to produce “a strategy that will shape the world so as to protect and promote U.S. interests for the next 50 years.”²⁴ Notwithstanding the otherwise legitimate concerns of East Asian powers that resist intrusion, the United States does have legitimate interests in East Asia that need to be protected and promoted. The traditional view from Singapore—a “small red dot on the map,” as a former regional leader reminded us—is well represented by Lee Kuan Yew, who asserted in 1966 that, “in the last resort, it is power which decides what happens and, therefore, it behooves us to ensure that we always have overwhelming power on our side.” As the guarantor of world order, the United States partly underwrites the survival of small states such as Singapore. More importantly, we believe that Washington, in promoting its vision of the U.S. role in the

twenty-first century, must necessarily exercise a generous measure of restraint. Washington has completed this task so well in the postwar period, even as it pursued the Herculean task of stabilizing the world order. For the most part, current U.S. East Asian policy seems to lack precisely this element of self-moderation. Inis Claude, a prominent scholar of the balance of power system, in summing up his decades-long study of the balance of power principle vis-à-vis the European order, wrote:

That this moderation is viewed as the essential foundation for the functioning of the balance of power system rather than as a consequence of its functioning is evidenced by the fact that the fading and ultimate collapse of the efficacy of that system is customarily attributed to the decline of those factors that sustained moderation.²⁵

The world of present-day East Asia is quite different from nineteenth-century Europe, but the wisdom of Claude's reflections on moderation and power balancing still hold true. Bush has spoken passionately on U.S. engagement in the world as primarily about "shaping a balance of power that favours freedom."²⁷ We argue that the United States and its East Asian counterparts can properly realize the collective aim of freedom in the judicious pursuit of U.S. interests in East Asia within the role of guarantor and stabilizer of the regional order. The alternative—the United States as an unrestrained, untutored, roguish bully, particularly in a region as fragile, unpredictable, and yet so full of promise as contemporary East Asia—would simply and surely be disastrous not only for East Asia, but also for the United States.

Notes

1. See François Heisbourg, "American Hegemony? Perceptions of the U.S. Abroad," *Survival* 41, no. 4 (Winter 1999–2000): 5–19.
2. Richard Solomon, former U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, made this point during a visit to Auckland, New Zealand, in 1991. *Straits Times*, August 7, 1991.
3. Martin Walker, "Present at the Solution: Madeleine Albright's Ambitious Foreign Policy," *World Policy Institute* 14, no. 1 (1997): 2.
4. William Overholt, for instance, is scathing in his condemnation of Albright's tenure as the top U.S. diplomat, particularly her knowledge and policy toward East Asia. See William H. Overholt, "Bush and Asia: Solid, Centrist," *Nomura: Asia Strategy* (December 28, 2000), 2.
5. See, for example, Eric Jones, "Asia's Fate," *National Interest* 35 (Spring 1994): 18–28.
6. Kishore Mahbubani, "Preface," in *Can Asians Think?* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1998), 11.
7. We are reminded here of the moral realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, who once cautioned his fellow Americans, "We [the United States] cannot simply have our way, not even when we believe our way to have the 'happiness of mankind' as its promise." *Ibid.*, 12.

8. Lee Siew Hua, "Bush Pledges to Keep the U.S. Engaged with the World," *Straits Times*, January 22, 2001, 1 (emphasis added).
9. See, for example, Arnfinn Jorgensen-Dahl, *Regional Organization and Order in Southeast Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1982).
10. Richard K. Betts, "Wealth, Power, and Instability: East Asia and the United States after the Cold War," *International Security* 18 (1993/1994): 64.
11. Heisbourg, "American Hegemony?"
12. Robert Kagan, "The Benevolent Empire," *Foreign Policy* (Summer 1998); Heisbourg, "American Hegemony?" 9.
13. Stewart Patrick, "America's Retreat from Multilateral Engagement," *Current History* 99 (December 2000): 430–439.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 437.
15. Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1 (January/February 2000): 49.
16. U.S. Institute of Peace, "*Triologue*": *U.S.–Japan–China Relations and Asian–Pacific Stability* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1998).
17. See, for example, Richard K. Ashley, *The Political Economy of War and Peace: The Sino–Soviet–American Triangle and the Modern Security Problematique* (London: Frances Pinter, 1980).
18. Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," 56.
19. Richard N. Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States after the Cold War* (New York: Brookings Institution, 1998).
20. Heisbourg, "American Hegemony?" 15–16.
21. John Gerard Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," in Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), 198.
22. As Sheldon Simon has written concerning, in his view, the Asia–Pacific region (and, by implication, East Asia as well):

No real *community* consisting of common values, interlocking histories, and the free movement of peoples and firms across national boundaries exists yet in the region. Hence the reticence about creating political institutions that would entail policymaking based on legal procedures. Successful institutions require common views of objectives as well as cost and benefit sharing.

Sheldon W. Simon, "Security, Economic Liberalism, and Democracy: Asian Elite Perceptions of Post–Cold War Foreign Policy Values," *NBR Analysis* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 5–32.
23. See, for example, the essays debating "restraint," "selective engagement," "cooperative security," and "primacy" as alternative frameworks for analyzing U.S. strategic choices in M. E. Brown et al, *America's Strategic Choices, An International Security Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000) (revised edition).
24. Robert B. Zoellick, "A Republican Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1 (January/February 2000): 63.
25. Inis L. Claude Jr., "The Balance of Power Revisited," *Review of International Studies* 15 (1989): 80.
26. *Straits Times*, January 22, 2001, 1.

