

A New Asian Agenda

Milling through crowds at a July 1998 Washington embassy reception, I was struck by different responses to President Bill Clinton's just-concluded China trip. To Americans, the trek was a smashing success. Images of the president mingling with the masses in Beijing, Xian, and Shanghai and homespun anecdotes airing over Chinese television made the trip a success in the eyes of Americans.

Yet every Asian correspondent and diplomat with whom I spoke disagreed. As seen through Asian eyes, the trip was without substance, despite Washington's claim of a diplomatic victory.

Washington's contribution to the perception gap confounds Asian policymakers. One Asian diplomat said the United States is looking at East Timor but neglecting the crises found in the rest of Indonesia. "Don't be so focused on your year 2000 elections that your role [in Asia] is diminished," he said.

A focused, coherent, and long-term policy is essential to address Asia's perception of a Clinton administration that is disorganized and ambivalent toward the region. America's inherent strategic advantages will not last forever.

As East and Southeast Asia recover from protracted recession, perception has enormous long-range impact. Sadly, Washington's failed policy causes the region's intelligentsia to question *Pax Americana*. This, in turn, undermines America's ability to fulfill its commitments toward free-trade policies and security.

The White House's 1998 Chinese odyssey was a microcosm for U.S. em-

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phasis on photo-op statecraft. The result of the trip was Beijing's initiation of a new round of dissident arrests, while Hong Kong witnessed further deterioration of its tenuous "two systems" compact with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Far beyond China's borders, other countries in the region are trapped in a perception gap of Washington's making. The president's refusal to visit Tokyo, his public exaltation of the PRC as a stabilizing force, and attack on Japan for alleged inaction during the region's ongoing financial meltdown upset the geopolitical balance. Asia now perceives that Japan had been downgraded while China was to assume a more pivotal role in the region.

A confused policy toward China did not begin or end in 1998. After being led to believe he would have a World Trade Organization (WTO) accord in April 1999, Zhu Rongji returned to Beijing empty handed. Failure to achieve a deal with the WTO has added to already existing bilateral perception gaps. "You need a bedrock of credibility," says Col. Larry Wortzel, a frequent visitor to the region and director of the Heritage Foundation's Asian Studies Center. "A strong presence, coupled with a clear statement of intent and values, are that bedrock."

No single tragedy, incident, or blunder shapes Asian diplomats' perception of resolve or façade. Yet, in the aggregate, a consensus within and outside the (much-heralded Washington) Beltway insists Asian policy is a Potemkin Village. In place of policy are disorganized interventionism and ad hoc initiatives guided by short-term domestic concerns.

Clinton supporters often claim victory, as they had following the 1998 China trip and after crafting a North Korea "framework" agreement five years ago. Asians perceive these as partial victories at best. Even in Washington, few perceive these as anything but reactive steps, not triumphs, that produced short-term gains.

Asians' collective perceptions often differ from our own, as evidenced by the embassy reception. This is disturbing, because the region is pondering many diplomatic quandaries deemed worthy of superpower (meaning U.S.) attention. From their standpoint, the United States is failing the test.

Foremost of these challenges is the ascendance of the PRC. Clinton supporters have failed in their assessments of the world's most-populous nation. We have pontificated in public (a style offensive to Asia) on human rights, labor policies, and Western-style democratization. Given that Asia does not wish to be lectured, these vigorous endorsements, while justifiable and worthy, should be kept in private. In public and in private, we failed to shift the bilateral debate to issues such as nonproliferation, where consensus building may be possible and where the PRC has a checkered reputation.

Worse, Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's tough talk is

usually accompanied by a reversal of policy. This is a calamity: Washington succeeds in sending the wrong messages to both PRC hardliners and reformers, making it difficult for the latter to contest the former.

The Taiwan Strait issue shows how, at the margins, perception gaps might shift the regional balance of power. Until last year, the United States maintained a delicate balance in trans-Pacific security by stating, in the famous “communiqués,” that the PRC was entitled to its opinion on unification with Taiwan. A corollary of that long-held agreement was that the United States would take no position on China’s stance.

After Clinton’s tactless pronouncements, the United States is now perceived as supporting China’s uncompromising stance towards the quasi-annexation of Taiwan. Clinton’s adherence to a “one China” policy on Beijing’s terms provided the PRC leadership with a stunning diplomatic victory and disrupted efforts by those in China and Taiwan seeking peaceful resolution of the always-delicate unification question.

Within the past few months, much of Asia has remained confused regarding evidence of Chinese spying and security lapses at U.S. nuclear weapons labs. Asians cannot understand why the White House appeared to undermine congressional investigators. They ask, who’s in charge here?

Another testimony to failed trans-Pacific statecraft is Pyongyang’s ongoing threats to its peaceful neighbors. Washington pinned hopes on a North Korean “soft landing,” placating that missile-rattling rogue regime. While U.S. officials portrayed the most recent accords (September 1999) as a triumph, Asians perceived it as capitulation. North Korea pledged to temporarily abandon tests of the Taepodong-2 missile in exchange for Washington’s lifting of economic sanctions. Again, Washington backed down from earlier demands that a comprehensive solution on broad issues be the cornerstone of any rapprochement with North Korea. Among the agreement’s key flaws are the lack of transparency, the failure to curb Pyongyang’s nuclear missile programs, and the inability to prevent Pyongyang weaponry from reaching other pariah states.

Here again was evidence of a perception gap. Some Asians are convinced that the United States is not fully capable of mastering its role as superpower in a unipolar world. It is unsettling that as this trans-Pacific battle of perception continues, future confrontations or diplomatic challenges—whether on the Korean peninsula or in another part of the region—may come as the geopolitical dynamic is less favorable (to the United States and

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its allies) than it is today.

Elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region, Washington's short-term obsession with limited objectives serves to undermine what observers concur are reasonable strategic objectives. Consider Southeast Asia. America's fixation on Myanmar—justly criticized as an authoritarian state—has come to shape our entire policy towards its neighbors, the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Reverberations of recent diplomatic blunders remain fresh in the minds of many ASEAN leaders. One was the 1994-95 Michael Fay incident in Singapore, in which a wayward American student was caned for a binge of excessive graffiti. Clinton's grandstanding on the lad's behalf catapulted a minor nonissue into a major diplomatic controversy.

"To be effective in Southeast Asia," says Ernie L. Bower, president of the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council, "you need commitment, focus, and demonstration that you care. Asia doesn't believe we think they are important." A broad, pro-active policy doesn't take much money, he says, "just commitment."

The United States is sending confusing signals to the People's Republic of China, miscommunicating to allies such as Japan, and is viewed as uninterested (or confrontational) in ASEAN.

Despite the perception gap, cultural gaffes, and institutional logjams, there remains an enormous reservoir of good will toward the United States, and aspects of the U.S. system are revered by Asia's leaders. The United States represents an ideal, itself powerful artillery in future perception battles. Yet, America risks losing the opportunity to work with these countries "to develop civil societies ... on their own terms," said John Brandon, assistant director of the Asia Foundation.

Successful diplomacy in the melange of cultures and nations known as the Asia-Pacific region are largely based on perception of intentions and actions. From Kyoto to Kuala Lumpur, from Seoul to Singapore, events unfold rapidly. Today's fixations will evaporate in time as new challenges dot the horizon. It is time to harness resources and devise a multifaceted Asia policy based on resolve and commitment.