

Overview

East Asia in 2009

1. US Policy toward East Asia under the Obama Administration

Barack Obama assumed office as the forty-fourth president of the United States in January 2009. Since its inception, his administration has demonstrably made the Asian region a significant focus of its agenda. That stance has been strongly imprinted upon public perception domestically and abroad by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's February 2009 tour of Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, and China, her attendance at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July and at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Ministerial Meeting in November, and by President Obama's visit to Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and China in November, and his participation in the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in the same month.

The Obama administration's East Asian policy is marked by four distinct features. First, US diplomacy toward Asia is founded on close ties with traditional allies and partners in the region, such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia. Second, the administration is seeking to establish new cooperative relationships with China, India, and other emerging powers in Asia, and the launch of the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue is particularly noteworthy in this regard. Third, heavy emphasis is being placed on cooperation with the United Nations (UN) and other international bodies, with the administration taking a pragmatic approach that is open to direct dialogue with antagonistic regimes, such as North Korea and Myanmar. Fourth, the United States is actively increasing its level of engagement in ARF, APEC, and other existing multilateral frameworks while advancing cooperation with its allies and partners in Asia. This includes efforts to denuclearize North Korea through the Six-Party Talks process and to further prevent North Korea's proliferation of missile and nuclear technologies and other dangerous weapons.

As with preceding US presidencies, the Obama administration has made the US-Japan alliance the cornerstone of its engagement in Asia, a position that was underscored at a summit meeting between President Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama in New York on September 23, 2009. The two leaders agreed to strengthen and deepen the alliance. When they met in Tokyo on November 13, they agreed "they should further deepen and develop the Japan-US alliance and build a new alliance that is even more constructive and future-oriented." They also issued "US-Japan Joint Statement toward a World without Nuclear Weapons," which outlined a strategy for close US-Japan cooperation aimed at promoting nuclear disarmament, nuclear nonproliferation, peaceful use

of nuclear energy, and nuclear security.

The Obama administration is also expanding cooperative ties with China across a broad range of areas. The launch of the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, which convened for the first time in Washington in July 2009, signals stronger US awareness of the need to pursue dialogue and cooperation with Beijing in order not only to coordinate policy on financial, economic, and trade issues against the backdrop of China's rapid economic growth, but also to address regional and global security challenges. At the same time, the White House is maintaining its strategy of preparing for the possibility of Chinese hostilities against the United States or its allies.

The issue of North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities is seen by the United States as not only a threat to such regional allies as Japan and South Korea, but also a critical challenge to efforts for preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This issue came to the forefront when North Korea launched a missile on April 5, 2009, and announced on May 25 that it had conducted its second nuclear test. The Obama administration is responding by taking four courses of action: (1) pursuit of consultation and cooperation with allies and partners via the Six-Party Talks and other channels; (2) imposition of new sanctions against North Korea; (3) strengthening of US military capabilities and implementation of defensive measures aimed at enhancing US military strength and realizing extended deterrence; and (4) using diplomacy as a tool for resolving the situation, including bilateral discussion held within the framework of the Six-Party Talks. The United States is also working to strengthen its alliance with the Republic of Korea (ROK), as was seen at the June summit between President Obama and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak. The two leaders signed the "Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea," a joint statement envisioning action by both sides to adapt their alliance to the 21st century security environment and maintain a robust defense posture. In the document, the United States reaffirmed its commitment to provide extended deterrence, including through its nuclear umbrella. In October, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates attended a US-ROK Security Consultative Meeting in Seoul, where he emphasized Washington's commitment to strengthen the alliance by declaring that the United States would "provide extended deterrence for the ROK, using the full range of military capabilities, including the US nuclear umbrella, conventional strike, and missile defense capabilities."

2. China: Development amid Contradictions

On October 1, 2009, the People's Republic of China celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of its founding, marking the occasion with a commemorative event held at Tian'anmen Square in the capital city of Beijing, which included the first military parade in ten years. In a speech to those gathered there, President Hu Jintao remarked, "Today, a socialist China geared to modernization, the world and the future has stood rock-firm in the east of the world." Furthermore, Hu said, "people from all ethnic groups cannot be prouder of the development and progress of our great motherland," and he emphasized that "all the Chinese people are full of confidence in the bright prospects of the great rejuvenation of the nation."

Just three months before President Hu proudly extolled the achievements of sixty years of Communist Party rule at this ceremony, however, a large number of Uyghurs rioted in Urumqi City, in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The rioting, according to official announcements, left 197 people dead and more than 1,700 people injured, and sent shock waves through the Chinese leadership. For the Chinese government, dealing with ethnic minorities is an important issue that relates to economic development, political stability, and national security. So the radicalization of the minority problem represented a potential undermining of the social stability upon which economic development is premised, at a time when the government faced a global economic crisis and was fretting about its ability to sustain economic development.

In recent years, Chinese policy on ethnic minorities has adopted the dual approach of, on the one hand, severely suppressing demands for political autonomy among minorities, a policy premised on leadership by the Communist Party; while, on the other, endeavoring to gain the support of ethnic minorities by raising standards of living in heavily minority-populated regions, and by making patriotism based on a "Chinese Nation" of Han and all the minority groups an object of admiration. According to a government white paper entitled *China's Ethnic Policy and Common Prosperity and Development of All Ethnic Groups*, huge strides have been made in economic development and infrastructure improvements in regions with large ethnic minorities through massive investments by the central government. But while it praises these achievements, the white paper makes no reference to the widening economic disparity between the Han ethnic group and ethnic minorities, which is assumed to be worsening amid such development. What the latest series of riots have exposed is that, in addition to the

long-standing issue of dealing with protests by ethnic minorities, the Chinese government now confronts a new problem: that of rising discontent toward minorities on the part of the majority Han. For the government in Beijing, the problem of ethnic minorities will continue to be a source of major concern as it seeks to ensure political and social stability in the country.

The US-bred financial crisis and the global economic slowdown, which initially have damaged advanced economies since the latter half of 2008, have also severely impacted the Chinese economy. With the worsening of the financial crisis, the US economy, a major market for Chinese exports, has sharply contracted, forcing Chinese exporters to cut production. Since November 2008, to avoid social destabilization the Chinese government has been implementing an aggressive program of economic stimulus based on large fiscal expenditures. The effects of this stimulus are gradually emerging: in the second and third quarters of 2009, China's GDP grew by a rate of 7.9 percent and 9.1 percent respectively, indicating that the downward trend in the Chinese economy has been halted. However, it is unclear whether this series of economic measures will lead to stable growth. To sustain stability of growth over the long term, the Chinese government will have to deal with the issue of transforming its mode of economic development—and must seek to sustain growth over the long term mainly through “high added value and highly efficient” industries. This means that the Chinese authorities face a difficult challenge of producing relatively high economic growth while transforming the mode of economic development.

From the standpoint of its foreign relations, the global financial crisis may have presented China with an opportunity. The reason is that it has become possible for China to present the task of “overcoming the financial crisis” as a “common interest” of the international community, which in turn allows the former to pursue the building of cooperative relations with major industrial countries and regions. China's political leadership regards the first meeting of the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue as an extremely important event, one that can become an effective platform for engendering a “positive, cooperative, and comprehensive Sino-American relationship.” Moreover, China does not intend to limit the cooperation achieved through this dialogue with the US only to bilateral issues. Instead, it is exploring ways of expanding the scope of the dialogue to regional and global issues, thereby strengthening its influence on international security.

The year 2009 was also a year in which China made an unabashed display of its

confidence militarily. Defense budget in fiscal 2009 amounted to 480.7 billion yuan, a 17.3 percent increase over the previous year and the twenty-first consecutive year of double-digit growth in such expenditures. What the military parade at the sixtieth anniversary celebrations revealed was a change in the balance among the various branches of the military, more domestically produced weapons, and progress in the “informatization” of military units. More specifically, an excessive emphasis on the army had been corrected and it was emphasized that 90 percent of the military’s equipment was now manufactured domestically. In addition, units using such high-tech equipment as AWACS, UAVs, and satellite communications made their appearance for the first time, reinforcing the impression of progress in informatization.

3. The Growing Momentum toward Nuclear Disarmament

In Prague on April 5, 2009, US President Barack Obama gave a speech in which he announced his determination to pursue the elimination of nuclear weapons. He called on the international community to make efforts to reduce and eventually eliminate all nuclear weapons. On September 24 of the same year, at a UN Security Council (UNSC) Summit Meeting called at the initiative of President Obama, a Security Council Resolution on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Nuclear Disarmament was unanimously adopted. This resolution aims at the realization of “a world without nuclear weapons,” and contains a reaffirmation of the importance of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Then, on September 24 and 25, US representatives for the first time in ten years attended the latest conference to promote the effectuation of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which had been held every alternate year since 1999.

President Obama’s Prague speech expressed US commitment to moving forward with talks with Russia to reduce the two sides’ strategic offensive forces—based on a new treaty to replace the soon-to-be-expired Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty I (START I)—as a major step toward the promotion of nuclear disarmament. Although the two sides were not able to reach agreement on a follow-on treaty prior to the expiration of START I on December 5, 2009, negotiations on a START follow-on treaty are continuing. President Obama’s strong stance toward nuclear disarmament and nuclear nonproliferation is likely to exert a favorable influence on the NPT Review Conference scheduled for May 2010. Signs of this were seen at the Third Preparatory Committee for the 2010 NPT Review Conference, held

in May 2009, where a number of participating countries expressed their appreciation for President Obama's forward-looking attitude to nuclear disarmament.

Despite this global increase of interest in and momentum toward nuclear disarmament, there is no room for optimism regarding the nuclear weapons in East Asia. Major developments were seen in 2009 with respect to North Korea's nuclear and missile development. On April 5, North Korea launched a missile, which it had claimed in advance to be a satellite launch. This was followed on May 25 by the announcement of the country's second nuclear test. Then, on July 4, Pyongyang took the provocative step of launching seven ballistic missiles in succession into the Sea of Japan. On May 26, just after the nuclear test, the government of South Korea announced the country's full participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). This was followed by the adoption on June 12 of UNSC Resolution 1874, which imposes severe sanctions on North Korea. The Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear issue are now in a state of abeyance, and no progress toward the denuclearization of North Korea has been made so far.

Meanwhile, Russia is planning to lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons in its new military doctrine. Namely, Russia is to include the provisions which refer to the preemptive use of nuclear weapons to prevent an invasion by the potential adversary in the new doctrine. While continuing nuclear disarmament talks with the United States, Russia is increasing its reliance on nuclear weapons to guarantee its national security.