

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 13
Number 1 *Parameters* 1983

Article 12

7-4-1983

AMERICA "REDUX": EAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE SUPERPOWERS AND ASIAN SECURITY

Bernard K. Gordon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Bernard K. Gordon, "AMERICA "REDUX": EAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE SUPERPOWERS AND ASIAN SECURITY," *Parameters* 13, no. 1 (1983), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1319.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

AMERICA *REDUX*:

EAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ON

THE SUPERPOWERS AND ASIAN SECURITY

by

BERNARD K. GORDON

The last two or three years have been relatively quiet ones for East Asia; there have been few security problems in the region. As Robert Keatley pointed out last summer in the *Wall Street Journal*, at the time of Thailand's last election the US Ambassador and his political staff "had the day off; a decade ago they'd have been monitoring the polls and filing endless reports about the progress of 'democracy.'"¹ Indonesia is another case in point. Until recently, the United States, in a tiff with Indonesia because of lack of agreement on the next US Ambassador there, had left the post in Jakarta vacant for almost a year. A decade ago, with its apprehensions about the region far greater than they are today, Washington would have been much less likely to stand on principle for so long.

Additional signs are evident in Asia's north. A couple of years ago, the prospect of mammoth trade and investment with China was all the rage, both in the United States and in Japan. As the Chinese began to scale down their plans for development, however, and to concede that there had been a lack of coordination and unrealistically grandiose expectations both at the central level and in the provinces, businessmen and others began to pull back. In the process, a number of Japanese were burned financially, and Americans found that in terms of the likely profits that could be expected anytime soon, the problems of finding hotel and office space

and of having telephones that do not work were simply too large to warrant staying on. Likewise, the Reagan Administration found that in regard to its arms sales to Taiwan and its relations with Beijing, it could indeed have its cake in China and eat it in Taiwan. Despite many dire warnings, the sky did not fall.

In other words, East Asia has seemed to become, in many respects, mundane. Plenty of money is being made in the ASEAN region and in Taiwan and Korea as well, for in economic terms, as everyone knows by now, East Asia is the world's most rapidly growing area. But the region is no longer a front-burner political concern. Part of the explanation for that development derives precisely from economic conditions: because much of East Asia is doing well economically, there is less reason to fear for immediate or short-term threats to security.

That is all to the good, and, at least from an American viewpoint, one has to hope that if this is to be a time of quiescence in East Asia, Americans—in business, education, and politics—will use the time well. It is to be hoped, in other words, that American businessmen will not forfeit too many of Asia's markets to Japan, and that our markets here will remain sufficiently accessible to Asian producers so that their own levels of economic activity will not decline to any serious degree. Similarly, for those of us in academia, this can be a time when we prepare more Americans to participate in, to

share at least as actively as the Japanese in, East Asia's growing prosperity. Finally, for those whose concern is Asian security, this is a time to discern whether there are any important trends that could threaten the generally positive and favorable features in East Asia that I have described. That of course is the hardest task of all, for as Bolingbroke wrote a century ago:

The precise point at which the scales of power turn . . . is imperceptible to common observation They who are in the rising scale do not immediately feel their strength, nor assume that confidence in it which successful experience gives them afterwards. They who are the most concerned to watch the variations of this balance, misjudge often in the same manner They continue to have no apprehensions of a power that grows daily more formidable.²

The leaders of East Asia's medium and smaller powers would be comfortable with the main thrust of that observation. It is their nations' security that is most immediately affected by superpower policies in the region, and they believe that we may be at one of those times in history when "the scales of power turn." They are especially wary of the growth of Soviet power in Asia, and the future role and capacity of the United States in the region gives them particular pause. While none want the clock pushed back to the US-dominated 1950s and 1960s, most of the foreseeable alternatives to what is in place today look even worse to them. Accordingly, they wonder and worry about some of the trends now developing.

While East Asian assessments differ, particularly on the likely roles of China and the Soviet Union in the region, perceptions and attitudes about the United States have a common strand. The widespread view is that uncertainty and inconstancy have come to characterize American policy in Asia; and in the view of some leaders, there is a concern that the United States may already be in the process of a strategic reduction of its role.

We should not underestimate, for example, the long-term effect on Asian thinking of Jimmy Carter's intention to remove US ground forces from South Korea. Though that aim was reversed even in the Carter years, and though the Reagan Administration has made clear its position against that course of action, the initial announcement did its damage. Koreans were already sensitive to their standing in American public opinion; and the attention given to "Koreagate," to domestic political unrest, and to the much-publicized activities in the United States of Reverend Moon and his followers has helped Koreans believe that they are not held in particularly high esteem in America. From their perspective, it is only a matter of time before another US administration rekindles the troop-withdrawal option.

In Korea itself, this prospect has not led to any major shifts in basic strategic alignment, but it has helped to underscore the urgency of developing some form of dialogue with the North. And, probably even more important, it has led Seoul to broaden its relations with others in the region. The Korean initiative to the ASEAN countries, as well as Seoul's aggressive campaign to elicit large-scale economic assistance from Japan, should be seen in this light. Neither of those moves are in any way negative developments, and an incipient Korean connection with the Southeast Asian states in ASEAN has mutually attractive features.

Bernard K. Gordon is Professor of Political Science at the University of New Hampshire. His work on international politics in East Asia has taken him to that region annually since 1962, and he has met regularly with defense and foreign ministers and their staffs throughout the region. Professor Gordon has been a Visiting Research Professor at Kyoto University in Japan and at the University of Singapore, and his research has been aided by awards from the Ford, Fulbright, and Rockefeller Foundations. His recent articles have appeared in *Orbis*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Asian Survey*, and his books include *The Dimensions of Conflict in Southeast Asia* and *Toward Disengagement In Asia*.



ASEAN states, for their part, are already uneasy about their heavy dependence on Japan, and the Koreans are clearly anxious to displace the Japanese from as many markets as possible. If ASEAN and Seoul succeed in intensifying their economic ties, both will benefit. Korea, in particular, will prize the added political legitimacy that goes with the trade and investment role it is pursuing in Southeast Asia. It was not so many years ago, after all, that South Korea was still considered a pariah state among some in ASEAN. Similar benefits will come from an intensified Korea-Japan connection, and if these are some of the unintended by-products of the shock waves Jimmy Carter sent to Seoul in 1976-77, the ultimate outcome will not be disappointing.

There is less room for optimism in Southeast Asia. Leaders there are no less sensitive than the Koreans to changes in superpower policies and relations, but they appear to have less confidence that they can effectively insulate their nations' security from the worst consequences of superpower rivalries. Probably the best-known manifestation of this sense of relative helplessness is the growing disarray in ASEAN regarding the situation in Indochina. Until very recently, all ASEAN members had been doing a good job of maintaining public unity; however, today the differences among them are real, well known, and likely to grow. The issue is what stance to take toward Vietnam's military occupation of Cambodia, in particular, and its de facto control over all of what used to be French Indochina, more generally.

Malaysia and Indonesia hope for an early resolution of the issue but point to the growth of Soviet naval power in the region and the extent to which Vietnam's dependence on the Soviet Union has aided that growth. They are more concerned, however, about the way that China has exploited the issue in its campaign to "bleed Vietnam" until it leaves Cambodia. Thailand and Singapore, certainly no less desirous of an early solution, are prepared to mount a longer-term resistance to Vietnam's conquest. They too are not prepared to look with favor

on an Indochina settlement that accepts Vietnam's leading role in Cambodia, but for different reasons.

Thailand's reason is its desire to see Cambodia restored to some kind of buffer between itself and the energetic Vietnamese. It has rightly pictured itself as the front-line state—with Vietnamese troops close to its borders in Cambodia—and no ASEAN member argues publicly against Thailand's view of its own predicament. Singapore has a much deeper reason for its hard-line opposition to the Vietnamese *fait accompli*. Every Singaporean knows in his inner core that the tiny city-state is a Chinese island surrounded by envious Malays, and wants no part of any international settlement that seems to legitimize large and powerful states swallowing their smaller neighbors. Accordingly, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's Prime Minister, has made it a practice recently of talking about "military aid" for the anti-Vietnamese Khmers still fighting in Cambodia. That kind of talk irritates both Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, whose leaders don't mind speaking with some derision about the level of support that Singapore could realistically provide.

The issue revolves around regional estimates of the superpowers—in particular, whether China or the Soviet Union is the greater threat to ASEAN, and whether the United States can be expected to play an effective role to protect the smaller states from either threat. The hope is that it can, but the assessment is generally not optimistic. Lee, for example, has several times articulated what the Thais generally prefer to leave unsaid:

Had there been no Chinese 'punishment' for Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia in 1979, the situation would have been disastrous for Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia. Soviet influence would have become all-pervasive.³

That Chinese role is precisely what most worries Malaysia and Indonesia. Long suspicious of China's role in support of internal insurgencies, both Kuala Lumpur

and Jakarta believe that Thailand is playing with fire (as is all of ASEAN) in relying on Chinese help to aid the Pol Pot followers and other anti-Vietnamese resistance forces in Cambodia. Neither capital is under any illusions about Soviet intentions in the region, but China's proximity and its capacity to call on ethnic Chinese minorities in Southeast Asia worries them even more. For example, when Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Matathir was asked to elaborate on a reported remark of his that China, rather than the Soviet Union, was the "real threat to Southeast Asia's stability," he commented directly:

A lot of people of Chinese origin have settled in all the countries of this region. While the majority of them are loyal, there has always been a small group of dissatisfied people who try to disrupt the peace of the people of the ASEAN countries. It has happened in Indonesia, it has happened in Malaysia. Even Singapore fears this, as do the Philippines and Thailand to a lesser extent.

China has openly said that it morally supports such groupings. What are we to say to that? We can't very well say, 'Well, you are not a threat to us,' when China supports people who have vowed to overthrow our government by violence.

There is also a threat to stability . . . because of Soviet involvement, but the threat of conquest is a different thing. People don't indulge in outright conquest now; big countries tend to subvert by using internal forces to overthrow a government in order to install a government that is sympathetic to them.⁴

The Thai-Singaporean rejoinder to this view of the threat is unequivocal. The Soviet Union intends, as Lee has put it, to be the "arbiter" in Southeast Asia, and the focus of Soviet efforts is the Strait of Malacca:

The Strait is one of the five strategic choke points of the world, besides Gibraltar, Suez, Panama and the Cape of Good Hope. They

must never become 'chokable' by the Soviets.⁵

Last August the Secretary-General of the Thai National Security Council expanded on this position, stating that the Soviet Union had shifted its attention

from the Strait of Malacca to the Straits of Sunda and Lombok in Indonesia in anticipation of Moscow's use of submarines in the area The Soviet Union's plan to make use of the two straits will pose a great danger to Indonesia in the future.⁶

I have drawn on these statements and observations to point up the significant differences on basic strategic questions even among those closely cooperating Asian leaders. In private interviews, this disagreement has been evident for several years; the main new development is that cabinet ministers in ASEAN no longer attempt to hide it. And without attempting to deny the objective reality of the growing Soviet presence in the region, or that of China's insistence that its voice be heard on Indochina and other Southeast Asian matters, many believe that the root of the problem is a much-lowered level of confidence in American policy and capabilities.

With that has come a sense of urgency among the ASEAN states that somehow each must provide as best it can for its own security in the region. Accordingly, the Indonesians and Malaysians press on Washington the view that China is the problem and that the United States must avoid arms sales to the Chinese; while Thailand, worrying most about the pressure from Vietnam on its Cambodian border, seeks to impress on everybody else that Hanoi's sponsor in Moscow is the main issue.

Probably the most disturbing aspect of this development is the threat to ASEAN's coherence and unity that it represents. The organization has become the subject of increasing optimism in American foreign-policy thinking in recent years, but the paradox is that doubts about American policy have contributed, more than any other

factor, to an incipient weakness in ASEAN. Leaders in the region commonly express the view these days that the major defect in American policy is the lack of constancy, or, as Thanat Khoman, former foreign minister of Thailand, has put it, "consistency." He and many others have bemoaned the changes that seem to affect US policy with every change in administration. As a Foreign Minister put it to me a year ago, "We get a bit tired of having to reeducate every new group of American leaders to the facts of life here." Sometimes this feeling leads to openly testy remarks, as in this comment on US policy by Malaysia's Premier:

We have the distinct feeling that there is not the keenness to be involved, or even to be sympathetic sometimes. This is perhaps a very harsh thing to say, but it is a feeling that I think the Reagan Administration has for all countries. It is almost isolationist in its attitude. There is not the kind of sensitivity that we had come to expect from the United States.⁷

The nation that poses probably the greatest uncertainty, and unquestionably the most important in strategic terms, is Japan. Even among those Japanese who are most understanding of American values and thinking, and who have no inclination whatsoever to loosen ties with the United States, there is a strong and growing sentiment that matters are approaching a time of dangerous flux.⁸ With Japan, too, the issue is one of American sensitivity and constancy, even more than a matter of changed perceptions of the Soviet Union or China. Soviet aims toward Japan, for example, are seen as largely unchanged from what they have been throughout the postwar era: as a former Ambassador to Washington put it recently, "to alienate Japan from the US—to Finlandize Japan."⁹

While Japan is under no illusions, then, about Moscow's significantly increased naval capacity in the region, it finds that some US policies tend to aggravate rather than lessen regional tensions. For example, the American inclination to provide some form of military

assistance to the Chinese, through sales or grants, is generally not welcomed. Whether the justification offered for such transactions is that they serve as compensation for the continuing US relationship with Taiwan or that they are designed objectively to help modernize the People's Liberation Army, the view of many in Japan is that American military support of the Chinese is needlessly provocative to the Soviet Union. It is seen as providing yet further rationale for the Soviets to bolster their own forces in the Pacific, which in turn will generate more intense pressures in Japan to build a significantly larger and more sophisticated defense capability.

That direction is not one in which most Japanese yet want to embark—not mainly for reasons of fiscal restraint, but largely out of a Japanese distrust of their own likely inability to stem the growth of a major military buildup within. *Mainichi* expressed that view recently this way:

Military spending has a self-bleeding nature. Once the rein is let loose, it will continue expanding endlessly, as evidenced by our experience in the past The government cannot escape the criticism that it has jumped on such a right wing tide.¹⁰

The Japanese hope to avoid giving further momentum to such tides, and they look to the United States as the main restraint. One area of concern, of course, is the Sino-Soviet relationship itself. Tokyo has watched even more closely than Washington the recent efforts between Beijing and Moscow to resume negotiations on a variety of issues, and the Japanese hope that no US misstep will lead China to more than a resumption of merely "correct" ties with Moscow. Anything beyond that, as an editorial in *Mainichi* put it some months ago, would "rock the foundations of US foreign policy, and Japan too."¹¹ The resumption of a close Sino-Soviet relationship is the most haunting specter for Japanese policymakers, and if they saw developments moving in that direction, they would doubtless call for a thorough and searching reassessment.

It is partly for that reason that the Japanese, and so many others in the region, watch with concern the "insensitivity" to Asian affairs that is believed to characterize US global policy. The recent pattern, for example, under which the United States heavily reduced its Pacific naval deployments (to include the removal of a carrier) in order to bolster forces in Southwest Asia and in the Persian Gulf is still a matter of major apprehension. In Southeast Asia, that move was seen as an indication that Washington expects Japan to fill the gap in such circumstances, and this kind of expectation is a source of worry to those who are not anxious to see the resumption of a Japanese military role so far from the Japanese home islands. In Japan itself, and perhaps in China, the reduction of naval strength was looked upon as a reflection of American thinking that rates East Asia behind Europe and the Gulf as an area of strategic concern. In any case, the common element has been a growing apprehension that the United States does not accord sufficient importance to the Pacific, and a resulting fear that such a view of the world will either forfeit more to the Soviet presence in the region or lead to a warming of Sino-Soviet ties.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that however much East Asian governments have been critical of American foreign and defense policy in the past, a heavy American presence in the Pacific is still the policy most desired today. While the concept of a triangular relationship between China, the Soviet Union, and the United States may have some superficial attractiveness, how such a notion operationally benefits any nation other than the USSR is difficult to see. More specifically, it is the Soviet Union that has long sought to be accepted as a full-fledged Pacific power, and the aim of its activities in recent years has been to make that goal a reality. The noncommunist governments of East Asia, without exception, would not welcome that development, and they do not see it leading to a balance of forces in the region. With regard to China, that nation is widely seen as incapable, for

the foreseeable future, of playing a strategically equivalent role to that of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Pacific, and there are reasons to believe that, in any event, such a role would not be welcomed. A pattern of American withdrawal from the region, which is what most fear is taking place, is seen as either leading in the direction of growing Soviet influence or calling for some other counterweight—most likely from Japan, an alternative almost nowhere welcomed or sought.

Given the circumstances addressed here, each of the states of East Asia that we have looked at may increasingly attempt to strike the best bargain it can, on a unilateral basis. For Japan, such a course of action could mean moving closer to China, an eventuality with which US foreign policy needs to be most concerned. With regard to ASEAN, the growing disarray of that group of states reflects the same uncertainties about US policy, and that is a particularly disturbing development. In sum, the predominant outlook in East Asia seems to be one of hope that the United States will continue in its postwar role as the region's principal security guarantor; but for reasons that are beyond the scope of this article to examine, there is much cause to doubt whether that particular role for the United States is in the cards.

NOTES

1. Robert Keatley, "Welcome Respite from the Lighthouse," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 July 1982.
2. "On the Study and Uses of History," quoted in Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5th ed., rev. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1978), pp. 211-12.
3. Interview with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, *U.S. News and World Report*, 8 February 1982.
4. "U.S. Is Accused of Trying to Wreck Malaysia's Economy," *Malaysian Digest*, 30 April 1982.
5. Lee interview, *ibid.*
6. Sq. Leader Prasong Sunsi, in *Nation Review* (Bangkok) 31 August 1982, quoted in FBIS, 2 September 1982. This is an important statement of Thai views and contains significant data on the scale of the Soviet military and advisory presence in each of the three Indochina countries.
7. "U.S. Is Accused of Trying to Wreck Malaysia's Economy," *Malaysian Digest*, 30 April 1982.
8. For a good sampling see Urban Lehner's "Spat Between Friends," in the *Wall Street Journal*, 18 March 1982, where he reports, for example, that the Secretary-General of the LDP (Susumu Nikaido) said recently that "the chorus of criticism in Washington" reminds him of the days before

World War II, when he lived in the United States. "America is inclined to make mistakes in discerning its enemy. Japan is a friend If Japan's industrial power were to be switched to the other side, the balance in the world would be altered." See also Masashi Nishihara, "Stop Buffeting Japan," *The New York Times*, 14 April 1982.

9. Takashi Yasukawa, quoted in *Wall Street Journal*, 23 June 1982.

10. As quoted in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 August 1982.

11. *Mainichi Shimbun*, 8 March 1982, in Daily Summary of Japanese Press (US Embassy, Tokyo).

