

# The Case for Continued U.S. Engagement in Asia

By Roger A. Brooks

The topic of this forum, strategic disengagement in the post-Cold War era, is an important one, and certainly is one that is being discussed in similar fora throughout this country and overseas, as it should be. But we should be wary of proposing the idea that, because of the changes taking place in the Soviet Union and within the Soviet Bloc, the United States can now afford to become strategically disengaged from the world in general, and, in particular, disengaged in East Asia and the Pacific Rim.

Moreover, as much as we might wish to see an end to the Cold War, the jury that can decide the time of the Cold War's demise is still out. This is at least as true in Asia as it is in Europe.

While we have some reason to be optimistic about the present trends taking place in the Soviet Bloc, we still have the challenge before us of trying to craft a comprehensive conception of basic security goals for the future. And we have to do this at the time of what Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz has called "the breakdown of the strategic paradigm of containment."<sup>1</sup>

The truth is that we are entering a period of lessened threat, but at the same moment we have to deal with reduced resources for defense, rapid technological change and greater conceptual complexity in the kinds of threats which face us, especially in East Asia.

Clearly, as Paul Wolfowitz also pointed out at the end of last year, this is not a situation which demands that we try to match smaller threat with smaller forces. We almost certainly will end up with smaller forces, but the threat, while diminished, is in many ways more complex, and potentially more dangerous than it has been. And the United States will be asked to re-fashion its reduced forces to operate effectively in a different, more subtle and probably more volatile international environment.<sup>2</sup>

**Dependent on Navy.** One principle should stick in the minds of U.S. planners who will be responsible for effecting this change: as a maritime power, the U.S. and its allies and friends are critically dependent on naval forces to a measure far beyond that of a land power like the Soviet Union. And nowhere is naval power more important for the United States than in the Western Pacific.

In brief, while we have seen some substantial Soviet military reductions in Asia, particularly a reduction of ground forces along the Sino-Soviet border, there has been no

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1 The Honorable Paul D. Wolfowitz, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, "Towards a Strategy for a Changing World" Remarks prepared for delivery to The Hoover Institution, December 8, 1989.

2 *Ibid.*

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real decrease in the operational capabilities of the recently-expanded Soviet Pacific Fleet, or the Soviets' nuclear, naval, or naval air capabilities, generally. Moreover, Gorbachev's *glasnost* has yet to translate itself into serious reductions of Soviet and East European Bloc support for the disruptive and destabilizing regimes of North Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan. In addition, the Soviets retain their interest in stimulating anti-U.S. movements throughout the Asia-Pacific region, especially in the Philippines and South Korea.

Finally, instability in the region, particularly in places like China, could re-awaken and invite Japanese rearmament were the United States to become strategically disengaged and thus increasingly irrelevant in the region.

For the past four decades, and in the last decade in particular, American engagement in Asia has meant increasing prosperity and closer economic cooperation for both America and the countries of the Pacific Rim. It also has meant increasing democratization and political liberalization in Asia, although in some parts of Asia this has admittedly come in fits and starts and in other parts of the region, not at all. Such prosperity and liberalization would never have had a chance and would have no future without America's strategic engagement in the region.

#### **THE U.S. VISION OF ITSELF IN EAST ASIA**

While we look to craft a new strategic vision, which may encompass new forms of strategic engagement, and that will continue to further and protect the national interests of the United States, we certainly should not discard all the lessons of the past several decades – decades that have been periods of strategic engagement rather than disengagement for the U.S. That engagement has brought significant benefit to the U.S., particularly in terms of America's ability to create an environment conducive to the creation of democracies and models of free market economic growth throughout the region.

During this period, Americans have looked to East Asia from three distinct vantages:

**First**, Asia's proximity has given rise to a natural, historic and continuing American interest and role in Asian affairs. Americans sought to make the United States a nation of the Pacific as early as 1846. American trade with China began in the 1780s; the U.S. opened Japan to the world in the 1850s. We underwrote East Asian security in the 1920s and remained engaged in the 1930s while ignoring Europe's slide to war. The U.S. has fought two wars in Asia since 1945. Americans are comfortable with the traditions of Pacific commitment. And it is a stake that can exist – unlike NATO – without an overarching military threat.<sup>3</sup>

**Second**, Americans have viewed Asia as the place where the American way has taken root. Americans can take pride in the fact that Asian societies have been and are seeking to emulate U.S. democratic values. Their open embrace of the free market has become a banner for the Third World. Their economic success has become a symbol of the triumph of the American vision. Indeed, the American effort in Vietnam, ultimately unsuccessful on

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3 Dr. Michael Vlahos, "America in the Post-War East Asian Balance," *Heritage Lectures* No. 180, November 4, 1988.

the peninsula, held the line long enough to permit the establishment of a democratic market economy outside Indochina itself. The free existence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)<sup>4</sup> and the prosperity and independence of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan all spring from the American resistance to tyranny in Vietnam. Most recently, American engagement in Asia has helped:

- ◆ ◆ to bring an end to military rule and pave the way for free elections in Korea;
- ◆ ◆ to end a dictatorship in the Philippines and to introduce democratic rule to that country, albeit with some difficulty; and
- ◆ ◆ to bring an end to martial law and rapid progress toward democracy in Taiwan.

Moreover, while China's reforms have been stalled under the heavy hand of an oppressive octogenarian regime, that regime already is having a difficult time putting the genie of free market growth, released in the last decade of economic reform, back in the bottle.

**And third, Americans have viewed Asia as the place where America's future will be challenged.** The increasing democratization in many of the states of Asia has not happened in a political vacuum. It came about, to a large degree, because of the increasing prosperity in the region.

Our trade with Asia was over \$ 290 billion in 1988 or 37 percent of our total world trade. Since 1965, when the U.S. began to strengthen its Asian bases to prosecute the war in Vietnam, Taiwan's GNP has increased nearly fiftyfold, Korea's, over thirtyfold, and Japan's, over twentyfold. Today, we find our second (Japan), fifth (Taiwan), seventh (Korea), tenth (Hong Kong) and twelfth (Singapore) largest trading partners in the Asia-Pacific region.

The next century in the Pacific Rim will largely be characterized by the increasing competitiveness and prosperity of the countries of the region, and a perception in this country that those nations who may have learned their lessons from us all too well during the past four decades are gaining advantage over the U.S.

**Benefiting from Increased Prosperity.** If the U.S. makes the right decisions about its own national priorities and if it remains strategically engaged in Asia, it too can benefit from the increased prosperity that should evolve in the region in this and the next century.

Strategic disengagement from the region — that is, the removal of an American presence as a strategic force or entity in Asia — could mean that the United States not only would become irrelevant as a military presence in Asia, but that it also would not benefit from such prosperity and could suffer real economic decline. If Americans do have a unified vision of themselves in the world, I do not think it is one of increasing irrelevance or of decline, but instead one of continued engagement and commitment in partnership with our friends and allies in Asia.

While there has long been a streak of isolationist sentiment in the fabric of American society, during the past 40 years most Americans have come to understand the dangers of isolationism and disengagement from the world. Winston Churchill challenged the American people to put aside this isolationist view in 1943 when he said:

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4 The countries of ASEAN are Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

One cannot rise to be in many ways the leading community in the civilized world without being involved in its problems, without being convulsed by its agonies and inspired by its causes. If this has been proved in the past, as it has been, it will become indisputable in the future. The people of the United States cannot escape world responsibility.

Churchill's words certainly have as much meaning today as they did then.

In the years immediately following World War II, Americans engaged themselves with the countries of Asia in the spirit of patronage rather than of partnership. Today, there is still a reason for the U.S. to remain strategically engaged in Asia, but that engagement increasingly must be characterized by partnership. This means that, while the U.S. must seek greater participation and contribution from its friends and allies in the region, in providing support for common strategic goals, the United States must be prepared to make a significant contribution to providing a strategic and military deterrent to potential aggressors in the region.

While the U.S. must be able to convince its allies in Asia to carry a significant share of the "burden" of maintaining an American presence there, the U.S. must realize that it too has a "burden" to carry for defense of the region.

#### **AMERICA'S COMMITMENT IN ASIA**

It is important for the United States to remain strategically and militarily engaged in Asia. There are several reasons for this:

**First, the situation in Eastern Europe and the Islamic states of the Soviet Union remain unpredictable, and, in some cases, unstable.**

There is little question that the U.S. wants *perestroika* and *glasnost* to succeed in the Soviet Union. But the U.S. also should prepare itself for the possibility of setbacks in the Soviet Union, particularly for the possibility of Gorbachev's demise and the accession to power of those who may try to re-consolidate old-style power within the Soviet Empire — albeit a much smaller empire. A deterioration of the situation in Eastern Europe or the Baltic states could also raise the specter of increasing instability in the Asia-Pacific region.

**Second, whatever changes the U.S.S.R. has made elsewhere, we must question its goals in the Asia-Pacific Region.**

As I mentioned earlier, we have seen some substantial Soviet military reductions in Asia; a reduction of ground forces along the Sino-Soviet border (of the 200,000 troops that Gorbachev has announced that he will pull out from "east of the Urals," around 120,000 would come from the Sino-Soviet border); a decrease in the out-of-area naval deployments in the Pacific; and a reduction of the number of Soviet aircraft and naval assets deployed at Cam Ranh Bay.

Nevertheless, there has been no real decrease in the operational capabilities of the recently expanded Soviet Pacific Fleet, or the Soviet Union's nuclear, naval or nuclear air capabilities generally. Slight reductions in the absolute size of that fleet through retirements of obsolete vessels have been more than offset by:

- ◆ ◆ the acquisition of fewer but much more capable assets;

- ◆ ◆ the newest generation of fighter aircraft; and
- ◆ ◆ the most modern and advanced attack submarines and surface combatants in the Soviet inventory.

Indeed, the largest concentration of Soviet naval power is in their Pacific Fleet. It contains two KIEV-class aircraft carriers, which will soon be taking on more modern YAK-41 VSTOL aircraft. This new aircraft is expected to have a performance equal or superior to the U.S./U.K. *Harrier* which won the conflict in the Falklands War in June 1982.

The Soviets are now testing their first 65,000 ton aircraft carrier TBILISI. Two more are being built and four are expected to be in the fleet by the end of the 1990s. The Pacific Fleet will get two of these nuclear-powered carriers that may carry top-of-the-line MiG-29s or SUKHOI-27s — both of which are a rough match for U.S. F-15s — our top fighter.

The Pacific Fleet also is taking deliveries of new AKULA-class attack submarines, which are about as quiet as current U.S. attack submarines. The AKULA is also armed with small cruise missiles like the U.S. *Tomahawk*.

**Potential Conflict Zone.** The Soviets consider, moreover, the Alaskan theater to be a serious potential zone of conflict. They maintain a large concentration of submarines, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and bombers on the Kamchatka Peninsula. We have an important early warning radar in the Aleutian Islands, and air bases in Alaska will be useful in attacking Soviet bases and defending convoys to and from Northeast Asia.

Since the mid-1980s, when the Soviets began rebuilding their long-range bomber fleet, they have increasingly tested U.S. defenses in Alaska and the Aleutian Islands. TUPOLEV TU-95H *Bear* bombers regularly probe U.S. defenses, prompting increasing numbers of scramble intercepts by U.S. F-15s in Alaska. The turboprop-powered *Bears* are soon to be replaced by supersonic *Blackjack* bombers, which will be escorted by SUKHOI-27 fighters. Evidence has also been found of Soviet *Spetsnaz* commandos landing on some of the Aleutian Islands.

The Soviets' new openness also has yet to translate itself into serious reductions of Soviet and East European Bloc support for the disruptive and destabilizing regimes of North Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan. For example, Moscow has given top-of-the-line MiG-29 fighters and SU-25 ground attack jets to North Korea. In early 1989, the Soviets accelerated arms deliveries to Cambodia, to allow the Vietnamese-backed Hun Sen regime in Phnom Penh to survive while Hanoi gained diplomatic kudos for withdrawing its occupation troops.

In addition, the Soviets retain their interest in stimulating anti-U.S. movements throughout the Asia-Pacific region, especially in the Philippines and South Korea. In addition to its hefty subsidies to Pyongyang and Hanoi, the Soviets take a real interest in the communist insurgency in the Philippines. The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) has a proven record of Stalinist brutality.

**Third, the need to provide Japan and the Republic of Korea time to gain real self-sufficiency in self-defense.**

Japan and the Republic of Korea are on the brink of being self-reliant for conventional self-defense. Washington should urge them to become even more self-reliant, but the U.S. has self-interests in maintaining its alliance relationships with each. Unlike the Federal Republic of Germany, Japan has no naturally occurring community of cultural engagement with the democratic West. Its main link is the Mutual Defense Treaty with the United

States. An unengaged Japan is free to assist the Soviets or others in a way that could harm U.S. security. It is also free to pursue a military expansion that also is not in our interest.

Today our access to Japanese military bases allows U.S. forces to deter potential Soviet use of their ballistic missile submarines in the region. These bases also provide alternatives to Philippine bases if needed.

Reductions of U.S. forces in the Republic of Korea are likely, but they should coincide with Seoul's determination that American forces are not necessary. If the ROK states that an American presence is necessary to deter the North, the U.S. should examine that request very carefully. Thirty years ago a miscalculation brought the U.S. close to a Third World War. A superpower conflict emerging from a future Korean conflict should not be discounted. The price America pays for its deterrent force in South Korea is far less expensive than the price of a new war.

**Fourth, the need to provide security guarantees to Australia at a time when Australia provides the United States with substantial security benefits in the South Pacific.**

The U.S. has reaped significant benefits from its role in the Australia-New Zealand-U.S. Alliance (ANZUS), particularly in its relationship with Australia. For its promise to respond to threats to Australian security, Washington has received Australian military support in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.

In addition, Australia has made every effort to deter Soviet adventurism in the South Pacific, sparing Washington that expense. The U.S. satellite communications facility in Australia is ideally placed to communicate with our own satellites over the Soviet Union. This is important for arms control verification and would be vital in the event of conflict in that part of the world. For the risks involved in hosting U.S. facilities, it is unlikely that Australians would accept a "less than alliance" relationship.

The Soviets also have strategic interest in dismantling the Western alliance system in the South Pacific because it is a critical region to Soviet access to outer space. All Soviet space launches enter outer space over the South Pacific. As warfare in space becomes an increasing possibility, the Soviets will want to gain greater political power in the South Pacific.

Soviet strategic goals in the South Pacific also include blocking any possible redeployment from the Philippines to that area. The New Zealand Labor Party's departure from the ANZUS military relationship was in great part the work of pro-Soviet trade union leaders also powerful within the Labor Party. These trade union leaders have long been cultivated by the Soviets.

**Fifth, the potential for unanticipated change and subsequent disorder in several parts of the Asia-Pacific Region remains substantial.**

Despite the Bush Administration's valiant attempts to steer China toward reform and preserve what was moving toward a useful strategic relationship, there is now no consensus on how China will develop. When the present Chinese leadership passes from the scene, there could ensue considerable instability; and some even have spoken of the prospect of a new kind of "war-lordism," with the most successful and wealthy provinces coming under the control of the strongest military leader. If this were to happen with the United States militarily and strategically disengaged from Asia, it could invite other countries, such as India and Japan, to move against or into China to protect their interests.

On the Korean Peninsula, one hoped-for result of Seoul's ambitious "northern policy" to advance relations with the Soviet bloc will be to isolate North Korea and to make Pyongyang realize that it must behave differently if it wants to become a member of the civilized community of nations.

**Destabilizing the South.** Seoul is also improving its own military balance versus the North. But Kim Il-Sung's promise to unite Korea under communism before he dies is still current. His son and apparent successor, Kim Jong-Il, is said by South Korean intelligence sources not to have any inclination to change North Korea's Stalinist military state substantively. In addition, we see increasing evidence that North Korea is actively using the South Korean student movement and religious movement to destabilize the South. There is also growing evidence of North Korea's interest in building an independent nuclear weapons capability.

In the Philippines, the situation clearly is unstable. But that is no reason for us to throw up our hands in disgust and walk away from the situation, as some might suggest we do. If the next coup succeeds, a military junta could open an even wider door in the Philippines for the communist insurgency to walk through. Only Filipinos should determine if freedom survives, but the United States has a real moral obligation to prevent a communist blood bath. If Aquino survives, then perhaps the next government will be more competent. In the meantime our military presence greatly assists Filipinos to maintain political stability. Removal of the nearly \$1 billion a year in U.S. aid could create economic and political chaos that would rebound only to the benefit of the Communist Party of the Philippines.

U.S. military presence in the Philippines makes much cheaper U.S. naval deployments to the Persian Gulf, and complements supply routes to Northeast Asia. For now, U.S. presence also blocks Soviet and potential Chinese ambitions to control sea lanes in Southeast Asia.

**Sixth, the need to keep Japan from filling a vacuum left by American disengagement from the region.**

Instability in the region, particularly in places like China, could re-awaken and invite Japanese re-armament were the United States to become strategically disengaged and thus increasingly irrelevant in the region. Japan is still the principal economic power in the region and would not idly sit by if political instability were to threaten their long-term access to commercial markets in Asia.

For this reason, and the reasons which I outlined this morning, I believe that it would be ill advised for the United States to risk strategic disengagement in the Asia-Pacific region.

