

The Iraq War and Asia: Assessing the Legacy

Whereas the media is preoccupied with the war in Iraq, future historians will likely judge the rise of Asia as the more important challenge to the international system in this era. There is no denying that the conflict in Iraq has been unpopular around the world, including in Asia. That has not meant, however, that the Iraq war has galvanized Asia's rising powers to align to balance perceived U.S. unilateralism. If anything, most major powers in Asia have used the war on terrorism and the conflict in Iraq to align more closely with the United States in order to balance rivals within the region or to advance their global standing. Nor has the damage to U.S. moral authority caused by the abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo caused a significant backlash against the norms of the U.S.-led neoliberal order. On the contrary, the universal principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law have never had more currency in Asia than they do today.

These trends in Asia contradict the prevailing wisdom among critics of the Iraq war that the United States has lost influence and moral authority around the world as a direct result of the war. Yet, the Iraq war has had one important pernicious impact on U.S. interests in Asia: it has consumed U.S. attention in a way that has limited the ability of the administration and Congress to reinforce positive developments in the region and to build on partnerships and institutions that will be critical over the course of this century. This problem has been a gradual and indirect result of the war. It is not irreparable but will require attention and recalibration.

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An assessment of the impact of the Iraq war on Asia must be separated from the domestic U.S. and transatlantic debates about the war and instead judged in terms of U.S. strategic objectives for Asia itself. Those objectives have been broadly consistent over the past three administrations: to strengthen U.S. alliances, convince China to play a positive role in the world, roll back the North Korean nuclear threat, and foster politically liberal and economically sustainable development in Southeast Asia. Five years after the Iraq war began, the United States has seen progress on all of these fronts (except perhaps with North Korea) because Asian nations are preoccupied with economic development, balance of power, and internal legitimacy. The Iraq war has had a second- and third-order impact on some of these areas, but it has not changed the basic need in Asia for a strong U.S. strategic presence in the region.

The ultimate legacy of the Iraq war on Asia will therefore depend on whether the United States has the will to see through its commitment to bring stability in Iraq. A failure of U.S. leadership in Iraq will reverberate in Asia more than in any region other than the Middle East itself. Should the United States abandon Iraq, friends and foes alike in Asia will draw conclusions about the willpower and commitment of the United States in their own region, where potentially dangerous power competition and rivalry linger just beneath the placid exterior of growing trade and economic interdependence. The importance of Asia should not be used as an excuse for precipitous withdrawal from Iraq, but neither should the preoccupation with Iraq lead to a search for quick solutions and easy headlines with respect to the strategic challenges in Asia. It is possible and indeed critical to prevail in Iraq while increasing strategic attention to Asia.

Alliances Tested and Transformed: Japan, South Korea, and Australia

U.S. alliances in Asia are stronger today than they were before the Iraq war, none more so than the alliance with Japan. The Bush administration came into office determined to strengthen the U.S.-Japanese alliance based on the precedent set by the Clinton administration's so-called Nye Initiative, which emphasized the U.S. military presence in Asia and its alliance with Japan and the recommendations of the bipartisan report prepared in October 2000 by Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye on Japan strategy.¹

When Junichiro Koizumi became prime minister in April 2001, he shared this vision of a closer bilateral alliance to reinforce stability in the Asia-Pacific region and to strengthen both nations' engagement of a rising China.² Although Japanese politicians and scholars had briefly flirted at the end of the Cold War with the idea of using the China card to balance Japan's strategic dependence on the United States, Koizumi knew that a decade of Chinese

military growth and revelations of North Korean kidnappings of Japanese citizens had brought the Japanese public around to his view that a closer U.S.-Japanese alliance “only strengthens Japan’s position in Asia.”³

The first test of Koizumi’s more proactive management of the alliance came after the September 11 attacks. A Japanese government still traumatized by its ineffective response to the Persian Gulf War 10 years earlier moved with unprecedented speed to pass the October 2001 Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, which allowed the dispatch of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF) transport aircraft and refueling ships to provide logistical support for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

Sending troops to Iraq would prove more controversial, but in July 2003, the Koizumi government passed the Special Measures Law on Humanitarian Assistance and Reconstruction, which permitted the dispatch of 600 Japanese ground forces to Samawah in southern Iraq. Although the government

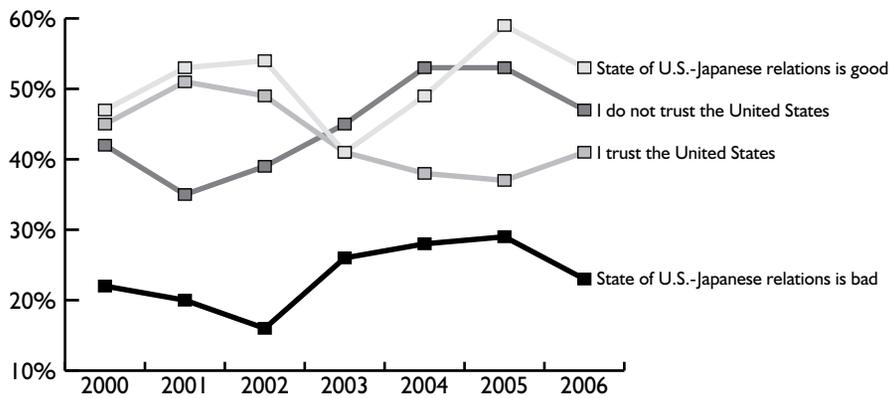
was careful to argue that these Japanese troops were not in a “combat” zone, the image of Japanese forces wearing heavy body armor and hunkered down behind sandbags while coalition forces continued engaging insurgents across the country was not lost on the Japanese public.

Even as polls showed that a majority of the Japanese public had negative views of the Iraq war itself, their views of Koizumi and the SDF were positive. The commander of the first Samawah deployment, Colonel Masahisa Sato, became a celebrity and was elected to the National Diet, and Koizumi went on to win an electoral landslide in Diet elections in 2005. The Japanese public also recognized the cold reality of what Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe argued on the NHK television channel during the lead-up to the deployment: if Japan wanted U.S. help dealing with the North Korean threat, it was only reasonable for Japan to step up and help the United States in Iraq.

Japanese newspaper editorials on the war in Iraq were not that different from their U.S. counterparts. The liberal *Asahi Shimbun* joined the *New York Times* in urging caution and then heavily criticizing the conduct of the war. The centrist and conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* ran editorials with titles such as “War May Be the Only Solution” and “U.S., UK Need Free Reign in Iraq.”⁴ In terms of public opinion, the *Asahi Shimbun* polling found that favorable views of the United States declined from 29 percent of respondents in 2001 to 23 percent of respondents in 2005 and negative views increased from 8 percent to 15 percent in the same period.⁵ The Gallup Organization and *Yomiuri Shimbun* found that the Japanese public’s trust in the United States declined

The Iraq war has not galvanized Asia’s rising powers to align against U.S. unilateralism.

Figure I. Japanese Views of the United States, 2000–2006



Source: *Yomiuri Shimbun* and the Gallup Organization, 2006.

after the attack on Iraq but their faith in the U.S.-Japanese alliance increased significantly (fig. 1).⁶

Taken as a whole, the legacy of the Iraq war on the U.S.-Japanese alliance is that it helped facilitate the transformation of the alliance from the regional cooperation characterized by the Nye Initiative of the mid-1990s to security cooperation on a global scale. The withdrawal of Japanese ships from the Iraq coalition in November 2007 briefly cast some doubt on that trend, as the Japanese government struggled to retain a proactive international role in the face of opposition control of the Upper House after the elections in July 2007. The Fukuda government passed legislation returning those ships to the coalition in January 2008 and doubled the ante by proposing legislation that would give the government latitude to order future deployments for coalition operations without requiring separate legislation for each mission. Japanese politics have become more complicated, but the general direction set by Koizumi continues to have broad support both in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and large parts of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan.

Japanese public views of the importance of the alliance also appear well entrenched, although two recent trends merit careful attention. First, the volatility in the Japanese public's sense of trust in the United States after the attack on Iraq suggests that recognition of the importance of the alliance does not necessarily translate into trust in U.S. judgment. Second, positive views of the United States dipped after Washington softened its stance toward North Korea in February 2007. The U.S. shift on North Korea policy has been broadly attributed in Japan and in the United States to the administration's preoccupation with Iraq and the Middle East. Whether or not that was the primary

motivation, the perception alone reinforces the indirectly negative impact of the Iraq war on some U.S. policies in Asia, in this case with Japan.

On the whole, the evidence is strong that the U.S.-Japanese alliance came through the Iraq war stronger than when it entered but that the Japanese people continue to have a lingering unease about their strategic dependence on the United States. That unease cannot be attributed to Iraq alone or even primarily to Iraq, but it is a problem that will require Washington to demonstrate a greater willingness to empower Japan within the alliance on issues of critical importance to the Japanese public, such as North Korea policy.

Whereas the period just before the Iraq war was marked by initiatives to reaffirm and strengthen the U.S.-Japanese alliance, the U.S. alliance with South Korea was entering a period of tension and doubt. The proximate cause was the accidental death of two young Korean school girls in a traffic accident involving U.S. Army heavy vehicles on June 13, 2002. The acquittal of the officers involved and widespread Internet images of

the mangled bodies led to a massive outpouring of grief and anger in a series of public demonstrations just prior to South Korea's December 2002 presidential election. The progressive candidate Roh Moo-hyun harnessed this mass movement to ride to victory.

Roh brought into power a cadre of ideological advisers from the so-called 386 Generation, who were in their thirties, went to college in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s and whose formative experiences had been the struggle against the pro-U.S. authoritarian regimes of the ruling party. According to the worldview of many of these advisers, the North Korean threat was as a political construct of the conservatives, and the United States represented the real threat to peace on the Korean peninsula. Accustomed to five years of President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy, emphasizing cooperation and reconciliation with North Korea, and reeling from the immediate images of the two school girls, the South Korean public was swayed by this narrative. President George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, in which he listed North Korea in the "axis of evil," deepened public anxiety.⁷ After the speech, the South Korean press was so certain of the administration's belligerent intentions on the peninsula that the president made headlines in February 2002 when he declared in a Seoul press conference what senior U.S. officials considered obvious, that he had no intention to attack North Korea.⁸

In this general atmosphere of mistrust, the immediate public opinion polls unsurprisingly showed a further deterioration in South Korean views of the

The war has had one pernicious impact in Asia: it has consumed U.S. attention.

United States after Operation Iraqi Freedom commenced. The Pew Global Attitudes Project found, for example, that South Korea's "favorable" view of the United States dropped from 58 percent in 1999–2000 to 53 percent in the summer of 2002 and to 46 percent in the summer of 2003. Editorial opinion of the United States was also more critical than it was in Japan. Even Kim Dae-jong, the influential columnist for the conservative *Chosun Ilbo*, wrote on March 24, 2003:

This is not a war.... What we are seeing is a one-sided attack, a game in which the discrepancy in defense spending between the two sides is glaringly obvious. The war in Iraq seen from American television is a burst of pent-up military strength and clinical experiments of new weapons.... The United States that we see now is different from the United States that we have known. Americans tolerate domestic antiwar sentiment in the name of diversity, but seethe at allies who voice antiwar and anti-American sentiments. And it seems that the Americans will not budge an inch from their attitude of "American supremacy."⁹

Nevertheless, the negative impact of the Iraq war was not as consistent or sustained as one might expect from the Pew poll or the Kim editorial. Two separate studies found a statistically significant downturn in Korean attitudes toward the United States after the 2002 State of the Union address, but then a distinct uptick from May to September 2003 after the attack on Iraq.¹⁰ In addition, most polls found a dramatic recovery of Korean views of the United States from 2005 to 2007. The centrist *Joong Ang Ilbo* polls, for example, had the United States move from the Korean people's third most-liked country to the most liked country in 2006. The Korean public also placed ever greater importance on economic ties with the United States from 2005 to 2007, even as China surpassed the United States as Korea's main trading partner in the same period.¹¹

Moreover, in spite of the anti-American subtext to some of Roh's political rhetoric, his administration took significant steps to strengthen the alliance with the United States during the Iraq war. Korea's 3,600-strong detachment in Irbil in northern Iraq was the third-largest contribution of coalition troops after those of the United States and the United Kingdom. Roh's own progressive political base opposed the deployment, but the enabling legislation passed in the National Assembly on April 2, 2003, by a wide margin. Roh's government also initiated negotiations on an ambitious free-trade agreement with the United States in 2005, completing the complex deal in less than two years. Furthermore, although Roh's conservative successor, Lee Myong-bok, was elected in December 2007 by the widest margin in Korean history, primarily for his economic management prowess, his pro-American stand unquestionably helped him in the polls as well.

Prime Minister John Howard of Australia was a stalwart ally of Bush in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, and some in the U.S. press have suggested that he lost to Labor leader Kevin Rudd in the November 2007 elections because of the Iraq war.¹² Like Korea, however, the Australian election turned on the economy and not on Iraq, although for different reasons. Lee won because the Korean economy was sagging, whereas Rudd won because the Australian economy had been strong for so long that voters saw little risk in turning it over to Labor, which had social and climate change policies more to the public's liking.

That said, Australians' confidence in the United States as a world leader declined steadily from 2001 to 2007, according to surveys taken by the University of Sydney, and the Iraq war was probably one factor.¹³ According to the poll, only 37 percent expressed "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of confidence in U.S. leadership in 2007, compared with 66 percent in 2001. On the other hand, the private, Sydney-based Lowy Institute found that feelings about the United States remained positive on the whole, with 60 percent of Australians expressing "positive" feelings in 2007, a continuation of trends measured since 2005.¹⁴

Although Australians' confidence in the United States took some bruising over the period of the Iraq war, the overall strategic trend has been one of convergence and closer alignment with Washington. The Howard government made a deliberate decision to be at the tip of the spear in combating global threats such as terrorism with the United States. Howard was in Washington on September 11, 2001, and committed special forces as well as combat aircraft for dangerous combat missions at the beginning of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Australian editorials were strongly supportive of their troops, with the *Australian* declaring on March 19, 2003, that "resolve and resolutions are on our side."¹⁵ Subsequent editorials from Howard's nemeses, the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, were more critical of the United States and Howard's support for Bush but always stood by the Australian forces.¹⁶ That Australians did the dangerous work early in Iraq and then were able to come home certainly helped Howard with public opinion and made it possible for him to send an additional battalion-sized deployment to work with Japanese forces in Samawah.

Rudd has pledged to withdraw Australian combat troops but has offered to continue an additional deployment rotation before then. Australia will withdraw from Iraq by June 2008 but is likely to maintain the deployment

The impact on Asia must be separated from the domestic U.S. and transatlantic debates.

of some of the approximately 1,000 support personnel it has in the theater and will keep troops in Afghanistan.¹⁷ His gesture satisfied the more anti-American left-wing base of Labor but ensured that Australians would stay solidly in the coalition. Meanwhile, Australian defense officials say that they have never been more interoperable with U.S. forces on a global basis and fully expect the trend to continue under Labor. The Rudd government has sent a signal that it will focus greater attention on Asia, but it is not doing so at the expense of the increasingly interoperable U.S.-Australian alliance.

Five years into the Iraq conflict, the United States' major alliances in Asia are probably stronger than they were before it began. Tokyo, Seoul, and Canberra face dangerous and complicated neighbors and need strong alignment with the United States. The defense relationships with all three allies have been transformed and enhanced by Iraq. Yet, the publics in all three countries went through various periods of intense anxiety about their security dependence on the United States, leaving considerable work to be done on the soft-power side of the equation.

China: Strategic Competition Averted?

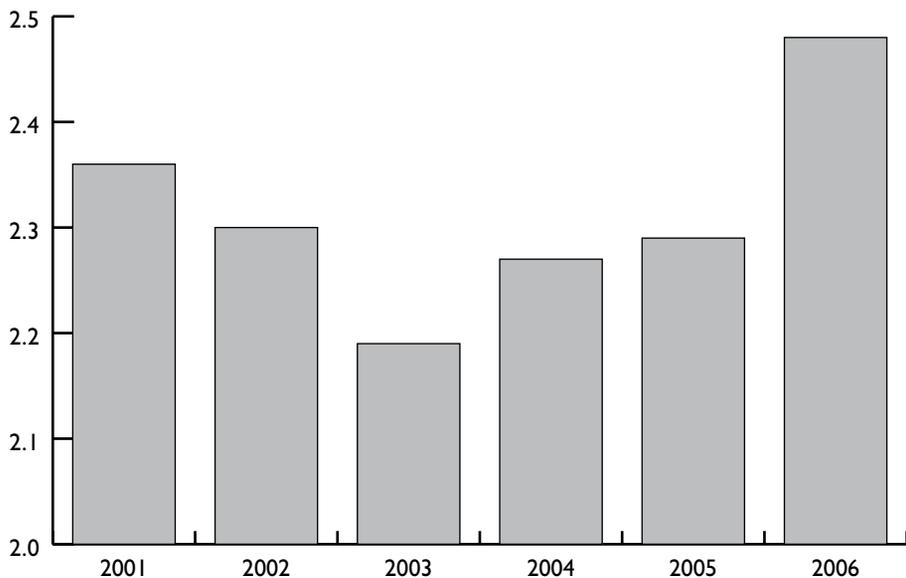
For Beijing, the Iraq war presented an opportunity to avoid open confrontation with the United States and focus on consolidating China's national power under a strategy that Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping had called the "Four Modernizations," President Jiang Zemin had named "peaceful rise," and President Hu Jintao had dubbed "peaceful development." Jiang had sought to solidify that approach by proposing a symbolic "strategic partnership" with the United States during the Clinton administration, but Bush's soon-to-be national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, appeared to reject that goal in 2000, warning that China was more of a "strategic competitor."¹⁸ Early in the Bush administration, proposals for the Pentagon to transfer more air and naval capabilities to the western Pacific as well as the crisis that erupted when a Chinese fighter collided with a U.S. EP-3 surveillance plane further threatened to confound Deng's longer-term vision for managing the United States.¹⁹

After the September 11 attacks, the strategic focus of the Bush administration shifted from China to the war on terrorism. As a potential military adversary of Washington, Beijing was deeply ambivalent about any use of U.S. force. The 1999 Kosovo intervention had been particularly unnerving because it had been swift, decisive, supported by NATO allies, and premised on intangible issues of human rights that could in theory be applied to the cases of Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, or even Hong Kong.

Beijing therefore viewed the growing crisis over Iraq with trepidation. Ultimately, however, the Chinese leadership chose not to oppose the U.S.-led attack on Saddam Hussein's regime. The initial premise for using force in Iraq was the threat of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs and not intangible principles of human rights, as in Kosovo, despite subsequent revisionism both by supporters and critics of the Iraq war. In addition, a U.S. focus on the Middle East eased the dangers of strategic tension between the United States and China that had seemed nearer in 2000 and 2001. Moreover, Beijing saw a strategic benefit in the growing tension over the war between the United States and the French-German coalition of President Jacques Chirac and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. China could let France take the lead in slowing the U.S.-British momentum in the UN Security Council and then exploit Chirac's and Schroeder's calls for multipolarity to contain U.S. power once the war began.

At the same time, Chinese leaders had to contend with public opinion about the Iraq war just as their Australian, Japanese, and Korean counterparts did. CCTV, the Chinese national television network, made vivid footage of U.S. soldiers in combat regular fare for Chinese viewers. Not surprisingly, pollsters found a decline in Chinese attitudes about the United States corresponding to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq (fig. 2).²⁰ As with other

Figure 2: U.S. Favorability among the Chinese Public, 2001–2006



Note: The data use a 4-point scale: 4 represents very favorable; 1 represents not favorable at all.

Source: Horizon Research Consultancy Group, 2006.

polling about the United States in Asia, however, the Chinese public attitude toward the United States is clearly stronger at the end of the Bush administration than it was at the beginning, propelled perhaps in China's case by Bush's very popular November 2005 visit to China, during which he raced against the Chinese Olympic mountain bike team.

Has the Iraq war masked the greater threat to U.S. interests from China's military modernization that the Bush administration had initially highlighted?

The war helped transform the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

The evidence is mixed at best. Without the resources required in Iraq, the Pentagon might have followed through on initial proposals to deploy a second carrier battle group and more ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) in Guam to counter the People's Liberation Army (PLA) deployment of SSBNs, ballistic and cruise missiles, and fourth-generation tactical aircraft.²¹ The administration might also have avoided some of

the deteriorating views of the United States in Southeast Asia that eased China's own soft-power expansion in the region.

On the other hand, U.S. alliances after Iraq are stronger and more interoperable in part because of coalition operations. This new strength and interoperability enhances deterrence and dissuasion in Asia. In addition, the Iraq war ironically may have given the Bush administration a freer hand in domestic U.S. politics to manage the complex relationship with China. China's trade deficit with the United States rose to more than \$200 billion in 2006, a position that had led to severe trade friction with Japan when the United States ran a high trade deficit with it during the 1988 and 1992 presidential elections. Yet, China did not register in the 2004 election because Democratic nominee Senator John Kerry (Mass.) was so focused on the increasingly unpopular war in Iraq. Finally, China's growing and often negative influence on everything from Darfur to South Korean industrial competitiveness to Italian shoe exports have ensured that traditional U.S. allies in Asia and Europe have chosen to continue aligning closely with the United States rather than choose multipolarity in spite of Iraq. Indeed, the same polls that tracked the U.S. difficulties in the world around the time of the Iraq war found that China's image globally began slipping significantly beginning in 2005.²²

Although Chirac's vision of multipolarity may have seemed possible to Beijing in 2003, the European Union's subsequent decision to postpone lifting its Tiananmen Square-era arms embargo on China sent a strong signal that the Iraq war had not fundamentally altered the Western democracies' commitment to sustaining the neoliberal order. Nor had the war created new space internationally for outsiders to embrace what is called the "Beijing consensus,"

opposing interference in the internal affairs of other states. The pro-American stances of President Nicholas Sarkozy of France, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, Lee, Fukuda, and Rudd stand as evidence that the next administration in Washington will enter office with stronger aggregate partnerships to help shape China's emerging role. None are signing on to a policy of containment of China, but Washington is not asking for that. If anything, the next administration is likely to continue the strategy of encouraging Beijing to be a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system, while working to maintain a balance of power in the region and internationally. The Iraq war has influenced these facts at the margins, but not the fundamentals.

North Korea: Killing the Rooster Almost Scared the Monkey

One popular criticism of the Iraq war is that it caused North Korea to want a nuclear deterrent to stop an attack by the United States. The problem with this argument is that North Korea had already decided to mobilize critical national resources to develop nuclear weapons decades before Operation Iraqi Freedom and had already achieved that capability, according to U.S. National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) going back to the Clinton administration.²³ Nevertheless, the Iraq war did have both positive and negative impacts on the course of diplomacy with North Korea.

On June 13, 2001, Bush announced that he was prepared to continue diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang but intended to broaden the agenda to include human rights, missiles, and the conventional military threat.²⁴ The North's initial reaction was to rebuff the United States, particularly after the axis of evil statement in the 2002 State of the Union address. U.S. officials met with North Korean representatives at the United Nations to explain that the president's clear warnings were the reason why the administration was prepared for serious negotiations with Pyongyang to address issues of mutual concern. Faced with coercive diplomacy but with a prospect for sanctions relief and improved relations, Pyongyang agreed. Yet, the talks were delayed until the fall of 2002 by a series of minor crises between the North and South that spring. By the time Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly led a delegation to Pyongyang in October 2002, U.S. intelligence had already concluded that the North Koreans were cheating on the existing Agreed Framework by pursuing a nuclear weapons capacity through a clandestine program for highly enriched uranium (HEU). When the North Koreans acknowledged the program and demanded concessions from Washington, the nuclear diplomacy entered yet another crisis.

The Bush administration's preferred approach at that point was to establish a multilateral forum in Northeast Asia to collectivize the North

Korean nuclear problem and to bring other nations' leverage to bear. Not surprisingly, Pyongyang was uninterested in empowering Beijing or Tokyo in that way. Beijing also explained that it was not prepared to enter into what it saw as a bilateral U.S.–North Korean problem. Yet, when Secretary of State Colin Powell told the Chinese leadership during a visit to Beijing in late February 2003 that the United States was not going to return to the old

Most polls found a dramatic recovery of Korean views of the U.S. from 2005 to 2007.

bilateral diplomatic game with North Korea, the Chinese side reluctantly agreed to establish a three-party forum with the United States, China, and North Korea. Beijing pressured the North Koreans to attend the April talks and then warned that delegation at the session that Pyongyang's current path would only lead to disaster for them. The unmistakable context for Beijing's unprecedented pressure

on Pyongyang was the Bush administration's implementation of its pledge to stop Iraq from developing weapons of mass destruction. The April talks in Beijing took place as CCTV aired repeated images of the fall of Baghdad to coalition forces.

When the talks expanded to the full six-party format in August 2003, the diplomatic momentum was still strong. Long delays, however, occurred between the rounds after that initial one, with the second and third rounds taking place in February and June 2004 yielding no forward progress. A number of factors could explain the slower pace of diplomacy: The Chinese Foreign Ministry hosts found North Korea a far more intractable counterpart than expected, the U.S. policy process was contentious, and the South Korean government was sending mixed signals to the North. One factor was almost certainly the deteriorating situation in Iraq, which undercut the indispensable coercive element in U.S. diplomacy and removed the urgency in Beijing's and Pyongyang's calculations and responses.

Nuclear diplomacy with North Korea did not take a significant turn again until coercion was reintroduced, this time in response to Pyongyang's missile and nuclear tests in July and October 2006. Whereas Beijing had taken proactive steps in 2003 because it worried U.S. pressure would destabilize the peninsula, in 2006 it moved because of Pyongyang's dangerous brinksmanship. Beijing supported the strong sanctions of UN Resolution 1718 in the Security Council in response to the North Korean nuclear test and cooperated with the U.S. Department of the Treasury to freeze North Korean financial assets sanctioned under Section 311 of the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act. When the United States offered a bilateral negotiating track and a new six-party agreement on

February 13, 2007, which would reduce that pressure in exchange for concrete steps toward denuclearization, Pyongyang again accepted.

The fate of this new negotiating framework is uncertain. The North has taken concrete steps toward disablement of its now-decrepit reactor complex at Yongbyon but appears unprepared to deliver a meaningful declaration of its other nuclear weapons and facilities as required under the February 13 agreement. Questions about North Korean transfers to Syria and traces of HEU on smelted aluminum tubes that it turned over to the U.S. side raise further doubts about whether Pyongyang intends to move down the path of denuclearization or simply sidestep the mounting pressure it faced after its nuclear tests. The U.S. diplomatic process has been largely denuded of the coercive elements that had been critical elements earlier, and it appears unlikely that the Bush administration is willing to reintroduce pressure on North Korea in its final year in office. The politics of the Iraq war have to be blamed at least indirectly for the lack of sticks in the current U.S. approach toward North Korea.

The Bush administration has argued that the Iraq war had a direct role in Libya's decision to abandon nuclear weapons in 2003.²⁵ The timing of Libya's decision and the accounts of those involved in the negotiations certainly reinforce that assertion. The November 2007 NIE on Iran also asserted that Tehran halted work on its nuclear weapons program in the same time frame based on a calculation of the pros and cons, suggesting the Iraq war may have played into the Iranian decision as well.²⁶ The ebb and flow of diplomacy with North Korea after bilateral U.S.–North Korean talks broke down in late 2002 over the HEU issue also coincides with the coercive signal sent by the attack on Iraq in 2003. The Iraq war was an example of the Chinese proverb that it is sometimes necessary to “kill the rooster in order to scare the monkey” in terms of Beijing's and Pyongyang's receptivity to multilateral talks in 2003, which each had resisted previously. A successful resolution of the Iraq situation at that point might have positioned the administration to mobilize the optimal mix of carrots and sticks to continue serious denuclearization efforts on the Korean peninsula. Whether that would have been enough to convince Kim Jong-il to abandon a program so essential to regime survival we cannot now say.

Southeast Asia: A Complicating Factor in a Growing Relationship

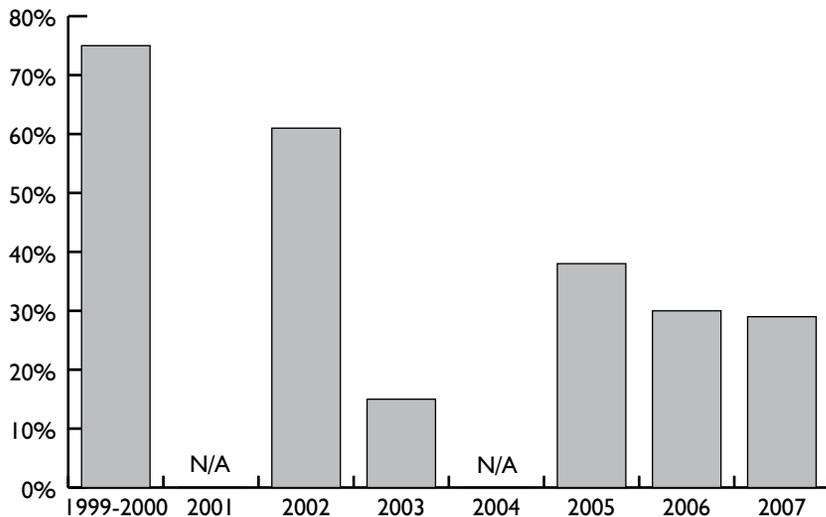
With large Muslim populations in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and even Thailand, the war against Iraq would inevitably cause some backlash against the United States in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, the *Star* wrote on March 23, 2003, that “this attack on Iraq will touch raw nerves and will likely reverberate around the Arab nations, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.”²⁷ The

Utusan Melayu lamented that the war “is actually an attack against Islam, not the original objective of wiping out international terrorism.”²⁸

Yet, not all opinion in the Southeast Asian press was as unabashedly anti-American. The *Jakarta Post* wrote on April 11, 2003, that “the war may be deplorable, but for what it is worth, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq has ended the reign of one of the most ruthless and brutal leaders the world has ever known.”²⁹ The eminently pragmatic Singaporeans read in the *Straits Times* on March 26, 2003, that “determining the correct policy for Singapore depends very much on being able to accurately read the most probable conclusion to the war in Iraq.... [V]ictory has a thousand fathers: defeat is an orphan.”³⁰

In terms of public opinion, the worst drop in Southeast Asia after the attack on Iraq occurred in Indonesia, where Pew polls found positive views of the United States dropping from 61 percent in 2002 to 15 percent in 2003 (fig. 3).³¹ Indonesian views of the United States rebounded somewhat after the U.S. military led relief operations in Bandah Aceh following the December 2004 tsunami, with 38 percent expressing positive views of the United States. Indonesia’s first directly elected president, Susilo Bambang Yuduhono, also used the U.S. power card to maintain a balance of power in Southeast Asia, traveling to Washington on May 25, 2005, and taking steps to ease the restoration of military-to-military ties that had been suspended after the East Timor crisis.

Figure 3: Indonesia’s Views of the United States, 1999–2007



Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2007.

Thailand and the Philippines, the two U.S. treaty allies in Southeast Asia, contributed ground forces to Iraq for humanitarian missions, although both withdrew those forces in 2004. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines won particular disdain from other members of the coalition for withdrawing her 51 troops in order to appease Iraqi insurgents who had kidnapped and threatened to execute a Philippine worker. Bangkok withdrew its forces in part because of the growing Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand. Both alliances are somewhat shakier today because of the sudden withdrawal of troops from Iraq, although that has not stopped critical U.S. cooperation with the Philippines on terrorism or with Thailand on the annual U.S.-Thai Cobra Gold military exercise.

Meanwhile, Singapore signed a strategic framework agreement with the United States, strengthening security cooperation and expanding U.S. military access in Southeast Asia in 2005. Prime Minister Phan Van Khai of Vietnam heralded new intelligence and security cooperation with the United States during a July 2005 visit to Washington. Both of these steps took place after the attack on Saddam. With China's influence growing in the region and the PLA Navy engaging in firefights with Vietnam over the contested Paracel Islands, the importance of a strategic relationship with the United States far outweighed any angst about far-away Iraq for these countries.

Polls do suggest a general loss of U.S. soft power in Southeast Asia, measured as the popularity of the United States itself, but this has not stopped leaders in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) from embracing U.S. ideals. In January 2007, the Eminent Persons Group (EPG), a group of distinguished citizens from the ASEAN member countries, drafted a new charter for ASEAN that embraced democracy, human rights, and other "universal values." Although the EPG's recommendations for a human rights commission and other mechanisms were watered down in the final charter announced in November 2002,³² the region is clearly moving beyond the principle of noninterference in internal affairs that had been so central to the founding of ASEAN. Nor has ASEAN spurned closer relations with the United States because of Iraq. ASEAN signed the ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership on July 26, 2006, to strengthen political, security, economic, educational, and social cooperation.

The ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership stands as a strong basis for this administration and the next to continue deepening engagement with Southeast Asia. Bush was set to meet with ASEAN leaders in September 2007 to sign additional agreements before attending the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Sydney but postponed the meeting to remain in Washington an extra day because the White House had to set the stage for the politically charged congressional testimony by General David Petraeus, the

U.S. commander in Iraq. Regional press has also been critical of Secretary of State Rice for missing two foreign ministers' meetings at the ASEAN Regional Forum because she had to address pressing issues in the Middle East.

At the end of the day, Southeast Asian nations share U.S. interests in a successful outcome in Iraq and the Middle East peace process and should not begrudge the U.S. secretary of state the opportunity to focus on making progress in those areas. Nonetheless, the limits on U.S. influence in Southeast Asia are caused not so much by a backlash against the Iraq war, but rather only by the amount of time and energy that U.S. leadership chooses to spend on engagement with the region. This may be indirectly affected by the challenges in Iraq, but it does not have to be.

Asia's Bottom Line

Despite the unpopularity of the Iraq war around the world, the reality is that the war has not changed any fundamental elements of Asia's rising influence on the international system, nor has it significantly weakened the U.S. hand in the region in any enduring way. Opinion polls in Indonesia showed sharp declines in support for the United States after the attack on Saddam, but those numbers rebounded after the U.S. role in tsunami relief in early 2005, demonstrating that the downward trend was not irreversible. In Japan, polls showed that the United States was more popular for the two years after the attack on Saddam but then sagged somewhat in popularity because of issues largely unrelated to Iraq. In Korea, the public reaction to the axis of evil speech was stronger than the reaction to the Iraq war. The negative trend turned around shortly after the attack on Iraq, with support for the U.S.–South Korean alliance today at its highest level in years. The reality is that the Iraq war has not been as fundamental to Asian geopolitics as it has in the Middle East or Europe.

Overall, U.S. alliances in Asia are stronger today than they were before the Iraq war, with higher levels of interoperability because of the experience of coalition operations. Meanwhile, security cooperation has expanded with nonallies and former allies such as Singapore and New Zealand, respectively. The exceptions are alliance partners the Philippines and Thailand, neither of which is beyond repair.

In terms of the challenges faced by the United States in Asia, North Korea continues to vex the administration today as it did before Iraq and no doubt will continue to worry the next administration. The example set by coalition action against Saddam in 2003 helped the United States motivate China to put pressure on Pyongyang, but that pressure was not sufficient to shift the North Korean strategic calculus on nuclear weapons. It might have been with time, but the mounting difficulties in Iraq undercut the credibility of U.S.

coercion. The coercive element returned to U.S. strategy toward North Korea after Pyongyang's 2006 nuclear test, but many of those sticks have been traded away for tactical procedural results since then. Progress is still possible with North Korea, but it will require a reassembled tool kit that includes incentives and disincentives to shape the North's strategic calculus.

U.S. strategic relations with China have probably never been more positive. Time will tell whether the United States actually built a stronger foundation for China to play a positive role in the international system or was just distracted from a real Chinese threat by the war in Iraq. Odds are strong that the former will be the case, particularly given the strength of U.S. alliances in Asia and the patterns of cooperation that are being built with China on North Korea and other issues. Those who argue that the United States should have been focused on China as a threat instead of Iraq need to

recognize that a U.S. strategy of containment in Asia would not have had many partners in the region. The United States would have found itself far more isolated internationally than it was after the attack on Saddam. Most of Asia is quite satisfied with the current state of U.S.-Chinese relations, which makes it easier for states to expand strategic cooperation with the United States even as regional economic ties deepen with China. The Iraq war has drawn some U.S. resources away from military modernization in the western Pacific, but it has not undermined the overall balance of influence or power in the region, beyond what one would expect from China's growing economic importance.

Southeast Asia was most traumatized by the Iraq war, but the example of the tsunami relief operations and the opportunities presented by the new ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership can still be harvested. Bush attended every APEC summit, a perfect attendance record that his predecessor lost by skipping two sessions. The Asian diplomatic calendar is expanding, however, and senior-level U.S. participation is viewed in the region as waning in relative terms. This may be due to the time pressures of Iraq and particularly the consuming domestic political battle over Iraq policy. If this is the case, the blame cannot be laid on the administration alone. Congress and the presidential candidates from each party must also ask themselves whether they have their foreign policy priorities in the right order.

Asia is a region in which traditional forms of power still matter. The lingering negative effects of the Iraq war in Asia have mostly been related to the weakness shown in U.S. power after the first six months of the war. If the surge strategy continues to yield results and the United States is seen as living up

U.S. engagement in Asia may be affected by Iraq, but it does not have to be.

to its commitment to bring stability to Iraq, then the long-term impact of the war in Asia will have been more positive than negative, with the exception of Southeast Asia, where the war had a more profound impact on Muslim populations. On the other hand, if the United States loses its will and withdraws precipitously from Iraq, the consequences in Asia will be profoundly negative. Beyond that, the key issue will be whether U.S. leadership sustains a long-term focus on Asia and invests in shaping institutions as well as patterns of cooperation that strengthen stability and prosperity in the region.

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