Chinese and North Korean POWs were released during Operation *Comeback* after Korean War armistice was signed

National Air and Space Museum

Asia

Facing Interesting Times

By **DEAN CHENG**

Since the earliest days of the Republic, the United States has had vital interests in Asia. Indeed, the ink was barely dry on the Treaty of Paris, which formally recognized American independence, before the Nation was establishing its own trade links there. The arrival of the U.S. merchant ship *Empress of China* in 1784 inaugurated what today is $900 billion in trade between the United States and Asia.[1] The opening of Japan in 1854 and the Open Door policy half a century later were both intended to ensure that American interests in the region were known and respected. Consequently, American security concerns have long included Asian contingencies. Well before the battles of the Pusan Perimeter and the Chosin Reservoir, U.S. forces had operated on the Korean Peninsula.

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Today, American security concerns in Asia are often associated with the potential for conflict in the Taiwan Straits or on the Korean Peninsula. In both cases, substantial American forces are arrayed and prepared to engage in open, high-intensity warfare.

These are not, however, the only two flashpoints. Indeed, Taiwan and Korea are part of a larger set of rifts and faults that underlie most of the East Asian security landscape. At the same time, the growing economic interconnections between China and the region, as well as with the United States, result in a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of rivalries and accords among the various states. Unlike the confrontation between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact, East Asia is far more complex, embodying not only ideological conflicts rooted in the Cold War, but also historical animosities, unsettled borders, internal instabilities, and the absence of regional institutions that might ameliorate some of the ensuing tensions.

Last Frontier of the Cold War

The Cold War in Asia was in many ways more extensive than that in Europe. Of the four nations divided ideologically at the end of World War II, three (China, Korea, and Vietnam) were in Asia. The United States fought major wars in two of them. The collapse of the Soviet Union did not neatly resolve the Asian ideological divides, despite being heralded as the end of the Cold War. Indeed, two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Cold War remains a reality in Asia.

This is expressed in several ways. One is the continued division of both the People's Republic of China (PRC) from Taiwan and North Korea from South Korea, enforced by the deployment of substantial militaries by all sides. On the Korean Peninsula, the physical divide of the Demilitarized Zone reflects the political and ideological gap separating Pyongyang and Seoul.

In the case of the PRC and Taiwan, although the two have become much more closely aligned economically, military and political tensions remain. Beijing continues to oppose any political interactions by third parties with the government in Taipei, blocking their membership in various regional and international organizations. It was not until 2008 that Taipei allowed direct commercial flights between the two sides of the straits. Meanwhile, the issue of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan continues to roil the trilateral relationship among Beijing, Taipei, and Washington.

Another aspect is the continued one-party rule of Asian communist parties, including in North Korea, the PRC, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. These parties survived the fall of the Soviet Union because they did not derive their legitimacy from Soviet support. This was in contrast with Eastern Europe, where the ruling parties were installed by Moscow and the advancing Red Army. Consequently, whereas the collapse of the Soviet Union deprived the leadership of the Warsaw Pact states of their most important support, the same was not true for the Asian communist parties.

This legitimacy was reinforced in several of these countries by independent efforts by the ruling communist parties to reform their economic systems and improve the national standard of living. In both Vietnam and China, the ruling parties had commenced far-reaching economic reforms well in advance of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. This has sustained popular support for the ruling parties; as long as the economic benefits continue to accrue, the party's grip on power is unlikely to be significantly challenged. Only North Korea has adhered closely to communist ideology, refusing to end rural collectivization or shift toward a more consumer-based economy.

> *Asian communist parties survived the fall of the Soviet Union because they did not derive their legitimacy from Soviet support*

Economic reform has not been accompanied by political reform in these nations, however, as the various Asian communist parties have evinced little interest in loosening their political controls. Moreover, this has been true whether there has been substantial economic reform (for example, the PRC) or minimal efforts (North Korea). The prospects of reconciling with their opposite numbers are therefore greatly reduced, since both Taiwan and South Korea are not only market economies, but also vibrant democracies. This means that the prospect of ideologically based conflict, including open resort to the use of force, remains a real possibility.

History Remains an Open Book

Ideology is not the only potential cause of conflict in East Asia, however. Indeed, in many cases ideology merely provided an *additional* overlay to longstanding historical animosities. Taiwan, for example, was a source of regional tension long before Chiang Kai-shek evacuated the Nationalist government there in 1949. It first became a territorial issue for Chinese central authorities in 1895, when the Qing Dynasty was compelled to cede it to Japan after losing the first Sino-Japanese War.

That war, in turn, was only part of a centuries-long rivalry between China and Japan to be the preeminent power in Asia. Earlier conflicts included the attempted invasions of Japan by Kublai Khan in the late 13th century and the Japanese invasion of Korea (then a tributary state of China) in the late 16th century. The subsequent Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945 further aggravated the mutual bitterness by adding a massive butcher's bill to the relationship. The post–World War II Sino-Japanese competition, therefore, not only arose from rival economic and political systems, but also reiterated the general ongoing enmity between the states.

Meanwhile, historic suspicions between Thais and Khmers found renewed expression in 2003, when Cambodian crowds sacked the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh. While it is likely that the riots had roots in a combination of factional politics and ongoing Thai-Cambodian commercial negotiations, it is noteworthy that the proximate reason for the rioting was a Thai television personality's claim that Angkor Wat had been stolen by Cambodia from Thailand.

Nor is history an issue only when raised by ideological rivals. Indeed, throughout most of the Cold War, competitions *among* the communist Asian states were as likely to lead to the use of force as conflicts between capitalist and communist Asian states. Wars among the Asian communist powers included not only the 1979 Chinese invasion of Vietnam, but also the earlier Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia (itself partly in response to Cambodian attacks on Vietnam), as well as the only incidence of open armed conflict involving two nuclear states: the Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969. In each case, historical animus likely contributed to mutual suspicions.

The Sino-Vietnam War of 1979, for example, has been attributed to Vietnamese

alignment with the Soviet Union, which threatened China with encirclement. From the Vietnamese perspective, however, it only underscored China's longstanding aggressive stance toward Vietnam, dating back over two centuries. Similarly, there is strong mutual dislike between Khmers and Vietnamese, with roots that long antedate the rise of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge.

Finally, Japanese historical revisionism, such as their depiction of the World War II "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" as an attempt to benefit Asia, as well as Japanese treatment of the issue of "comfort women" and the Nanking Massacre, have directly affected regional perspectives toward Japan. Japanese politicians' visits to the Yasukuni shrine, where a number of war criminals are interred, regularly arouse significant regional ire and the lodging of diplomatic protests. The Japanese decision to dispatch minesweepers to the Persian Gulf in 1991 after the first Gulf War was opposed in no small part because many in the region thought it might presage a more robust Japanese foreign policy. Similarly, it was not until 2007–2008 that Japanese and Chinese warships engaged in port visits for the first time.

In this light, it is not surprising that the end of the Cold War did not abate tensions in Asia. Rather, it merely removed the ideological component from some of the complicated relations within the region that draw upon age-old prejudices and hatreds.

Internal Stability Not a Given

Further complicating the Asian security dynamic are extensive underlying tensions. Some of these are rooted in ethnic, religious, and other differences, as many Asian states are extremely heterogeneous. In addition, many governments, especially in Southeast Asia, are confronted by questions of their legitimacy, especially from ethnic and religious minorities who often feel underrepresented. The combination of factors means that internal stability in many states should not be assumed.

There is, for example, a range of ethnic and religious separatist movements, as various tribes and groups seek autonomy if not outright independence. Some of the better known separatist groups are in the PRC, including the Uighurs (the East Turkestan Islamic Movement) and the Tibetans. Beijing has refused to countenance any expansion of autonomy for such groups—and its intransigence on the Taiwan issue may well be rooted in fears that this would encourage other separatists.

The PRC is hardly alone in confronting such movements, however. Other states that have active separatist groups or domestic insurgencies include Burma (Karen, Shan, and other ethnic groups), Indonesia (Free Aceh Movement, Free Papua Movement), the Philippines (Moro Islamic Liberation Front), and Thailand (Pattani United Liberation Organization, among others).

Another potential source of domestic instability involves the substantial ethnic Chinese populations in many Southeast Asian nations. These were described by one Thai king 80 years ago as the "Jews of the East." Like the Jews of medieval Europe, ethnic Chinese were historically often prevented from owning land, deliberately segregated and discriminated against, and channeled into entrepreneurial and financial businesses. As a result, in the postcolonial environment, many became cornerstones of the region's business class.

Today, ethnic Chinese wield economic clout substantially in excess of their proportion of the population. Despite constituting only a quarter of the population or less in most Southeast Asian states (with the exception of Singapore), they control the bulk of listed companies in local stock markets. According to one account in regard to these stock markets, they control "more than 80% in Thailand and Singapore, 62% in Malaysia, about 50% in the Philippines. In Indonesia, they control more than 70% of corporate wealth—although some dispute this figure."[2] Several of the largest Thai corporations, including Charoen Pokphand, for example, were founded and are still headed by ethnic Chinese Thais.

This substantial economic presence has led to significant tensions between the ethnic Chinese and other ethnic population groups. As a result, many states have pursued efforts to promote "native" populations preferentially. Ethnic Chinese have had to sacrifice certain rights if they wish to be seen as citizens. Simultaneously, there has been a direct effort to assimilate ethnic Chinese through such measures as requiring the adoption of non-Chinese surnames. In Thailand, these measures have been sufficiently thorough as to make it difficult to estimate exact percentages of ethnic Chinese.

Such measures, however, have proven only partially successful in leading to actual assimilation. In times of economic or political stability, the ethnic Chinese population has often nonetheless been the target of violence.

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M–48 Patton tank moves through jungle in central highlands of Vietnam, June 1969

U. S. Army Military History Institute

Indeed, as recently as 1998, ethnic Chinese fled Indonesia in the face of anti-Chinese riots.

One major unknown is how the PRC may react in the future to anti–ethnic Chinese pogroms. Historically, Beijing has protested but refrained from directly intervening, in part because it lacked the wherewithal. But that situation is evolving with the expansion of the People's Liberation Army. As important, although the ethnic Chinese in these nations are not Chinese citizens, many of the most financially successful are significant investors in the PRC. Charoen Pokphand, for example, was one of the first companies to invest in China when it initially opened to the West in the late 1970s. Furthermore, the region has become a major trading partner with the PRC, including increasing direct investment by Chinese firms and investors. Whether Beijing would stand idly by if its resources or assets were to be jeopardized by domestic unrest in these countries, consistent with its historical policy of noninterference in foreign domestic affairs, is unclear. Chinese power projection platforms, including an aircraft carrier, could be justifiably employed safeguarding Chinese assets and lives (including a noncombatant evacuation operation).

Few Institutions, Little Identity

Not surprisingly, given the cross-cutting concerns and issues that have riven the region, as well as the continuing impact of divergent ideologies and political systems, there is far less regional, transnational, or pan-regional identity in Asia than in Europe. In addition to the historical factors, pan-Asian attitudes are vitiated by the relatively recent independence of many of the states in the region. Nations that have only recently gained their independence are hardly likely to subsume their hard-won autonomy into a larger regional framework. Unlike Western Europe, nationalism is associated with international recognition and respect, rather than the massive bloodletting of 1914–1945.

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Moreover, many of the initial steps that undergirded the European Union have not been taken in Asia. There is, for example, no counterpart to the European Coal and Steel Community, which was created in 1951 and established a Western European common market in those two commodities. It was the first transnational European organization. It both provided a forum for multilateral discussion of economic issues and acclimatized the leading elites to the idea of mutual coordination. It is often credited as the intellectual and legal forefather to the European Economic Community, itself the basis for the European Union. By contrast, there are few effective institutions in Asia. Nations tend to coalesce on specific issues or in response to particular crises, only to fragment once the moment has passed. There is little around which to create a sense of greater Asian identity.

U.S. Navy (Michael Moriatis)

Royal Malaysian Air Force MiG–29 lands behind F/A–18D at Kuantan Air Base during exercise Air Warrior

There is, for example, no Asian common market comparable to the early stage of the European Economic Community. The closest counterpart is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has established an ASEAN Free Trade Area. Rather than eliminating tariffs among members, however, and presenting a single common tariff with external trade partners, there is instead a Common Effective Preferential Tariff, wherein member states pledge to keep tariffs on each other's goods within a band of 5 percent or less. Meanwhile, tariffs for goods originating outside ASEAN are set at the discretion of each state.

The absence of political integration, however, has not been an obstacle to greater economic connectivity. Indeed, Asian Development Bank statistics indicate that intraregional trade has grown in Asia at a pace comparable to that of intra-European trade, despite the absence of pan-regional institutions.

Regional security is even more fragmented. There is nothing comparable to NATO; that is, there is no single security-focused entity that covers most or all of East Asia. While a number of subregional security organizations have been established, their effectiveness has been limited. In Northeast Asia, for example, despite the security concerns associated with four nuclear powers (the United States, Russia, PRC, and North Korea) and a variety of tensions, no formal security mechanism for the region has ever evolved. Some had hoped that the Six-Party Talks, originally established to deal with North Korean proliferation, might evolve into a more permanent, wide-ranging regional security body. The failure of the talks to manage Pyongyang's actions suggests that such hopes were probably misplaced.

A number of security-related organizations have arisen in Southeast Asia, but their track records have been even more mixed. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, for example, was established in 1954 and envisioned as an Asian counterpart to NATO. It was always much weaker, however, with no political counterpart to the North Atlantic Council, much less the various NATO joint commands and standing forces drawn from its signatories. There was not even an agreement that an attack upon any member would constitute an attack against all the others. The organization was formally dissolved in 1977.[3]

A more successful security entity is the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) system. Created in 1971, the FPDA builds upon a series of bilateral agreements among Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Malaysia, and Singapore to foster multilateral security consultations aimed at deterring aggression against the latter two states. Unique among Asian security mechanisms, the FPDA has an operational component in the form of the Integrated Area Defence System, centered on the Royal Malaysian Air Force Butterworth airbase. It also has no formal American participation.

It is notable, however, that the members of the FPDA avoid the term *alliance*, emphasizing instead the consultative nature of the various arrangements. This is rooted in part in a desire to avoid excessively antagonizing Indonesia, one of the original inspirations for the agreements. Moreover, despite the agreements, actual cooperation between Malaysia and Singapore has always been vulnerable to the vagaries of their relations. Malaysia, for example, refused to allow any Singaporean army units to exercise on its territory from 1971 until late 1989.

Instead of establishing region-wide institutions for resolving disputes or realizing greater security cooperation, most of the Asian multilateral organizations are formalized, regularized meetings of senior government officials. One of the most visible, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation entity, hosts an annual regional summit of its 21 "member economies." Yet it has steadfastly refrained from even labeling itself as an organization, simply describing itself as a forum. Its Web site specifically notes that it has "no treaty obligations required of its participants," with all commitments being nonbinding. Similarly, the ASEAN Regional Forum, with 27 members, and the ASEAN + 3 talks, which brings together the 10 ASEAN member states with the PRC, Japan, and South Korea, mainly serve as opportunities for dialogue.

As a consequence of this lack of regional institutionalization, there is no real "Asian" counterpart when dealing with the region. Instead, any response to a crisis will first entail individual negotiations with various states, often on an ad hoc basis. As important, especially in the security context, it means there are distinct limits to interoperability, as Asian forces often have little experience interacting.

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Regional Stabilizer

Instead of allying with each other, much of Asia prefers Washington as the guarantor of regional stability. Moreover, if the United States is not always the most trusted nation, it is generally the least *dis*trusted. The result has been a series of individual bilateral alliances, coupled with a general willingness to rely on the United States to preserve the regional balance of power.

In terms of formal alliances, there is a "wagon wheel" of bilateral agreements with the United States at the hub. These include:

- Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines (1951)
- Republic of Korea–U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty (1953)
- Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Defense between the United States and Japan (1960)
- Security Treaty among Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (1951)
- Southeast Collective Security Treaty, or Manila Pact (1954).

Other U.S. security arrangements that supplement these treaties include the Thanat-Rusk Agreement with Thailand (1962), the Taiwan Relations Act (1979), and the Strategic Framework Agreement with Singapore (2005). This system of alliances and understandings was largely developed in the early years of the Cold War, but continues to be the main structure for regional security.

U.S. Air Force (Jerry Morrison)

Secretary Gates briefs press after trilateral meeting with counterparts from Japan and South Korea in Singapore

Compared with major regional powers such as Japan or China, the United States offers significant advantages as the preserver of the overall regional balance of power. Given the overlapping demands and claims involving just about every Asian state, no regional power is likely to be seen as an honest broker. By contrast, Washington has no territorial aspirations in the region, and much less historical baggage than any of the major Asian states. At the same time, unlike any grouping of smaller states such as Malaysia, Thailand, or Indonesia, the United States also possesses a range of instruments of power, making it less subject to intimidation by major regional powers such as the PRC. Finally, by seeking to preserve the status quo and ensure that no single Asian power would come to dominate the region, the United States has maximized the opportunities for the majority of Asian states, at minimal cost to them. In essence, America has freed local resources for "butter" that would otherwise have gone toward "guns."

In particular, the U.S. alliance with Japan has served these functions, while reassuring the region. On the one hand, the security commitment from the United States has obviated the necessity for Japan to create its own conventional or nuclear deterrents, thereby allowing it to maintain its "peace constitution," which formally renounces war as an instrument of national policy. Both Japanese and Asians generally would prefer to see Japan continue to operate under such strictures. At the same time, the U.S. alliance constitutes what one American Marine general termed the "cork in the bottle" on any Japanese rearmament. In essence, Japanese military expansion would be rendered visible because of the close security relationship with the United States.

This does not mean, however, that the region necessarily shares the views of Washington on regional policy beyond the desire for stability. For example, it would be a mistake to assume that the various states view Chinese economic growth as necessarily detrimental to their own. Indeed, many of the regional economies have become suppliers of raw materials and intermediate inputs to the PRC economy. In addition, China has been expanding its imports of industrial goods, especially in machinery and transport equipment, to help sustain its own exports to the rest of the world.[4] Only for China have the U.S. and European Union economies become more prominent over the past 15 years. For states such as the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, the United States and the European Union have been progressively displaced as an export destination by the PRC (measured as a percentage of total exports). Thus, in the Asian context, the PRC is increasingly seen as a partner to local economies, as well as a competitor.

Implications for the United States

Given these undercurrents within the Asia-Pacific region, what are the implications for American policymakers? Several important conclusions might be derived from this overview.

First, there is no "Asia." While there is a geographical region, there is no "Asian" perspective on issues. Instead, each nation holds its *own* view, examining issues in light of its *own* interests. Consequently, one cannot craft a single message or expect a unified perspective, whether on developments on the Korean Peninsula or trade negotiations. This means there will be competing demands on policymakers as they seek to forge an American policy; what will be popular in Seoul is unlikely to resonate in Kuala Lumpur or Bangkok. Picking and choosing policies that maximize regional support, while still attaining U.S. objectives, will require regular displays of Solomonic wisdom.

Second, knowledge of national histories matters. In light of the mutual suspicions that permeate the region, and in the absence of security institutions, recognizing that a given policy is as likely to alienate neighboring states as to please them is essential. Thus, where exercises are held, and with whom, is likely to be the focus of much negotiation. As important, every state is likely to garner American support for their position—or at least make it appear they have.

Another aspect of the knowledge of local conditions and histories is the need to recognize that, while most of the *nations* in Asia are quite young, they come from a number of ancient *civilizations*. This makes for a volatile combination; the people have a rich history often dating back to the time of Christ or earlier, but at the same time, they may have obtained their independence from Western colonial powers only in the 20th century. Consequently, these nations tend to have a strong sense of history, as well as a great yearning to be treated with respect.

If the region desires U.S. presence to maintain a balance, for the most part it is not interested in taking sides with the United States (except insofar as it relates to their own specific national interests). More to the point, the region does not view any single state as an enemy—least of all the PRC. Indeed, China is a competitor on many levels, especially economically, but it is also a partner, including economically. Therefore, regional support for the United States in any PRC–U.S. confrontation cannot be assumed.

Finally, the various undercurrents outlined earlier are likely to be exacerbated if the current economic downturn proves extended. Internal instability, as outlined above, has often been muted by expanding national economies, allowing leadership groups to buy off opponents. In the event of a protracted global economic downturn, however, and given the reliance of many Asian economies on exports to drive their economic expansion, the combination is likely to lead to growing discontent. Worse, some studies suggest that Asian recessions last longer and hit harder. This will increase domestic instability and likely exacerbate interstate tensions.

The U.S. role as stabilizer and ally makes managing the various relationships both more essential and more difficult. In Asia, U.S. policymakers and policy *implementers*, including U.S. Pacific Command, are likely to confront "interesting times." **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Deputy U.S. Trade Representative Karan K. Bhatia, "U.S. Trade Relations with Asia," remarks to the Washington International Trade Association, July 24, 2007, available at <www.ustr.gov/assets/Document_Library/Transcripts/2007/July/asset_upload_file258_13189.pdf>.

[2] Mangai Balasegaram, "Analysis: Southeast Asia's Chinese," BBC News Service, August 29, 2001, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1514916.stm>.

[3] Although the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization is defunct, the Manila Pact that created it remains in force and is an essential component of the U.S. security commitment to Thailand. See "U.S. State Department, Background: Thailand," January 2009, <www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>.

[4] Juthathip Jongwanich, "Determinants of Export Performance in East and Southeast Asia," ERD Working Paper no. 106 (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2007), 8.