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POLICY ANALYSIS:

U.S. Policy Toward Strategic Asia Since September 11: Expanding Power or Promoting Values?*

VINCENT WEI-CHENG WANG

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 marked a turning point in the United States' relationships with the rest of the world, especially Strategic Asia— the entire eastern half of the Eurasian landmass and the arc of offshore islands in the Western Pacific. Notwithstanding the human...
tragedy, 911 constituted a major strategic event.\(^2\) The post-911 diplomacy and war on terrorism caused the "tectonic plates" of Strategic Asia to shift, raising serious questions about the role of the United States in this vital region.

The fundamental effects of 911 have been to accentuate the long-term shift of emphasis in U.S. strategy and force posture away from Europe and toward Asia. The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the Defense Department's major high-level strategic planning document (completed before September 11, 2001 but released right after September 11), noted that Asia was gradually emerging as a region susceptible to large-scale military competition. The QDR also hinted "a military competitor with a formidable resource base" would emerge in the East Asian littoral,\(^3\) which many construed to mean China.

However, as many U.S. officials have opined, "everything has changed" after September 11: Washington's need to cultivate cooperation in the global war against terrorism has contributed to improvements in great-power relations. The complex and unfolding ramifications of the U.S.-led war on terror for Strategic Asia can be summarized as: broadening U.S. presence in and engagement with key parts of Strategic Asia; strengthening America's relationships with its strategic partners, both formal allies and quasi-allied democracies; and intensifying the competitive aspects of U.S. relations with those countries that Washington has long regarded with suspicion.

This paper examines the change and continuity of U.S. policy toward Strategic Asia after September 11 and discusses the impact of September 11 on regional security trends. The main arguments are: (1) the anti-terror war codenamed Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)—which successfully destroyed the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization, dislodged the Taliban re-


gime that provided Al-Qaeda with sanctuary in Afghanistan, and then turned to a "second front" in Southeast Asia—has advanced U.S. power and standing in Strategic Asia;\(^4\) (2) OEF constitutes a major ingredient in the emerging Bush Doctrine;\(^5\) (3) while the doctrine exemplified by OEF appears to follow realist premises, by connecting the destruction of terrorism and the expansion of freedom, the result of the Bush Doctrine is, paradoxically, a Wilsonian brand of internationalism that combines American power and principles;\(^6\) and (4) American policy since OEF should guard against such pitfalls as over-reliance on military engagement, backlash against American policies, and setbacks in the realm of human rights.

"Everything Has Changed"?

Many have used the phrase "everything has changed" to describe adjustments in American domestic and foreign policies after September 11. Before the attacks, America's focus in the Asia-Pacific region was both to

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\(^4\)Operation Enduring Freedom began its combat operations in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. Two months later the last major city—Kandahar—was captured by the coalition, which consisted of ninety countries supporting the global war on terrorism (twenty-seven of them contributed forces in Afghanistan). The coalition continues to pursue terrorists through financial, diplomatic, legal, and military means. For more information, see Operation Enduring Freedom: One Year of Accomplishments, http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/defense/enduringfreedom.html.


\(^6\)Thomas Donnelly, a commentator at the conservative think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, claims that the National Security Strategy foresaw an opportunity to exercise a "distinctly American internationalism" that reflects the "union of our values and our national interests." Donnelly also argues that President Bush's speech at the AEI about liberating and remaking Iraq was "imbued with liberal political principles that the founders would recognize as essentially the same as their own." "Coming from Clinton's mouth, these words would elaborate ... very good reasons for avoiding a war. For ... Bush, these were fighting words." See "The Meaning of Operation Iraqi Freedom," posted May 21, 2003, http://www.aei.org/include/pub_print.asp?pubID=17229 (accessed May 22, 2003).
help the regional economy in its recovery from the 1997-99 financial crisis and to deal with such security challenges as China's growing stature, the problem of weapons proliferation, and—more fundamentally—America's continued predominance in the region.

After September 11, non-allies—including Pakistan and China—capitalized on the U.S.-led war on terror to improve their relationships with the United States that had frayed since the end of the Cold War. Countries like India, concerned that their nemeses might be courted by Washington in the anti-terror war, also eagerly offered help to the United States in order to maintain a balance in Washington's preferences. Suddenly the world seemed united around the United States over the cause of anti-terrorism. This solidarity may have been a result of the appalling nature of the attacks that helped forge a new coalition against terrorism; alternatively, the desire to appease the United States might have been what caused unsavory countries to "rally around the flag." The great-power consensus that had withered after the end of the Cold War was for a while "back in place in expanded form: the U.S., the European Union, Russia, China, and Japan are all on the same side now—at least on the issue of terrorism."7

In return, cooperation with the United States resulted in huge benefits for America's new partners. The Bush administration lifted the sanctions that Washington had imposed on Pakistan and India since their nuclear tests in 1998. Due to their strategic importance to OEF, military aid was given to the five Central Asian states, all with poor human rights records—an especially controversial move. The Federation of American Scientists points out that in the first year since September 11, 2001, the Bush administration had requested US$3.8 billion in security assistance and related aid for sixty-seven countries allegedly linked in some way to the U.S.-led war on terrorism.8

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After swiftly overthrowing the Taliban regime and degrading al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, OEF turned its attention to the Asia-Pacific region. Southeast Asia was called "the second front." Here OEF met with the diminishing returns of a military approach, a vanishing diplomatic honeymoon, and the complex political roots of terrorism in the region.

The Asia-Pacific region is playing a growing role in both America's foreign policy goals in general and the war on terrorism in particular. Global wealth and military power are increasingly concentrated in the Asia-Pacific. With Europe at ease, all the major flashpoints where great power rivalry may intersect—the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and India-Pakistan over Kashmir—are located in this region. The QDR thus advocated a "paradigm shift in force planning" in order to better accommodate anticipated needs in the Asia-Pacific. Beneath the surface calm extant in much of the region today, there exist deep cleavages and enduring disputes that could undermine peace. The anti-terror campaign has not altered any "strategic fundamentals" of these fissures.

Strategically East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East are linked, as the anti-terror campaign well demonstrates. Even before September 11, many analysts had warned that the Pacific Rim would become the next battleground of global terrorism—and yet the region is the least prepared region (save Africa) to combat extremists. A mix of socioeconomic marginalization, loosening political controls, and vanishing borders has created a worrisome situation in Asia. Given Asia's increasingly porous borders and rapidly improving communications, transport, and information infrastructure, extremists now are able to develop closer political and financial links with militants, arms suppliers, drug dealers, and other shadowy forces in South Asia and the Middle East.

Southeast Asia is home to the largest Muslim nation (Indonesia) and

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two other countries with groups seeking to establish fundamentalist Islamic theocracies (the Philippines and Malaysia). The region is an important front in the anti-terror war, with a large number of established Muslim fundamentalist groups sympathetic to Osama bin Laden. Home to radical Islamic groups such as the Jemmah Islamiah, Abu Sayyaf, and the Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia, Southeast Asia has emerged as a new home base for international terrorist networks.

U.S. Turns Toward Strategic Asia

The above facts explain why the United States has quickly turned its attention to the region after winning in Afghanistan. Although cooperation has extended to criminal justice, money laundering, and immigration control, the most important instrument has been military cooperation.

Since September 11, the United States has been rapidly expanding military ties with Asian nations. Washington has increased military cooperation with Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia in order to pursue members of al-Qaeda. In January 2002, the Bush administration sent 660 U.S. military "advisers" to the Philippines; these specialists were deployed to the south of the archipelago to fight Muslim extremists of the Abu Sayyaf, whose top lieutenants had ties with al-Qaeda. The U.S. Congress also passed a bill to establish counterterrorism training programs for Southeast Asian armies.¹⁰ Fighting the Indonesia-based al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah emerged in 2003 as a top priority for U.S. forces in Asia.

The United States has maintained a military presence in Asia since the Cold War. The Clinton administration began using the military as a vehicle for engaging and managing relations with an increasing number of countries. Countries with ties to the U.S. military in turn gain such

valuable help as military training or access to equipment.

As a result of OEF, the United States gained unprecedented access to bases in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf also allowed U.S. troops access to bases in Pakistan for humanitarian and logistic purposes. All these initiatives have served to improve America's diplomatic and strategic positions in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States has made military inroads into Central Asia for the first time, and American troops are making a return to Southeast Asia, a region that they vacated after the Vietnam War in the 1970s. These gains came, however, at the expense of tradeoffs, such as America's declining diplomatic capital (especially when President George W. Bush decided to attack Iraq) and the potential for exacerbating great-power rivalry. The U.S. relationship with China is illustrative.

China: Tactical Gains, Strategic Losses

George W. Bush labeled China "a competitor" during his campaigns. After he became President, the U.S.-China relationship steadily deteriorated, reaching a nadir over the EP-3 spy plane incident in April 2001. September 11 offered a significant opportunity to reduce tensions and increase cooperation between these two uneasy great powers.

China's priority in modernization, desire to become a respected great power, and problem of fighting its own terrorist challenges are among the most important factors that have contributed to China's cooperative behavior. China's role in arranging a six-party talk over North Korea also earned America's good will. China realizes that the success of its mod-

12 For more on China's new and more mature diplomacy, see Evan S. Medeiros and M. Taylor
ernization goals depends on its relationship with the United States. Even the staunchest Chinese nationalists understand the wisdom of avoiding a premature showdown with the United States.

However, the geopolitical realignment and U.S. gains in the aftermath of September 11 also unsettle China. Beijing fears that the U.S. military presence in Southwest Asia may become a permanent fixture in China's strategic backyard. The area where the strategic landscape could change happens to border China's largest province, Xinjiang (新疆), which makes up one-sixth of China's landmass and is home to restless Muslim populations and potential oil reserves. The race by several Central Asian republics to court favor with the United States has weakened China's influence in Central Asia and undermined the six-nation Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which China painstakingly put together in 2000 in order mainly to cut off the Islamic militants in Xinjiang.

On China's southwestern front, the United States now commands Pakistan's complete cooperation. China had been Pakistan's staunchest ally and arms supplier. Also disturbing is America's simultaneous upgrading of relations with India, Pakistan's sworn enemy who often considers China as its major security threat.

On the eastern front, Japan's alliance with the United States has also been strengthened. President Bush is willing to talk tough against North Korea, China's ally, on behalf of South Korea. While cooperating with China, the United States has stood its ground regarding Taiwan. The United States has reinvigorated military and other relationships with the major members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The U.S.-Australian alliance, moreover, is stronger than ever.

U.S.-Russian relations have also greatly improved. President Putin helped the United States gain access to Central Asian bases. He stopped opposing NATO's expansion, U.S. missile defense, and the Bush administration's withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.

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The better U.S.-Russian relationship offset the Sino-Russian relationship, which Beijing has long cultivated to counterbalance American "hegemonism."

However, China has also reaped many gains. The anti-terror cooperation halted decline in U.S.-China ties. President Bush twice traveled to China after 911. In August 2002, the United States gave China a major diplomatic victory: U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage announced in China that the United States would place on the American terror list the little-known Xinjiang-based Uighur (维吾尔族) Muslim group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which had sought an independent Muslim state and attacked American diplomats.

Despite its eagerness to improve ties with the United States, China has shown ambivalence toward the U.S.-led anti-terror war. Beijing cherishes the opportunity presented by this war to restore the strategic glue in the bilateral relationship—a bond that had been missing since the end of the Cold War. Strong anti-American elements exist in China today, however, obstructing a total accommodation with the United States. China fears being virtually encircled as a result of the series of reinvigorated relationships that Washington has fostered with China's neighbors. China fears that in the long term, the war may consolidate America's preeminent position in the Asia-Pacific region at the expense of China's power and aspirations.

China's attitudes reveal that the country is not a crucial partner to the United States in the anti-terror war. If nations are ranked in a series of concentric circles in terms of both their importance to the United States in the war effort and the degree of congruence of their interests with America's, China is not located in the core, which includes America's staunchest traditional allies like NATO and Japan; nor does it belong in the second ring, which now includes such nations as Pakistan whose cooperation Washington eagerly seeks. China is probably somewhere in the third or fourth circle—a sphere for those countries whose cooperation is desirable but not essential from the U.S. standpoint.

In sum, the atmosphere in U.S.-China relations has improved and there have also been small gains on certain issues. On those long-standing issues dividing the two countries—such as weapons proliferation, Taiwan,
human rights, and religious persecutions, the post-911 cooperation has not, however, led to any substantive progress. The U.S.-China relationship since September 11, to use David Lampton's words, resembles "small mercies."  

U.S. Objectives and Strategy in Post-911 Asia

America's strategies in post-911 Asia are best understood in light of the goals set in the National Security Strategy (NSS): "We will defend the peace by fighting terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among great powers. We will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent."  

John Lewis Gaddis points out three innovations in the NSS: (1) equation of terrorists with tyrants as sources of danger; (2) emphasis on cooperation among the great powers; and (3) removing the causes of terrorism and tyranny. Operationalizing these goals in the Asia-Pacific includes the following three steps. First, in order to formulate a strategy aimed at a pivotal long-term objective—preventing a worsening of the security situation in Asia, the United States must preclude the rise of a regional or continental hegemon. This step is necessary in order to prevent the United States from being denied economic, political, and military access to an important part of the globe, and to prevent a concentration of resources that could support a global challenge to the United States on the order of that posed by the former Soviet Union. Thus, the United States should maintain a balance of power in Asia favorable to U.S. interests. The NSS identifies terrorism and tyranny as threats to human freedom—and removing

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14 The National Security Strategy (cited in note 5 above).
16 Zalmay Khalilzad et al., The United States and Asia: Toward a New U.S. Strategy and Force Posture (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2001), 43.
them requires exercise of power. The strategy thus manages to reinterpret America's exercise of power as a struggle for freedom: "We seek ... to create a balance of power that favors human freedom."17 This is the NSS's first innovation.

Second, although the NSS stresses the importance of having all great powers "on the same side" united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos, the United States strives to turn this common interest in promoting global security into a union of common values. President Bush sees engagement with China and Russia as a means to achieve a goal that advances U.S. values and interests: "America will encourage the advancement of democracy and economic openness in both nations, because these are the best foundations for domestic stability and international order."

The NSS's second innovation, capitalizing on the great-power cooperation in fighting terror, is aimed at promoting democracy.

The NSS's third innovation calls for removal of roots of terrorism and tyranny. "The events of September 11, 2001 taught us that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states." The report asserts, "Poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders." The United States will actively work to bring "the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world."19

In other words, Bush's realist strategies for Asia represent steps to finish the idealist goals first undertaken by President Woodrow Wilson—to make the world safe for democracy. To accomplish these goals, the United States should seek to maintain stability in the region by actively shaping developments, managing Asia's ongoing transformation, and deterring the use of force against U.S. allies lest U.S. credibility in the region suffer.

Aaron Friedberg identifies the three central themes in the Bush administration's approach toward Asia: (1) a clear emphasis on maintaining a

17 The National Security Strategy (cited in note 5 above).
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
favorable Asian balance of power; (2) a strong preference for cooperating with other democracies; and (3) a decided inclination toward wariness in dealing with non-democratic regimes. Finding that U.S. policies toward Asia since September 11 have combined elements of "engagement" and "containment," he holds that the approach has succeeded in (1) broadening U.S. presence in and engagement with key actors of Strategic Asia (Pakistan and Central Asia); (2) strengthening America's relationships with its primary strategic partners—both formal allies (Japan, South Korea, and Australia) and quasi-allied democracies (India and Taiwan); and (3) intensifying the competitive aspects of U.S. relations with those countries that it has long regarded with suspicion (North Korea and China). This strategy has achieved notable success. However, OEF is now entering into more difficult terrain.

Whither the Anti-Terror War

The next phase of the anti-terror campaign will encounter several thorny problems. The first issue regards what comes next and whether or not there is an end game. President Bush's decision to attack Iraq in March 2003 cost him considerable diplomatic capital and has sowed the seeds of dissension in the coalition.

The second is the nettlesome issue of weapons proliferation. China and Pakistan, both enlisted by Washington to help combat terrorism, have had close military relationships with one or more members of Bush's "axis of evil." However, the most urgent challenge is North Korea's recently restarted nuclear programs—a move which is in apparent violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. Bush has sought to resolve this challenge through diplomatic rather than military means.

20 For more details on these categories, see Aaron L. Friedberg, "United States," in Ellings and Friedberg, Strategic Asia 2002-03, 30-44.

21 See Nicholas N. Eberstadt, "Korea," in Ellings and Friedberg, Strategic Asia 2002-03, 131-82; James T. Laney and Jason T. Shaplen, "How to Deal with North Korea," Foreign
A third challenge is the legitimate concern expressed by many in the human rights community that the anti-terror war may undermine the cause of human rights. Some governments are capitalizing on the anti-terror war in order to suppress domestic dissidents or minority groups. Russia's war in Chechnya and China's crackdown in Xinjiang are two such examples. Human rights watchdog groups have sounded concern that the war on terrorism has set back human rights and civil liberties in many countries. Some are concerned that the United States is cozying up to unlikely new bedmates as it forms a coalition to battle terrorism, but such actions could backfire down the line and create new instability.

A final issue concerns what would happen to the current great-power concert after the war on terror is over. September 11 offered a catalyst for improved U.S.-China relations. Although the Bush administration seems satisfied for the time being with its relationship with Beijing, Washington remains concerned about the long-term implications of China's rise and its intentions.

In sum, while having profoundly changed America's relations with Asia, September 11 has not altered America's interests in the region: securing peace, maintaining an open economy, and advancement of freedom and rule of law. The exigency of the war calls for an emphasis on the congruence of interests above the congruence of values. In the long run, however, cultivating congenial values goes a long way to eradicate some distant sources of terrorism. To maintain the U.S. position in Strategic Asia for the long haul, Washington must pursue policies that combine values with interests.