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## **US in Asia: On the Outside Looking In?**

The US' post-WWII posture towards East Asia can be seen as a consistent one of reactive regionalism. The US initially sought to adopt a multilateral approach in Asia and reintegrate Japan into the region, but opposition from some of the countries concerned ultimately led the US to develop a hub-and-spoke system of bilateral agreements in the realm of security. Subsequent US strategy toward Asia has generally been put together around bilateral structures. In the economic arena, the US has utilized both bilateral relations and multilateral frameworks such as GATT and the IMF.

When Australia put forth a proposal in 1989 on regional economic integration *sans* the US, Secretary of State Baker declared that the US should be included in any effort toward regional integration in the Asia-Pacific region; this led to US participation in APEC. Prime Minister Mahathir's advocacy of an EAEG concept that did not include the US met with sharp opposition from Secretary of State Baker, who thereafter placed a greater emphasis on APEC. This said, however, the failure of APEC and ARF to produce practical results diminished the US' interest and involvement, and the US' role remains a sporadic and passive one.

With the inauguration of the Obama administration, expectations have risen that the US might become more involved in the Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, it appears that the Obama administration has taken a positive stance toward regional multilateralism, joining TAC and participating in its first summit meeting with the ASEAN 10. The recent speech in Tokyo made clear the US' intent to become more actively involved in the East Asia Summit in seeking to address current issues as a member of the Asia-Pacific region.

Among the trade policy issues inherited by the Obama administration from the Bush administration are the South Korea-US FTA (KORUS) and the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP). During his visit to South Korea, President Obama announced that the US would be working in 2010 to move ahead on KORUS and to overcome any obstacles to that end. His Tokyo speech also touched on TPP, expressing hopes of realizing a regional agreement with a broad range of member states, including Singapore, New Zealand, Chile, and Brunei. Should the US ratify KORUS and begin TPP negotiations, trade cooperation relations in the Asia-Pacific region will undoubtedly undergo significant change.

APEC is scheduled to meet in Japan next year and in the US the year after that, both wonderful opportunities to revitalize APEC that will focus attention on (1) how highly motivated Japan and the US are and (2) what agenda items will be pursued and how far and what level of policies will be sought. APEC has thus far functioned well for the higher-dimension policy of articulating a vision to promote free trade and the

lower-dimension policy of devising measures to encourage trade. Future cooperation at the intermediate level will be necessary. For example, to augment mediation procedures for economic disputes and encourage the liberalization of trade and investment to give APEC's activities more binding force, the trade barriers in individual countries could likely be made more transparent. What should be avoided above all is a "Christmas tree" approach that puts every issue – infectious diseases, climate change, etc. – on the agenda. It is not known at present whether officials at the highest levels of the Obama administration have actually begun committing to APEC but, because setting an ambitious agenda takes time, the US should commit itself as soon as possible.

The manner in which the East Asian Community Concept advocated by certain political leaders in the Hatoyama administration and some scholars – i.e., as part of a "zero-sum" policy in which Japan seeks to draw closer to Asia while distancing itself somewhat from the US – has proven problematic and generated concern in the US. It is possible for Japan to build closer relations with East Asia while maintaining cooperative Japan-US ties, so "zero-sum" thinking is an unnecessary and indeed incorrect choice. The fact is that the Hatoyama administration's East Asian Community Concept is also a plus for the US. As indicated in the Tokyo speech, the Obama administration is pursuing more active participation and involvement in the Asia-Pacific region. The US believes that an East Asian Community without the US would likely be dominated by China and that it would not be founded on transparency, the rule of law, economic liberalism, and democratic norms. Marshalling their respective soft power, economic expertise and hard power, the US and Japan need to cooperate in forming a Community based on shared rules and norms.