

USAPC Washington Report
Interview with Amb. Morton Abramowitz
September 2006

USAPC: In *Chasing the Sun*, you and Amb. Stephen Bosworth say it is very important for the United States to remain engaged with the nations of East Asia, but not in a heavy-handed, overbearing manner. We must respect the desire of these nations to shape their own futures.

Abramowitz: Yes, and we also must recognize that U.S. influence in East Asia has diminished in great part because most of these nations have risen. They are far more capable economically and politically and are becoming more serious actors in regional developments.

USAPC: In recent months, the Bush Administration has made a concerted effort to foster closer relations with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations¹). For example, on the sidelines of the late-July meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her ASEAN counterparts signed an action plan to implement the so-called ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership.

Shortly thereafter, the Treasury Department decided to establish a special post in Southeast Asia to demonstrate U.S. commitment to maintaining strong economic ties with these nations. On August 25, U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab signed a TIFA (trade and investment framework agreement) with her ASEAN counterparts. Are we headed in the right direction?

Abramowitz: These are positive developments. ASEAN is trying hard to gain more coherence. Clearly, we should be more actively engaged with ASEAN as an institution as well as with individual member nations. Southeast Asia for some time almost disappeared from our screen.

At some point in the not too distant future, Washington also will have to come to grips with the increasing interest in region-wide integration. There is now much discussion in the region about a potential East Asia Free Trade Area, an East Asia Community, and so forth. An East Asian Summit took place in December 2005, but participants did little more than agree to meet again this year.

The discussion about regional integration is very much in its early days and has a long way to go. It is premature to say where U.S. policy is headed because Washington has yet to decide on how it feels about more formal East Asian-wide integration.

Japan and China have put forth competing visions of how the region should be organized. China has proposed an East Asia arrangement based on the ASEAN Plus Three group [ASEAN members plus China, Japan, and South Korea]. The United States and other Pacific nations are not included.

Japan has made two regional organization proposals. The first would create a 16-nation East Asian Free Trade Area, involving Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea, along with the 10 ASEAN members. The second would establish an OECD-type

¹ The 10 nations that comprise ASEAN are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

organization for East Asia. Both of these proposals reflect Tokyo's interest in moving away from regionalization limited to ASEAN Plus Three in which China likely would play an ever-greater role.

USAPC: How about a U.S. role in any of the proposed regional entities?

Abramowitz: That is one of the hurdles East Asian nations must get over in determining how to improve region-wide cooperation. Beyond the differences between China and Japan on this score, ASEAN nations themselves are divided. Indonesia definitely wants the United States and other Pacific nations to be part of any new regional structure. However, the Thais, the Malaysians, and the South Koreans presently are less enamored with that approach.

The question of whether the United States should be part of any new regional organization remains an issue that at some point must be resolved by East Asian nations. Clearly, the rising tensions between China and Japan make movement on region-wide political and economic integration very difficult. This is no short-term matter. Much needs to be discussed and sorted out.

USAPC: With respect to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF²), one commentator noted recently that it originally was conceived as a *process* for confidence-building in East Asia rather than as a policymaking institution. Do critics who charge that ARF amounts to nothing more than a “talk shop” have unrealistic expectations about what the annual meetings can produce? Does the ARF still play a useful role in the region or should it be discontinued?

Abramowitz: I used to be cynical about regional efforts, like the ARF and even ASEAN, because the rhetoric appeared to exceed the reality of what these initiatives could accomplish. But now growing older if not wiser I have become more optimistic.

The benefits of these regional forums take a long time to play out because East Asia is so diverse. ARF has become a mildly useful forum for consultations on security cooperation at high levels, and those discussions, even if they produce nothing tangible, strike me as worthwhile. To expect more, certainly at this point, is unrealistic. The ARF is worth preserving as part of a broader effort to maintain regional peace and stability—but it is not a major contribution to security in the region.

USAPC: *Chasing the Sun* suggests that the so-called Six-Party Talks aimed at halting North Korea's nuclear program may serve as a precursor to a permanent consultative forum for Northeast Asian security. [The six parties are China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea and the United States.] Please elaborate on this.

Abramowitz: Yes, the Six-Party framework has generated considerable discussion about a permanent forum for a security dialogue among the countries of Northeast Asia and the United States. Such a forum might help to reduce the frictions that bilateral alliances and relationships

² The ASEAN Regional Forum is composed of Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Canada, China, European Union, India, Indonesia, Japan, Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Russian Federation, Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste, United States, Vietnam.

sometimes foster and bring consideration and greater clarity to sensitive issues, such as military spending and planning. But we need more progress on the North Korean nuclear issue in order to move that idea forward.

The Six-Party talks have achieved very little thus far. In September 2005, the six nations issued a statement of principles on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. However, the next day each party publicly interpreted the statement in its own different way. Moreover, the principles have not produced any negotiating content. For all intent and purposes, there are no serious negotiating proposals on the table.

Nevertheless, the negotiations probably have been a worthwhile effort and certainly enhanced discussion between at least five countries. There is no question that all six parties have an interest in the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. But the talks are not necessarily a panacea.

Indeed, “six-party, six-party” has become something of a mantra for the United States. However, the fact remains that little has changed—despite North Korea’s provocative missile tests on July 4. In the end, there must be some serious negotiations between the United States and North Korea or the talks will peter out. One cannot be optimistic.

USAPC: Some commentators, including you, have suggested that North Korea probably is trying to “wait out” the Bush Administration in the hope that it will realize a better deal under a new U.S. administration. Can the Six-Party process be salvaged in 2009 or should we try a new approach?

Abramowitz: I think the Six-Party process must be salvaged if the parties are to advance to the stage of serious negotiations. One major impediment is that there still is little agreement between China, South Korea, and the United States on how to deal with North Korea.

For the past six years, U.S. policy on North Korea has been a failure. It not only has failed to halt the North Korean nuclear program, but it also has helped to produce a serious split between the United States and South Korea. Until China, South Korea, and the United States can agree on how to deal with North Korea, we are unlikely to see progress on the nuclear issue. We are not even sure North Korea wants an agreement.

China and South Korea basically have pursued policies of engagement with North Korea. Engagement policies with bad governments take a long time to produce systemic change and, at the end of the day, may amount to a triumph of hope over reality. Not much has changed in North Korea.

The Bush Administration argues that such an approach amounts to rewarding North Korea’s bad behavior and undermining Washington’s negotiating posture on the nuclear issue. Whatever its disclaimers, the White House basically prefers regime change now and sterner measures against Pyongyang. However, the U.S. position is unacceptable to South Korea and China, who contend that regime change in North Korea can only come about through engagement.

Unfortunately, we do not have the time needed to reap any potential benefits of engagement because of the short-term concern: Pyongyang’s continued nuclear weapons development.

The Bush Administration went badly wrong when President Bush met former South Korean President Kim Dae Jung for the first time three months into his term. In effect, the

president of the United States said, "I know how to deal with North Korea better than you do. Abandon your dealings with North Korea. It is a bad state."

Kim was shell shocked when some of us saw him later that day. That was a fundamental error which has soured U.S.-South Korean relations ever since.

USAPC: So you are not optimistic about South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's meeting with President Bush on September 14?

Abramowitz: It is very hard to be optimistic about a meeting between two rigid leaders with very different views. I suspect we will do what we always have done with South Korea in top bilateral meetings during the past five years. We will find rhetorical ways of saying that the alliance is in good shape, we are going to deepen it, and we are dedicated to the Six-Party talks.

But I am greatly skeptical that the Bush-Roh meeting will change anything about how we deal with the North Korea problem. Of course, there are important bilateral issues to address, like the FTA [U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement] and the question of operational command of joint forces on the peninsula. Some useful things may emerge.

One hoped that the resolution approved by United Nations Security Council on July 15 that condemned North Korea's missile tests would have led to a more concerted effort by the China, South Korea, and the United States to create movement in the Six Party negotiations. It may be too early to ascertain the impact of the U.N. resolution. But as we speak, it is hard to see whether that diplomatic initiative achieved anything significant.

USAPC: At a congressional hearing in late July, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill spoke in glowing terms about the consultative process that produced the U.N. Security Council resolution, calling it a "great week for diplomacy."

Abramowitz: Yes, it represented a diplomatic advance in the sense that it clearly isolated North Korea. So the question now is can the five parties build further on that isolation? As far as I can tell, little has been achieved since the U.N. resolution to change things significantly, but I may be ill informed.

USAPC: What could Washington fairly expect Beijing and Seoul to do in the event that Pyongyang conducts a nuclear test as some experts anticipate?

Abramowitz: I am not so sure North Korea will conduct a nuclear test. There are many inhibiting factors, the principal one being the reaction of China. Beijing certainly would be very unhappy about a nuclear test, but I do not know whether it would represent a red line for them in their relations with Pyongyang. Developing a coordinated response to a potential North Korean nuclear test no doubt still would be complicated by the fundamental differences between China, South Korea, and the United States about the appropriate level of toughness to use in dealing with North Korea. But it could certainly shake up South Korea's domestic scene.

USAPC: A former high-ranking U.S. military official recently said that while political tensions in Northeast Asia are quite high, the risk of actual military conflict is rather low. Do you agree with that assessment?

Abramowitz: Yes, but political tensions can have a significant impact on economic relations between the major powers in Northeast Asia. However, it is very hard to foresee any serious military conflict between China and Japan.

For the past 50 years, the two problematic areas have been Taiwan and North Korea. But beyond these two hot spots, it is highly unlikely there will be major military contests in the Pacific despite the differences and disputes between China and Japan. It is important to remember that the two economies are extraordinarily connected.

That is why we emphasize in *Chasing the Sun* that one must avoid being seduced by geopolitical rhetoric, clichés, and statements such as, “The Chinese are trying to drive us out of East Asia.” That is ridiculous. We are much too important and connected to the Chinese and everyone else to be driven out of Asia. China also is important to our interests. We have other serious interests to protect in the region.

USAPC: Focusing again on regional institutions, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) also has been criticized as ineffectual. APEC members are considering various institutional reforms. How can we revitalize one of the few trans-Pacific forums?

Abramowitz: APEC runs up against ASEAN Plus Three and other ideas of how Asia should be organized. My own belief is that East Asia cannot be organized on a trans-Pacific basis. If there is to be serious East Asia-wide political and economic cooperation, it will be East Asian and not include the United States and other Pacific countries.

There still is a role for APEC, but APEC by and large will not be the generator of regional cooperation in East Asia. APEC can still be a useful economic consultative organization, but I believe its time has probably passed.

The United States, of course, remains a major player in East Asia—admittedly, not as central as we once were. The U.S. presence in East Asia no longer resembles the “hub and spokes” described by former Secretary of State James Baker.

Nevertheless, the United States obviously continues to be very important both economically and militarily and can affect how East Asia organizes. If Washington wants to prevent ASEAN Plus Three-based regionalism, it can do so. So the future of East Asian regionalism will depend, in part, on how the United States wants to proceed.

USAPC: U.S. “soft power” in Asia has declined significantly in recent years owing in good measure to opposition to the U.S.-led war in Iraq. What other factors have caused the decline and to what extent did it predate the war?

Abramowitz: In *Chasing the Sun*, we assert that there has been a *relative* decline in U.S. influence in recent years primarily because the nations of East Asia have risen, particularly China. If I were to point to one of the great dates in world history, it would be 1978. That was the year Deng Xiaoping took over and launched the modernization movement. That changed everything—it changed the world—and has helped significantly in transforming East Asia.

One example: the growth of China has created many more opportunities for Chinese and Asians and generated greater interest in education. China is turning itself into a serious

educational and scientific center. It is also much less expensive than the United States and its foreign student population has expanded significantly.

In comparison, our post-9/11 visa procedures and the general difficulties foreigners now face entering the United States have served to discourage foreign students from studying here. There have been some improvements, but the United States is not the open place it once was.

It also is important to bear in mind that the American presence in Asia has always been overwhelming. It dominates most everything, and a large percentage of the Asian populace simply has grown tired of us, although less so than in Europe and the Middle East.

And there is the Islamic factor. America's post-9/11 approach to terrorism, our position on the Arab-Israeli problem, and our leadership of the Iraq war all have served to create animosity toward the United States in Asian countries with large Muslim populations.

Yes, our cachet has diminished, but life changes. Much depends on what the United States does. In the 1970s, for example, I remember the *cognoscenti* despairing of U.S. relations with Europe. Well, that soon changed.

In the past few years, we seem to be back in that situation again. Our influence may have declined in parts of East Asia, but all countries want strong relations with us and do not want to antagonize us.