

*USAPC Washington Report*  
**Interview with Ambassador J. Stapleton Roy**  
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**USAPC: In late November, the Chinese navy refused to allow U.S. naval vessels to enter the port of Hong Kong on two occasions.<sup>i</sup> The U.S. Navy responded in a manner that the Chinese government viewed as provocative. What are the implications of these episodes on U.S.-China military exchanges and U.S. perceptions of China's military strategy?**

**Roy:** These types of incidents illustrate what can happen to U.S.-China relations and U.S. relations with East Asia if the relationship between the United States and China is not handled properly. With good management, even sharp, substantive disagreements between the two sides can be handled without causing friction. But if relations are not managed well, incidents such as the ones involving the U.S. naval vessels tend to enflame a difficult situation even further. They create tensions and potential dangers that may reverberate throughout the region and even globally.

These incidents, in and of themselves, are trivial. In their symbolic importance, however, they are not the slightest bit trivial. If the U.S. and Chinese militaries cannot resolve matters such as a Hong Kong port call, how can they handle larger, more complex issues that will be generated as China continues to rise economically and militarily?

China's rise will pose challenges not just for the United States, but also for China's neighbors. And China lives in a neighborhood where its neighbors include not only small and middle-sized countries, but also global powers. Japan certainly is a global economic power. And in conventional military terms, Japan also is a very powerful country. India, of course, is a nuclear power. And Russia still maintains a significant military capability. So China has neighbors that are important countries in their own rights.

**USAPC: How do we improve the management of U.S.-China relations so these sorts of incidents do not recur?**

**Roy:** The irony is that these incidents occurred shortly after the United States resumed military exchanges with the Chinese military. After the EP-3 incident in April 2001,<sup>ii</sup> the U.S. Defense Department essentially froze military exchanges with China. In my judgment, that was extremely unwise.

The more problems we have with China, the more exchanges we should have because we need to know the other side and the other side needs to know us. That is the best way to resolve disagreements. I have yet to read a marriage manual that says you should freeze all communications if you are having problems with your partner. This applies in the international sphere as much as it does to personal relationships. We need open channels of communication. The more serious the problems are, the more important it is to maintain open channels of communication.

**USAPC: With respect to China's great-power neighbors, what about the role of Russia in the Asia Pacific? The Russians have not really distinguished themselves in the Six-Party Talks aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear program.**

**Roy:** Russia is a difficult country to evaluate in the East Asian context because of the changes in Russia itself. For one, it is no longer an ideological power that is pushing communism as a model for other countries.

In addition, the former Soviet Union has dissolved. The Russian Federation still is an enormous country with a significant population, nuclear weapons, and intercontinental ballistic missiles. It remains a very important player in the region and the world. But the Russian Federation undeniably is smaller and less of a global power than the former Soviet Union.

Moreover, during much of the 1990s Russia was struggling domestically. It only has been in the past 10 years that Russia has recaptured its economic vitality, and that is largely due to the rise in oil prices. But in East Asia, the Russian Federation still does not wield the economic or military heft that the Soviet Union previously did.

The problem from Russia's standpoint is that the mass of its population is in the European part of the Federation. Its vast eastern territories are under-populated owing in part to the extreme northern expanse of these territories. It therefore is difficult for Russia to maintain security in the eastern territories given the sparse population. At the same time, though, they have important eastern cities such as Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, and other historic settlements there.

It would be a disastrous mistake to forget about Russia or to try to exclude Russia from discussions about East Asian issues that are important to its interests. Any development in Northeast Asia naturally is of very great importance to Russia. For this reason, it certainly is appropriate to include Russia in the Six-Party Talks. But we should not expect Moscow to drive the process.

Russia needs to have a sense of participation. That is the secret to managing Russia as an Asian power, albeit a somewhat diminished power. The United States and other Asian nations should not try to exclude Russia from discussions and forums relevant to its interests. At the same time, though, we should not expect it to play the role that it tried to play earlier when it had a larger empire to back it up.

**USAPC: One hears a lot about how India is becoming an important player in East Asia. Do you think this description of India's rising influence in the region is exaggerated?**

**Roy:** No, I do not think that description is exaggerated at all. If anything, India's significance was exaggerated in earlier years when it was not growing so rapidly. India played a significant role in the non-aligned movement, through its relationships with key power centers around the world, and through its refusal to take sides in the Cold War struggle. But in terms of its economic strength, India previously was a weak player.

Now India's economy is growing rapidly and its population is expanding. The latter, in particular, will pose enormous problems for India down the road. According to some projections, within 30 years India's population will be larger than that of China.

So India clearly is a country of great importance and growing significance. But it is a country that lacks a history in the modern world of acting as a nation-state. India was a British colony, of course, until the late 1940s. After it gained independence, India was heavily driven by what some might call post-colonial impulses and its continuing confrontation with Pakistan. It did not project a foreign policy interest in East Asia or Southeast Asia of the sort that you would normally expect from a country of its size and potential importance.

Also important is the fact that historically India never has been a geopolitical player in East Asia. It has had a major cultural, philosophical, and religious impact on the East Asian cultures going back centuries, even millennia. But owing to geographic factors, India has not been involved in East Asia as a military power.

As India gains economic and military power in the next 50 years, will this pattern of behavior in East Asia change? Perhaps, but that is difficult to predict. India's relationship with China likely will be a determining factor. There is a rivalry between the two countries, but also a desire to cooperate because in many ways they are complementary. India and China both are going through a rapid development process.

I think it would be a major mistake for the United States to try and play off one country against the other. That strategy not only would be contrary to the interests both of India and China, but it also would end up weakening our relationships with these countries rather than strengthening our own position. That is a danger we must avoid.

India will want to pursue closer relations with *both* the United States and China. And as in our own relations with China, there will be elements of competition and elements of cooperation in the Sino-Indian relationship.

**USAPC: As U.S. relations with Asian nations continue to evolve, both bilaterally and multilaterally, how do you see this affecting our long-time alliance with Japan?**

**Roy:** East Asia offers enormous opportunities for the United States, but it also offers some of the biggest challenges. One of these challenges is rising China, which gets a lot of attention in Washington. Our relationship with Japan gets less attention than it should.

Japan is going through a vitally important transition. The new leaders that are emerging no longer accept the restraints placed on Japan by its defeat in World War II. They want Japan to be a "normal country." With the second-largest economy in the world and its impressive military capabilities, Japan, by rights, should have a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council and a higher stature in other global councils.

To achieve those goals, however, Japan must deal with the legacy of its earlier history of Asian conquest. That poses a problem for Japan because its harsh behavior toward its neighbors during the 1930s and 1940s continues to influence present-day attitudes of countries such as China, South Korea and North Korea and China. There are echoes of anti-Japanese attitudes in Southeast Asia as well. So Japan is looking for its proper role in an Asia where the rise of China poses an even greater challenge for Tokyo than it does for Washington.

For the United States, this creates enormous conceptual problems. We must understand and appreciate that the habits of the past 50 years, when Japan played the role of faithful ally of the United States, are changing. Japan now wants to be itself. It wants to be recognized in the region and globally as an independent nation that is a friend of and cooperator with the United States – but is not a junior partner with the United States.

Japan has the same cooperative and competitive relationship with China that India and the United States have. But Japan's situation is different because it is in closer proximity to China and the territorial disparities between the two countries are enormous.

For the United States to manage effectively the important transitions in Japan's regional role as well as related changes to U.S.-Japan relations, we must have much better coordination than we have had in recent years between the military and non-military aspects of bilateral relations. Whether we are dealing with economic problems or tensions arising from issues in

Sino-Japanese relations or matters about which China, Japan, and the United States do not fully agree, it is critical that the U.S. Departments of State and Defense work more closely with each other. This interdepartmental coordination has not been nearly as good as it must be.

It is important for the United States to re-think its approach to challenges created by the rise of China and changes in U.S.-Japan relations or we will be dealing with new issues using old concepts, and that will not produce the best policy approach.

**USAPC: With respect to evolving regional architectures, such as the ASEAN+3 construct or the East Asian Summit (EAS)<sup>iii</sup>, do you think these institutions could serve as forums for resolving regional issues, be they economic, political, or security-related?**

**Roy:** Yes, they could. But the United States needs to be agile in its thinking about what the U.S. relationship should be with these emerging institutions. At the moment, East Asia still is searching for the organizational frameworks that will best suit the interests of the area.

The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum played a critically important role in bringing regional leaders together on a regular basis for the first time. But in a way, APEC is too large; there are 21 member economies. In addition, it focuses primarily on economic cooperation issues and includes transpacific players whose attention is not as focused on the Asian Pacific area as some other countries.

So it is not surprising that in the eyes of many Asians, APEC simply has not been as well suited to dealing with their problems as smaller, more Asia-centered groups. But this raises the age-old question of whether or not Australia and New Zealand should be included in a new regional architecture. Geographically, Australia and New Zealand are East Asian countries, but culturally and historically they have not been seen either by themselves or by their East Asian neighbors as “Asian” countries. Most Asians no longer have that attitude, although one sees a lingering legacy of that view in Malaysia.

Over the years, the United States also has been a very important regional player. But in the last decade East Asian coordination mechanisms have emerged that do not involve the United States. The ASEAN + 3 framework is the most notable example of this. The United States also is not a participant or even an observer in the East Asian Summit (EAS).

This is not necessarily an adverse trend. But the United States has not devoted nearly enough intellectual attention to examining whether it should participate in these regional organizations or could play a more constructive role as an outside player.

The failure by the United States to define a position on whether it should become a signatory to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation is an egregious oversight. The Southeast Asian nations regard the TAC as the defining indicator of whether a nation supports ASEAN’s efforts to ensure that the region remains a zone of tranquility. This oversight has fed the belief in Asia, which I think is mistaken, that the United States does not care about East Asia as much as it did in the past.

The United States also must remain open to the idea that it may be necessary to have sub-regional organizational structures in East Asia, which would address the different security challenges created by the geography of the region. We already can see the kernel of this notion in the proposal that the Six-Party Talks, if successful, evolve into some sort of a stabilization mechanism for Northeast Asia.

**USAPC: Do you think the United States is overly reluctant to consider alternatives to its “hub-and-spokes” network of alliances in East Asia?**

**Roy:** It is not wise to throw out what you have until you have a sense for where you want to go. But in some ways the historic American treaty relationships in East Asia, which were formed during the Cold War for a particular purpose, have become a straitjacket for U.S. thinking. So, yes, Washington has been reluctant to think outside of that box because doing so might seem to be lessening the U.S. commitment to existing arrangements.

In reality, however, those existing arrangements have changed substantially. We see this particularly with respect to the U.S.-South Korea security alliance. Attitudes in South Korea have undermined the significance of that relationship, although they have not destroyed it. Washington and Seoul still regard the alliance as very important.

Nevertheless, the underpinnings of the U.S.-South Korea security alliance are significantly different from when it was originally concluded. This is because South Korea now is interested in improving relations with North Korea. It also has improved significantly its relations with China. Thus, the security treaty, which was aimed at protecting South Korea from a mutually perceived threat, is no longer as relevant in the minds of many South Koreans as the perception of the threat has diminished. The question now is whether collective security arrangements that are aimed at preventing the emergence of threats should begin to play a greater role.

**USAPC: You mentioned earlier the importance of communication in managing challenging relationships, particularly communication at the upper reaches of government. Are we on the right track with the U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED)?**

**Roy:** The biannual meetings of the SED do not produce dramatic progress in dealing with important economic issues between the United States and China. But the SED plays the critically important role of bringing senior leaders of the United States and China together every six months to review a whole host of economic and financial issues.

Do we have an equivalent political dialogue? No. We do have what the US side calls a “senior dialogue” with Chinese officials, but it is conducted at the Deputy Secretary level in the State Department and Chinese Foreign Ministry.

Given the cabinet-level status of the SED participants, one might ask why they must meet so frequently. As I suggested earlier, the answer is that both sides *must* meet frequently. How can one possibly believe that it is not a good investment of time for senior officials of a country such as the United States to meet with their counterparts from the most rapidly rising power in the world to discuss current issues?

It is through regular meetings like the SED that officials get to know each other. That is how they acquire a grasp of the issues and establish continuity. If a leader only deals with an issue every year or two at a summit meeting, he or she will not be as conversant with the details. By meeting every six months, however, they are better able to stay on top of things.

I hope that the Washington ultimately recognizes that in order to effectively manage important relationships in Asia or anywhere else in the world, the leaders themselves must meet with some frequency. If they do not get to know each other through that process, they will feel they are dealing with strangers. That is not a good basis for sound policy.

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<sup>i</sup> On November 21, the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk and its escort ships requested permission to dock at the port of Hong Kong for a four-day visit, but the Chinese navy refused them entry. Three or four days before, two U.S. minesweepers seeking to refuel in preparation for the stormy conditions in the South China Sea also had asked to enter Hong Kong and were denied permission. Although the Chinese navy subsequently reversed its decision and said the Kitty Hawk and its escorts could enter the Hong Kong port on “humanitarian grounds,” by then the U.S. ships were already on their way back to their home port in Yokosuka, Japan. However, rather than returning via the Pacific Ocean, the Kitty Hawk and its escorts proceeded through the Taiwan Strait, a route that effectively showcased U.S. naval power much closer to Chinese shores. Chinese authorities criticized the U.S. Navy for responding in a provocative manner to what it termed a “misunderstanding” about the port calls.

<sup>ii</sup> On April 1, 2001, two Chinese fighter aircraft harassed a U.S. EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft operating in international airspace about 70 miles from the Chinese island of Hainan. According to the U.S. Navy, one of the Chinese fighters collided with the EP-3 after several harassment maneuvers. The collision destroyed the Chinese aircraft and apparently killed the Chinese pilot. The EP-3 was so damaged that it was forced to make an unauthorized emergency landing on Hainan Island. Washington and Beijing sharply disagreed about the cause of the collision and whether it occurred in Chinese or international airspace, which created a tense and wary atmosphere in U.S.-China relations.

<sup>iii</sup> The ASEAN+3 framework involves the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam – plus China, Japan, and South Korea. The East Asia Summit (EAS) is a forum held annually by the leaders of 16 countries in East Asia and the region. The first summit was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on December 14, 2005. Subsequent meetings were held in December 2006 and November 2007. Participants included the ASEAN+3 nations, plus Australia, India, and New Zealand.