Introduction

American foreign policy toward East Asia—and the geopolitical organization of the region itself—is a creature of the Cold War. Yet despite the end of that great conflict, American policy toward the region has remained largely unchanged. In the decade since the end of the Cold War, the United States has reaffirmed its alliance commitments and made clear its geopolitical and economic interests in the region. This is partly because the Cold War has not fully ended in East Asia. The Berlin Wall came down in Europe, but the walls—real and imagined—remain in place across the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula. U.S. relations with China remain remarkably restrained and Stable despite sharp shifts in the global strategic environment, the rise of post–September 11 terrorist threats, and the Bush administration’s hard-line foreign policy. The U.S.-Japan alliance remains the organizational center of the region. In Asia, the end of the Cold War was less of a world historical transition than elsewhere.

But the explanation for continuity in American policy is also due to a larger reality. The United States is a global hegemonic power that has constructed a political-security order in East Asia—as it has around the world—and in practical terms there is no alternative order that it or the countries in the region can conjure up that is more stable or mutually beneficial. Perhaps a new order will someday emerge, but not yet. American policy toward East Asia and the regional order that has evolved over the decades reflects this hegemonic reality: Key countries in the region are dependent on American military protection and the American market. American-extended deterrence and regional trade linkages are at the heart of this American–East Asian order. Moreover, this order—and American foreign policy toward the region—is also supported by America’s ideas and intellectual traditions about how to build regional and global order. These are realist ideas about power and containment but also liberal ideas about how best to build an international order and how to engage the region in economic, political, and security spheres.

The Bush administration’s policy toward the region—as well as its wider global vision—is still emerging but exhibits both these realist and liberal logics. Unilateralist tendencies exist in the new administration, manifest in the rejection of a host of treaties and agreements. Yet in the aftermath of September 11, officials in the Bush administration seem to have discovered some usefulness of coalitions, alliances, and multilateral cooperation. The American campaign to fight terrorism should reinforce cooperative relations with both its allies in East Asia and create incentives for accommodating relations with China. These

*This article is a revised edition of a report presented to a commemorative international symposium at the fiscal 2003 annual convention of the Japan Association for Asian Studies (JAAS), held at the Hitotsubashi Memorial Hall in Tokyo on November 8, 2003.
developments reinforce the continuity of America’s presence in the region and the existing regional structures.

U.S. relations with East Asia have been less damaged by the neoconservative turn in American foreign policy and the crisis over the American invasion of Iraq than American relations with Europe. Hard-line, neoconservative officials in the administration are focused primarily on the Middle East, even though the “axis of evil” includes North Korea. The difficulties that the United States has encountered in the aftermath of the Iraq war have also served to moderate American global ambitions. There is some reason to think that the Bush administration—and certainly its successor—will return to a more mainstream foreign policy. This will reinforce continuity of American policy in East Asia.

In this paper I do three things. First, I sketch American policy toward East Asia—built as it is around hegemony, bilateral security ties, and soft multilateralism—and trace how American policy has been evolving since the early 1990s. Second, I step back and look at the broader realist and liberal grand strategies that the United States wields in the region. Finally, I will look at the more recent efforts to maintain a hegemonic leadership position in the region by reinvigorating the bilateral U.S.-Japan alliance, pursuing multilateral cooperative arrangements in security and economic areas, and searching for a lasting rationale for the American presence in the region.

American Policy Toward East Asia

American policy toward East Asia is built around hard bilateral security ties and soft multilateral economic relations. Embedded in these policies are a set of political bargains between the United States and the countries within the region. The U.S.-Japan alliance is the cornerstone of the security order, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the trans-Pacific trade and investment system are the cornerstone of the economic order. The hub-and-spoke defense system has its roots in the early Cold War and the failure of more multilateral security arrangements that were intended to mirror the Atlantic security pact. The U.S.-Japan alliance was established to deter the expansion of Soviet power and communism more generally in the Asia-Pacific. This Cold War anticommunist goal led the United States to use its occupation of Japan and military victory in the Pacific to actively shape the region—doing so more successfully in Northeast Asia than Southeast Asia. The United States offered Japan—and the region more generally—a postwar political bargain. The United States would provide Japan and other countries with security protection and access to American markets, technology, and supplies within an open world economy. In return, Japan and other countries in the region would become stable partners who would provide diplomatic, economic, and logistical support for the United States as it led the wider American-centered, anticommunist postwar order.

From the beginning, this bilateral security order has been intertwined with the evolution of regional economic relations. The United States facilitated Japanese economic reconstruction after the war and actively sought to create markets for Japanese exports, particularly after the closing of China in 1949. The United States actively prompted the import of Japanese goods into the United States during the 1950s so as to encourage Japanese postwar economic growth and political stability. The American military guarantee to partners in East Asia (and Western Europe) provided a national security rationale for Japan and the Western democracies to open their markets. Free trade helped cement the alliance, and in turn the alliance helped settle economic disputes. In Asia, the export-oriented development strategies of Japan and the smaller Asian tigers depended on America’s willingness to accept their imports and live with huge trade deficits; alliances with Japan, South Korea, and other
Southeast Asian countries made this politically tolerable.

The alliance system—and the U.S.-Japan security pact in particular—has also played a wider stabilizing role in the region. The American alliance with Japan has solved Japan’s security problems, allowing it to forgo building up its military capability and thereby making it less threatening to its neighbors. This has served to solve or reduce the security dilemmas that would otherwise surface within the region if Japan were to rearm and become a more autonomous and unrestrained military power. At the same time, the alliance makes American power more predictable and connected to the region. Even China has seen the virtues of the U.S.-Japan alliance. During the Cold War it was at least partially welcome as a tool to balance Soviet power—an objective that China shared with the United States.

The end of the Cold War and the shifting economic and political environment in East Asia has altered the region and presented challenges to this postwar regional hegemonic order. The geopolitical landscape has changed. The Soviet Union has collapsed, and now Russia is a weakened great power—too weak to play a dominant role in the region. The peace negotiations between the Koreas also are likely to lead to the reassessment of relationships and bargains. The end of the Cold War makes it more difficult for some Americans to understand why the United States continues to provide security protection to Japan and the wider region.

But in other ways, the relations and bargains remain critical to regional order—and they remain largely in tact. The United States is even more powerful today than it was in the past, particularly with the ongoing economic malaise in Japan and the growth of America’s new economy during the 1990s. The United States is still the world’s leading military power. The United States also remains the leading destination for East Asian exports. (In the late 1990s, the United States passed Japan as the largest trade partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN]). There is a wide array of regional vested interests—on both sides of the Pacific—in favor of open trade and investment. This creates powerful and ongoing incentives for the countries of the region to engage the United States and encourage the United States to establish credible restraints and commitments on its power. The U.S. government clearly is convinced that its security and political presence in the region is as important as in the past, despite the end of the Cold War.

America’s Realist and Liberal Grand Strategies

Behind American thinking toward East Asia stand at least two intellectual traditions. One is realist, of course, and it is exhibited in the balance of power and containment policies that the United States has pursued. America’s hegemonic bargain with East Asia reflects this logic: The United States provides security protection and access to its technology and markets in exchange for diplomatic, logistical, and economic support from its partners as the United States leads the wider postwar order. America’s wars in Asia and its forward military presence are all manifestations of this realist geopolitical orientation.

There is also a liberal orientation that has informed policies that have sought to create various sorts of integrative, reciprocal, and highly institutionalized relations. This tradition has stressed the importance of multilateral organization of economic relationships, and it has placed a premium on the encouragement of democratic reform in defeated or transitional states. The liberal orientation toward order is also concerned with the management of power, but it brings a richer set of ideas about how economic interdependence, democratic community, political socialization, and binding institutions can contribute to stable and mutually agreeable order. America’s “liberal grand strategy” is built around at least three elements of policy engagement, which seek to “open up,” “tie down,” and “bind together”
Opening up means directing the forces of trade and investment, cultural exchange, and transnational society into the closed politics of strong state rule. “These linkages bring with them powerful forces for change. Computers and the Internet, fax machines and photocopiers, modems and satellites all increase the exposure to people, ideas, and the world beyond China’s border,” as former President Bill Clinton explained in October 1998. Call this idea “strategic interdependence.” The idea is to create realms of wealth and autonomy within the economy and society, which encourages political pluralism and erodes the iron-fisted control of the Communist Party. Expanding trade and investment also creates new and more vocal “vested interests” in closed societies who want to maintain continuous and stable relations with the outside world. Strategic interdependence is meant to accomplish at least two objectives. It is to help activate and reward internal groups and factions within the economy and society and strengthen their domestic position, thereby giving a boost to political forces that favor democracy and a pluralistic political system.

Tying down means inviting other governments to get involved in international organizations, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and APEC. Here the idea is to create expectations and obligations on governments through membership in regional and global institutions. Political conditionality for gaining membership in these organizations can itself create leverage, but the expectation is also that once inside the institution, government officials will slowly be socialized into embracing its principles and norms. The variety of multilateral security fora in East Asia—most importantly the ASEAN Regional Forum—are seen as playing a small role in socializing regional governments, providing mechanisms for conflict resolution, and fostering some small sense of common identity.

Binding together means establishing formal institutional links between countries that are potential adversaries, thereby reducing the incentives for each state to balance against the other. This is the security component of a liberal grand strategy. Rather than responding to a potential strategic rival by organizing a counterbalancing alliance against it, the threatening state is invited to participate within a joint security association or alliance. By binding to each other, surprises are reduced, and expectations of stable future relations dampen the security dilemmas that trigger worst-case preparations, arms races, and dangerous strategic rivalry. Also, by creating institutional connections between potential rivals, channels of communication are established that provide opportunities to actively influence the other’s evolving security policy. Even today, the United States and its European and Japanese partners ward off rivalry and balancing among themselves by maintaining their security alliances. It is the binding logic—more so than the response to external threats—that makes these institutions attractive today.

Neoconservative Grand Strategy

Since September 11, a third set of ideas has emerged in Washington—the so-called neoconservative grand strategy. The neoconservative vision of world order is built on unrivaled American military might and a belief in American exceptionalism. Beyond this, the pundits and policy makers who make up this radical school of thought tend to share four convictions. First, the United States should increasingly stand aloof from the rest of the world and use its unipolar power—most importantly, its military power—to arbitrate right and wrong and enforce the peace. In a Hobbesian world of anarchy, the United States must step forward as the order-creating Leviathan. The United States will refuse to play by the same rules as other states, but this is the price that the world must pay for the American unipolar provision of security. America’s older, postwar approach to order—organized around alliance
partnership, multilateral cooperation, binding ties, and strategic bargains with other key states—falls away.

This new global aloofness is reflected in Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s aphorism that “the mission determines the alliance” rather than the other way around. The United States will determine what is a threat and how to respond—and relevant and willing partners will be invited to join in. Gone is the notion that the alliance determines the mission. New fundamentalists are not against security partnerships—but coalitions of the willing will be formed only if other countries sign on to America’s unilaterally-defined goals. This global aloofness is also reflected in the October 2002 National Security Strategy report’s new doctrine of preemption where the United States claims a new right to use force “to act against emerging threats before they are fully formed.” Gone are the old justifications of war based on self-defense and imminent threat enshrined in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. “When it comes to our security,” President George W. Bush affirmed, “we really don’t need anybody’s permission.”

Second, the new fundamentalists argue that military power—and the willingness to use it robustly in pursuit of the national interest—must be put back into the center of American foreign policy. Early neoconservative thinking in the 1970s made this a central tenet—American foreign policy in the post-Vietnam era had become too liberal, too soft, and too unwilling to confront Soviet expansionism. Power must be put back in the service of American principles and the national interest. During the Clinton years, the new fundamentalists argue, the United States was not taken seriously as a global military power—Commander-in-Chief Clinton sent a few cruise missiles to Baghdad on several occasions but never threatened real force—and when enemies stop fearing the United States, they are emboldened to strike.

Third, new fundamentalists are frustrated with the entangling rules and institutions of liberal internationalism—so they advocate pulling back from treaties and international agreements that jeopardize American sovereignty and constrain the exercise of power. The neoconservative pundit Charles Krauthammer calls it the “new unilateralism”: “After eight years during which foreign policy success was largely measured by the number of treaties the president could sign and the number of summits he could attend, we now have an administration willing to assert American freedom of action and the primacy of American national interests. Rather than contain power within a vast web of constraining international agreements, the new unilateralism seeks to strengthen American power and unashamedly deploy it on behalf of self-defined global ends.”

Some advocates of this view simply appeal to the new realities of terrorism: In a new era where small groups of determined individuals can unleash massive violence against the civilized world without warning, the old system of rules and multilateral cooperation must give way to action—whatever it takes to get them before they get us. Other new fundamentalists offer more political-philosophical attacks on multilateralism and rule-based order. In one of the most far-fetched versions, Under Secretary of State John Bolton, prior to joining the administration, argued that a great struggle was unfolding between what he calls Americanists and globalists. Globalists are depicted as elite activist groups who seek to strengthen “global governance” through a widening net of agreements on environment, human rights, labor, health, and political-military affairs and whose not-so-hidden agenda is to enmesh the United States in international laws and institutions that rob the country of its sovereignty. Americanists, according to Bolton, have finally awoke and are now seizing back the country’s control over its own destiny. This is a cartoon view that evinces not just a healthy skepticism of multilateralism; it sees American resistance to the encroachment of those rules and agreements as a patriotic duty.

Fourth, the new fundamentalists also incorporate Wilsonian ideas into their vision in urging the spread of democracy. This is not just idealism—it is good national security policy.
If democracy and the rule of law are established in troubled countries around the world, they cease being threats. This argument was given a conservative imprimatur in Ronald Reagan’s celebrated 1982 speech to the British Parliament in which he called for the promotion of democracy as a fundamental global security imperative. In the hands of new fundamentalists, this aspiration has become, in Pierre Hassner’s apt phrase, “Wilsonian in boots.” The promotion of democracy is not left to the indirect, long-term forces of economic development and political engagement—but, when necessary, it is purveyed through military force.

These radical ideas are bumping up against a stubborn international reality. The United States is not able to impose its will on other countries or intimidate countries into cooperation. The neoconservative strategy is not sustainable. It is too costly, and it generates more problems than it solves. America will inevitably move back to a more mainstream foreign policy—returning to liberal and realist grand strategies.

America’s East Asian Policies in the Post–Cold War Era

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has pursued a variety of realist and liberal-oriented policies in East Asia—and together they have reinforced continuity in the country’s overall commitment to regional leadership and engagement. The Clinton administration may not have had a fully formed grand strategy in place, but its policies were informed by both traditional realist security objectives and liberal aspirations. Clinton officials described their policy toward China at one point as “constructive engagement,” but it did so without loosening its commitment to the security of Taiwan. The warming of relations with China did not preclude the Clinton administration from sending two carriers to patrol the waters off Taiwan, and it was willing to debate how to press China on human rights and trade problems. Obviously, distinctions between “containment” and “engagement” are too simple to capture the mix of policies available to the United States. We can look at American foreign policy toward East Asia in this light.

The Bush administration is still shaping a strategy toward the region. There is an attempt to reestablish Japan as America’s core strategic partner in the region and dispense with the notion of a “strategic partnership” with China. Indeed, the ambition appears to be to make Japan a heavier and more involved military partner in the region—sharing intelligence and expanding Japanese functional duties in the region. The initial steps by the Bush team have also been to signal a harder-line position toward North Korea. The surprising language in President Bush’s State of the Union address portraying North Korea as part of a global “axis of evil” is a continuation of this hard-line approach to what it sees as rogue states. Missile defense is also an issue that is creating controversy, and how it plays out will do more than any other issue to shape the balance of continuity and change in American policy toward the region. But the major thrusts of the new administration also involve liberal grand strategic ideas: The bilateral alliances will remain the core of America’s commitment to the region; the United States will support soft multilateral dialogues in the region; trans-Pacific regional economic relations will be championed; and trade and investment flows will be encouraged in American relations with China.

In the economic area, the United States has had a very consistent policy of fostering expanded economic ties with China; encouraging cross-cutting trade and investment patterns within the region among the various economic centers; and raising the level of multilateral political management of intraregional economic relations. In many ways, the evolution of the East Asian region is already being driven by the forces of trade and investment. Japanese foreign investment exploded in the mid-1980s within Asia, reversing the earlier Western orientation of Japanese economic relations. At the same time, the overseas Chinese in
Southeast Asia have also created a complex production and trade network in the region. The result is a growing intraregional economy, not dominated by either the United States or Japan. The very complexity and cross-cutting character of these relations is driving greater political and security engagement in the region. The American policy appears to be aimed at deepening trade and investment interdependence and encouraging institutional groupings, such as APEC, to reinforce the open and “soft” character of Asia-Pacific economic regionalism. The United States has also consistently sought to make sure that Asia-Pacific regionalism encompasses the Western Hemisphere and not just Asia.

In the political area, the United States has supported the expansion of wider and deeper institutional relations between China, Japan, Korea, the United States, and the ASEAN countries—at least as these contacts are manifest as dialogues or policy consultations. The United States has reaffirmed its commitment to bilateral security ties, but it has offered support for multilateral and minilateral dialogues that are consistent with these underlying bilateral security commitments. Support for Chinese membership in the WTO and various regional dialogues are meant to provide ways to foster agreement on regional norms and standards of conduct. One argument made by American officials during the Clinton administration was that institutions should be arrayed so as to enmesh the regional powers in a series of regional and global institutions that serve to establish explicit standards and expectations on government behavior in regard to human rights, political accountability, property rights, and business law. Yardsticks are erected that, often in subtle and indirect ways, allow governments and private groups to both support and criticize government policy and politics in neighboring countries. This in turn helps foster political community. Another argument is that a denser set of regional institutions provides forums and arenas for governmental and political elites to interact—thereby providing opportunities for the “socialization” of these elites into common regional norms and expectations. Finally, dialogues can also provide functional problem-solving mechanisms that bring together leaders and specialists across the region to find common solutions to problems.

In terms of track-two dialogues, the United States government has backed the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD), which is a consultation grouping aimed at enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation through unofficial dialogue among China, Japan, Russia, the United States, and the two Koreas. Although North Korea has not participated, this forum has brought together officials and policy experts from the five countries to talk about political, security, and economic issues. The Clinton administration was closely involved in the launching of this dialogue and secured government funding of it. Together, these various multilateral mechanisms serve various purposes. The NEACD brings Russia and Japan into discussions of regional issues without involving them in the more narrow four-power talks over North Korea. These multilateral venues are also a useful way to diffuse Chinese and Russian suspicion of the bilateral alliances.

The final area is regional security relations. The U.S.-Japan alliance (and the other bilateral pacts) provides a vehicle for the United States to play an active role in the region. In this sense, they serve the same function as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) does for American involvement in Europe. These alliances also stabilize relations between the United States and its Asian partners. The deepening of the U.S.-Japan alliance does appear to be driven by these multiple logics of tying down and binding together. The United States and Japan agreed to enhance security cooperation in the U.S.-Japan Joint Declaration on Security in 1996, and Japan enacted the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines in order to make the security treaty effective in 1998. The Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996 and North Korea’s missile launching in 1998 both served to intensify American and Japanese efforts to reaffirm and update the alliance.

An important development in American thinking about its post–Cold War security
involvement in East Asia came with the 1995 Nye Report, which made an argument that America’s military umbrella in the region had real and important consequences for the stability and functioning of regional political and economic relations and for the success of America’s economic, political, and security goals, including such issues as nonproliferation. Its famous phase that “security is like oxygen” sums up the rationale that was advanced.\(^\text{12}\) The report made the case that the U.S.-Japan alliance and the engagement of China remain in the long-run interest of the United States—America’s security presence had direct and indirect impacts on the stability of the region and on the ability of the United States to achieve its interests. Serious intellectual and policy challenges to this view have been raised from time to time but not lasted, at least within the American defense and foreign policy community. At the end of the decade, the thinking remained the same. The 1998 Defense Department strategic report on East Asia argued that “maintaining an overseas military presence is a cornerstone of U.S. National Security Strategy and a key element of U.S. military policy to ‘shape, respond, and prepare.’” It again makes the direct link between the bilateral alliances and their “critical practical and symbolic contributions to regional security” (EASR-1998, p. 9). Despite the end of the Cold War, it is the widely held view of the American foreign policy community that the United States needs to be permanently engaged with a forward deployed military presence in East Asia.

The American view toward multilateral military cooperation has fluctuated over the decade, but it has generally been supportive of initiatives—as long as they do not undermine the core bilateral security order. The 1995 Pentagon report on East Asia spent more time than the 1998 report discussing the positive contribution of these multilateral cooperative initiatives. But overall, the United States has warmed up to soft security multilateralism. President Clinton gave voice to the multilateral vision in a speech before the Korean National Assembly in July 1993, when he called for the creation of a “new Pacific community, built on shared strength, shared prosperity, and a shared commitment to democratic values.” He identified four aspects to this vision of community: continued U.S. military presence and commitment, stronger efforts to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, support for democracy and open societies, and the promotion of new multilateral regional dialogues on the full range of common security challenges.

In the following years, the United States has signaled its interest in organizing “coalitions of the willing” to address various regional security problems and to cautiously foster closer ties between its partners. It has given support to the ASEAN Regional Forum as a mechanism for dialogue. But the United States has also backed minilateral initiatives among its allies, including the U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), the U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Defense Talks, the Pacific Command’s (PACOM) dialogue with Australia, Japan, ROK, and Singapore on establishing great interoperability for future collective humanitarian operations, and PACOM’s Asia Pacific Security Center, where Asian militaries study the conceptual and operational aspects of confidence-building measures and cooperative security. These cooperative security undertakings reflect the general American government view that the bilateral alliances should be strengthened and coordinated as much as possible. “Foremost,” argues the 1998 Pentagon strategic statement on East Asia, “the U.S. will continue to strengthen its strategic partnerships with allies, which serve as important pillars from which to address regional political and military challenges. All of our alliance relationships promise to expand both in scope and degree in coming years to encompass more comprehensive concepts of security cooperation” (EASR-1998, p. 61).

Going beyond these minilateral groupings, the Bush administration is focusing on even greater cooperation among America’s security partners in the region. This is an idea championed by Admiral Dennis Blair, commander-in-chief of the U.S. Pacific Command—and he calls it a proposal to build a “security community” in the region.\(^\text{11}\) The idea is to
“enrich bilateralism” with greater cooperation and shared strategic purpose among the East Asian security partners. These cooperative ties would build on the example of ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Five-Power Defense Arrangements, and America’s bilateral ties with Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand to provide a foundation for expanding shared expectations of peaceful relations among East Asian countries. This proposal for building security community ties in the region, of course, excludes China. The danger is that in the name of the liberal idea of security communities, the United States actually ends up building a containment ring around China.

The major question today is how America’s post-September 11 global campaign against terrorism will influence the American presence in the region and the wider set of regional great-power relationships. It does appear that at least two competing visions of American grand strategy coexist within the Bush administration. The multilateral vision of Secretary of State Colin Powell and others emphasizes traditional military partnerships and multilateral cooperation. It is a pragmatic vision that essentially represents continuity with the broad thrusts of American grand strategies over the postwar era—both realist and liberal strategies. The other vision is an aggressive unilateralism that is deeply skeptical about operating within a rule-based international order. It is an imperial view of America’s role that was largely pushed to the sidelines during the Cold War and the Clinton era. It is a vision of a country that is big enough, powerful enough, and remote enough to go it alone, free from the dangerous and corrupting conflicts festering in all the other regions of the world. The dynamics of American foreign policy since September 11 are paradoxical. The unilateral wing of the Bush administration has been strengthened by the success of the military campaign in Afghanistan. American military capacity has been demonstrated, and many in the administration want to assert that unipolar military power in new operations around the world. But at the same time, the administration’s antiterrorism campaign has led to closer ties with Russia and China. The great powers—the United States, Europe, Russia, Japan, and China—are as closely aligned as they have been since the Concert of Europe. Whether this new great-power accord lasts or America’s unilateralist impulses trigger a global backlash will shape the future of America’s role in East Asia.

Conclusion

American foreign policy toward East Asia is based on America’s position as a hegemonic and status quo power in the region. It wants continuity more than change, and its security and economic strategies toward the region reflect this reality. The American presence in the region exhibits both realist and liberal logics. American security protection and market access are part of a practical convergence of interests between the United States and its partners in the region. But there is also a more diffuse liberal orientation manifest in American policy: It seeks to open up and tie together countries in the region so as to realize a more stable and integrative order. These realist and liberal impulses have coexisted and together reinforced continuity in America’s role within the region.

There are at least five underlying challenges to this policy continuity. The first is the problem of a weak Japan. The United States—reflected in the Armitage report—wants Japan to play a more active role in the region. But will the weakness of Japan’s economic and political situation allow it to do so? The weakness of Japan might seem to favor a continuation of the bilateral alliance structure of the region, because there is no prospect in sight of a transformed regional security order organized around Japan or a Japanese-Chinese accord. But Japanese weakness makes it difficult for Japan to step up and expand its security role. A weak Japanese government might also be less able to explain and defend the
American troop presence when some future incident creates a crisis and domestic outrage over the bases grows. If Japan does move in the direction envisaged by the Bush administration, the question is whether an expanded Japanese military role in the region will antagonize China and other countries and destabilize the very order that the United States seeks to preserve. American officials should also worry about how prolonged economic stagnation might transform Japanese political identity—which in the postwar decades was transformed from military great power to economic achiever. If Japan can no longer see itself as a great economic power, what sort of national identity will replace it? The problem of a too-strong Japan has long been appreciated in the region, but the problem of a too-weak Japan is just beginning to be understood.

The second challenge is redefining the patron-client character of the alliance. More so than within NATO, the American role in the U.S.-Japan alliance is that of the asymmetrical senior partner. Can this relationship be put on a more equal and reciprocal footing without unraveling the political bargain around which the partnership is based? When Japan and the United States talk about alliance reform, Japan thinks more about greater political equality and the United States thinks more about greater burden sharing. Can Japan have more voice in the alliance without the United States deciding that the political gains from being in the alliance are not worth the costs in tying itself to Japan and restricting its policy autonomy? The other challenge is that a more equal alliance will necessarily make Japan a more salient and active security player in the region, and again the question is whether this can be accomplished without unleashing new security dilemmas and arms races in the region, particularly with China.

A third—related—challenge is fostering greater cooperation among America’s bilateral security partners without turning the security community impulses of multilateral security cooperation into a threatening new containment belt around China. Enhancing multilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, and other allies could look very provocative from Beijing’s perspective—even if it is cooperation dressed up in the liberal rhetoric of security community. After all, what is that enhanced cooperation aimed at? The form and content of great regional cooperation—at least cooperation that does not include China—will matter a great deal in determining if it is stabilizing or destabilizing. It would be a nice irony if hub-and-spoke security bilateralism were actually more congenial with regional stability than alliance multilateralism.

A fourth challenge to the existing order in East Asia is the stickiness of the American military commitment in the wake of future political reconciliation in Korea and the settlement of Cold War territorial disputes elsewhere in the region. Even if the United States is able to maintain a steady security commitment to East Asia, the question is how and where that military commitment will be forward deployed.

A final challenge is American power itself. The rise of a unipolar American order after the Cold War has not triggered a global backlash, but it has unsettled relationships worldwide. Asians and Europeans worry about the steadiness of American leadership. Some governments and peoples around the world resent the extent and intrusiveness of American power, markets, and culture. Some intellectuals in the West even suggest that an arrogant and overbearing America brought the terrorism of September 11 on itself. Aside from diffuse hatreds and resentments, the practical reality for many states around the world is that they need the United States more than it needs them—or so it would seem. In the early months of the Bush administration the political consequences of a unipolar superpower seemed all too obvious. It could walk away from treaties and agreements with other countries—on global warming, arms control, trade, business regulation, and so forth—and suffer fewer consequences than its partners. But successfully to conduct a campaign against terrorism the United States now needs the rest of the world. This is a potential boon to cooperation across
the board. To pursue its objects—fighting terrorism but also managing the world economy and maintaining stable security relations—the United States will need to rediscover and renew the political bargains upon which its hegemonic leadership is based. East Asia will be a critical location for this process.

But in the final analysis, the hegemonic order is probably a stable one. Alternative institutions are not likely to emerge to rival the American-led bilateral security structure. The ASEAN Regional Forum is not a template for a wider security system. The multilateral dialogues that are proliferating in the region seem to be actually serving to diffuse antagonism to the alliance pacts rather than to replace them. Just as there is no political coalition—within the United States or the wider region—that could support and sustain an American hard-line, containment-oriented approach to China, there is also no political coalition that could support or sustain a transformed regional order.

Notes
1. On the idea floated by the United States of a multilateral security institution in Asia in the early 1940s and during 1950–51 that was to be a counterpart to NATO, see Donald Crone, “Does Hegemony Matter? The Reorganization of the Pacific Political Economy,” World Politics, Vol. 45 (July 1993).
7. An American strategy toward Asia was spelled out in a February 1995 Defense Department report, and it emphasized four overriding goals: maintain a forward presence of 100,000 in the region; put America’s alliances with Japan and Korea on a firm basis; develop multilateral institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum to foster great security dialogue; and encourage China, for a position of strength, to define its interests in ways that are compatible with its neighbors and the United States. See United States Strategy for the East-Asia Pacific Region (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1995). This view is echoed in the last Defense Department strategic report on East Asia of the 1990s, The United States Security Strategy for the East-Asia-Pacific Region (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1998).
8. The so-called Armitage report is still a good guide to (at least) State Department thinking. See “The United States and Japan: Advancing Toward a Mature Partnership,” INSS Special Report, 11 October 2000.

(G. John Ikenberry is a Professor in the Department of Government at Georgetown University. E-mail: gji@georgetown.edu)