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Secretary Clinton's Asia Trip: Allied Reassurance

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Coming only three weeks into the Obama Administration, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's Asia trip will be long on signals and short on substance. That is not necessarily a bad thing, especially when it sends several critically important messages to allies Japan and South Korea. Her trip communicates that Asia matters to the United States and that Washington is committed to a predominant role in the region over the long-term.

Traveling to Tokyo and Seoul prior to Beijing reflects the importance of our allies as well as a direct attempt to assuage fears of "Japan passing." As a Senator, Hillary Clinton authored a *Foreign Affairs* article in which she stated the U.S.–China relationship was the most important relationship in Asia, rekindling Japanese angst from the slight suffered when President Bill Clinton traveled to China but skipped Japan.

By traveling prior to the Obama Administration having even announced its Asian team or finalized its policies for the region, Clinton says she wants to establish a tone of open dialogue and transparency with America's Asian allies. But, of course, talking does not guarantee agreement, and there are a number of contentious issues that could arise during the trip. Clinton must reassure allies disturbed by Bush Administration's abandonment of important principles in its zeal to achieve North Korean denuclearization. Additionally, she should more clearly articulate the Obama Administration's six-party talks strategy and its position on the U.S.–South Korea free trade agreement.

A Changed Political Landscape. Clinton's trip comes amidst global economic turmoil, which will shift attention away from traditional bilateral and regional security issues, such as transforming the existing military relationships into strategic alliances and achieving North Korean denuclearization. Moreover, U.S. allies will have fewer resources to address these objectives, including Washington's request for Seoul and Tokyo to assume a larger global security role in Afghanistan. Rather than discussing these more traditional concerns, it is expected that Clinton's trip will focus heavily on coordinating policies to address the economic crisis.

The election of a U.S. President with very high public approval ratings changes the political landscape in bilateral U.S. relations with Tokyo and Seoul as well as domestic South Korean politics. Obama will have more leverage in bilateral relations because he starts with a clean slate.

For instance, Obama undermines South Korean progressives on the North Korea problem by removing the political cover that their pundits, media, and anti-U.S. groups have hidden behind. Anti-U.S. actions and rhetoric can no longer be justified as only being anti-Bush, nor can U.S. efforts to insist

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upon North Korean denuclearization compliance be blamed on “neo-conservative conspiracies.” The South Korean left will also be less able to blame the deadlocked six-party talks on lack of U.S. “flexibility,” i.e., concessions. It will become increasingly evident that the problem is, as it always has been, North Korean intransigence.

Clinton’s trip occurs when the Japanese and South Korean leaders are weakened by dismally low approval ratings and hamstrung by legislative inertia. Japan suffers a “twisted parliament” with control of the bilateral Diet split between the ruling and opposition parties, the latter of which employs obstructionist tactics to bring about the prime minister’s downfall.

The South Korean ruling Grand National Party is driven by factionalism and acts like a minority party despite having nearly two-thirds control of the unicameral National Assembly. Neither Prime Minister Taro Aso nor President Lee Myung-bak have progressed in expanding the military alliances, and both are likely to be resistant to the Obama Administration’s requests for military assistance in Afghanistan.

An Increasingly Belligerent North Korea. Clinton’s trip will be overshadowed by North Korea’s increasing belligerency and potential long-range missile launch. Pyongyang has stepped up its verbal attacks and threatened military action against South Korea in an attempt to get President Lee Myung-bak to abandon his principled policy requiring conditionality, reciprocity, and transparency in inter-Korean relations.

North Korea’s rhetoric is also a shot across the bow of the Obama Administration. In mid-January, North Korea rejected the existing six-party agreement by asserting that it would denuclearize only upon receiving formal diplomatic relations with the U.S., the cessation of Washington’s “hostile policy,” and removal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella over South Korea. Pyongyang may also be preparing to test launch a Taepo Dong-2 missile, which could theoretically have the range to reach the continental United States with a nuclear warhead.

North Korea’s actions are a clear signal that it will not adopt a more accommodating position despite

the change in U.S. leadership. Such behavior is a standard North Korean negotiating tactic, designed to raise the ante, deflect criticism of its own non-compliance by blaming U.S. actions, insist on equality of conditions in response to unequal violations, and prompt renegotiation of the existing agreement. There is, however, a growing risk of a tactical confrontation between the Korean navies in the West Sea that runs the risk of miscalculation and escalation.

What Should Be Done. During her trip, Clinton must strike a proper balance between accommodating allied concerns while still advocating strong U.S. objectives. Although Seoul and Tokyo have both agreed to expand the scope of the respective bilateral alliances, implementation has lagged. Clinton should welcome the improvement in bilateral relations with South Korea as well as the resurgence of military contingency planning that has occurred since the departure of the Roh Moo-hyun administration.

The U.S. should continue to press for an expanded alliance structure with Seoul but temper this effort with a realization of the volatility of the domestic political landscape. Any Obama Administration request for South Korean ground forces to support coalition operations in Afghanistan will be particularly contentious and would require extensive public diplomacy efforts to mitigate the potential for public demonstrations.

The military relationship with Japan has been problematic due to Japanese constitutional, legal, fiscal, and societal constraints as well as extensive foot-dragging by Tokyo. It is now unclear the degree to which Japan is willing to alter the comfortable alliance status quo. There are serious consequences to Japanese inaction. Long-term Japanese policy stagnation is not in Washington’s strategic interest and risks increasing U.S. frustration with its ally.

Tokyo’s unwillingness or inability to make tough decisions risks Japan losing influence and even relevance in a region increasingly dominated by an ascendant China. Clinton should articulate U.S. concerns while exploring Japanese objectives in preparation for subsequent efforts coordinated with the Secretary of Defense.

Clinton should reassure our allies that the U.S. remains committed to the complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea and unequivocally state that Washington will not accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. Statements by U.S. officials have been misperceived in South Korea and Japan as indicating a shift in U.S. policy away from North Korean denuclearization to merely capping the existing nuclear stockpile and preventing prolif-

eration. Clinton should also delineate the Obama Administration's strategy toward the six-party talks and the means it will employ to ensure North Korean compliance with existing commitments.

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