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**“Building a Regime of Regional Cooperation in
East Asia and the Role which Japan Can Play”**

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**“The Effects of Leadership Changes on International Relations
in East Asia: National Security Economics Issues”**

By

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The Effects of Leadership Changes on International Relations in East Asia: National Security Economic Issues

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Introduction

The topic of leadership changes is indeed relevant today and in the future for the East Asian region. In North East Asia there have been changes recently in Japan, South Korea and China. A little bit earlier Taiwan's leadership also has changed, where a former opposition leader, Chen Sui-Bian from the DPP, who was pro-independence for Taiwan, has gained the presidency and is going to face election next year. This has brought about a sea change in Taiwan's foreign policy.

In South East Asia changes in leadership have also happened in the last few years, to be followed by other leadership changes and in the next one year or two with significant impact on policies, which could impact on international relations. Thailand and Malaysia have changed their leadership, and Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore might do the same next year.

In some instances, these personnel changes are part of generational changes as well, such as in South Korea and in China as well as in Taiwan or Singapore. In others it was not, such as Thailand, Malaysia or Indonesia. Leadership changes are also happening as part of deep societal changes such as in South Korea or Indonesia. In others those societal changes have happened earlier. Changes in tandem with generational or societal changes could be deeper and could create greater impact on policies, although in varying degrees.

Because the situation and development of those leadership changes are very dependent on the socio-political environment in each of the countries concerned, the best way to explain them is by examining the changes in each country, and then to make some observations about their similar or different impacts on foreign relations.

Changes in the Selected Countries

South Korea: President Roh Moo Hyun has been elected by a young electorate, who have no experiences of the Korean War, and the U.S. role in defending South Korea with over 50,000 American lives. The president himself has also not been exposed to foreign policy and international affairs. Therefore, his hesitation on relations with the U.S., and particularly with this administration, could be understood. On the other hand, he has been a protégé of President Kim Dae-Jung, whose “sunshine policy” would like to deal with North Korea in a more conciliatory way. And Mr. Roh was following that policy, also on the issue of North Korea’s nuclear proliferation that caught the attention of the international community, especially the Bush Administration, mid last year.

Hopefully by now he could see the benefit of reacting more strongly in a unified manner in the six parties talk with the North Korean regime, who has forfeited its written promises and agreement with the international community. President Roh’s political weakness is not helping him to adopting a strong stance and policy on the North Korean nuclear proliferation problem.

Japan: the election of PM Koizumi has at last given Japan a leader who has the support of public opinion and is willing to undertake the necessary economic and political reforms. He has been hampered by the “LDP old guard”, and the last general election has not given him a very clear mandate to strongly push

for the reforms. This has created some worries among Japan's friend and neighbours that the hesitation for further reforms will not help revive the economy and allow Japan to play its natural role regionally and globally as the second biggest economy in the world. On the other hand, PM Koizumi's "normalisation" process to increase Japan's defense and security role, as part of the U.S. alliance against terrorism and WMD, has been well accepted by ASEAN and is appreciated by the region. PM Koizumi is also willing to continue Japan's close cooperation with ASEAN and there will be a special Japan-ASEAN Summit in December 2003 in Tokyo. This relationship could form the nucleus of the East Asian Community in the future.

China: this important country is now governed by a new generation of leaders, the so-called fourth generation of leaders, under President Hu-Jin Tao. Their efforts on the economy and fight against SARS augur well for the future. Particularly appreciated are their efforts to do something on domestic political development, in terms of giving more power to the Central Committee, which is a good token for future Chinese stability. On foreign policy, they are following President Jiang Zemin's more relaxed and pragmatic policies. They have continued their cooperation with the U.S. on anti terrorism. They also tried to cooperate with U.S. to balance the huge imbalances in their bilateral trade. With ASEAN, China has not only proposed a free trade agreement (FTA), but also signed the Protocol to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, as a political signal to ASEAN to be willing to solve differences peacefully.

Of course it is China's strategy to be close to ASEAN, because she was as a source of anxiety to the region. China needs ASEAN for a peaceful environment to continue with her modernisation, and to prevent any possibility of encirclement to contain her in the future. She is very supportive of and committed to the East Asian Community idea, which at this juncture is known as the ASEAN + 3 process. Whether PM Wen Jiao-Bo intended that this is the new regional architecture for economic and security cooperation in the future is

not very clear yet. He mentioned this at the opening of the recent Boao Forum of Asian Leaders (government, business and academe). If it is meant to counterbalance the U.S., because the U.S. has become more unilateralist, it will be divisive as most if not all ASEAN governments are not willing to be part of such a move.

On the other hand, if in the long term the U.S. will oppose China, because China is becoming on her own right another “superpower”, then most countries in the region, including the ASEAN countries, will not go along with that as China is now already an important member of East Asia. To prevent this confrontation, East Asian regionalism can assist. First, by making sure that China becomes a status quo power, and second, by showing the U.S. that this new regional institution is not meant to oppose her presence and role in the East Asian region.

Taiwan: Although she is not a full player in the diplomatic and political fields, Taiwan has economic interest and relations with the region. The way President Chen is playing with the idea of “independence” is seen as a threat to stability and peace in the region, and will be opposed by most regional countries. The region wishes to see a peaceful resolution to the divide across the Taiwan Straits, and both sides are responsible for that. But President Chen’s “brinkmanship” in the independence issue will create chaos and instability, and even the possibility of war in the region.

On the other hand, more subtle and finesse policies on the Chinese side will be most welcome by the region. In the longer term, the region thinks that Taiwan’s economic dependence on the mainland is for real and will influence the course of a peaceful resolution to reunification.

Thailand: Thailand under PM Thaksin Shinawatra has a very active foreign policy. Not only has PM Thaksin changed a lot in domestic politics by having a

solid majority in parliament for his Thai Rak Party, but he is also very proactive in foreign policy, as he has shown in chairing the APEC meeting in Bangkok several weeks ago. How far this activity and leadership will go will depend partly on how far ASEAN as a group will support his foreign policy initiatives. But he is definitely going to become a very proactive leader among the next generation of ASEAN leaders and has to be watched more closely. He has improved Thailand's economy and regional standing quite remarkably. And he is behaving like the CEO of Thailand. He is very popular among the Thai people, although lesser so among the elite, particularly the academia, because of his disdain for press-freedom and the role of the civil society.

Malaysia: PM Abdullah Badawi is more a consensus seeker and is for collective leadership than PM Mahathir. Perhaps this is what Malaysia needs after 22 years of activism under PM Mahathir. He is also a better expert on Islam and Muslim issues and could face PAS more effectively on those issues. He has said that he is not going to change existing policies established by PM Mahathir except to fine-tune some of the rough edges.

This means that he is going to stick to a non-aligned policy, pro the developing world interests and playing solidarity to Muslim causes. Above all, of course, he will make solidarity and close cooperation with ASEAN as the center-piece of Malaysia's foreign policy. His rhetoric will be more subdued and that also will be good for Malaysia's external cooperation in the future.

Philippines: President Arroyo will stand again in the coming presidential election and has a fighting chance to win, if backed by the established elite as widely expected. That does not mean that the political divide has been overcome as has been shown by the abortive coup by some officers and the protest on the streets of Manila. She is backed by the U.S., who is concerned about the Southern part as a potential training ground for Muslim terrorists

linked with Al Qaeda. Relations with the U.S. has always been very important for the Philippines, for its economy as well as its security.

Hopefully President Arroyo could become a more forceful and capable president than she has shown in the first term, which was considered slow and not achieving very much. Otherwise the Philippines will not be able to recover her economic competitiveness. But in foreign policy she has strengthened her relation with the U.S. and restored what was damaged when the U.S. bases were closed in the early 1990s.

Singapore: A change of guard with DPM Lee Hsien Lung taking over is expected in 2004/2005. Policies will broadly be the same, but the style of leadership will differ, because PM Goh is very amenable and popular, due to his relaxed style. DPM Lee will try very hard to be more relaxed and in the last six months he has achieved a remarkable acceptance by the Singaporean public, including the younger generation. Therefore, the transition will go well and smooth.

The policies are going to be the same, although more structural changes in the economy is to be expected, since last year's crisis and this year's slow growth have been a real omen for the need of change. This is indeed a must for Singapore to maintain its competitiveness. Foreign policy will also be the same, with ASEAN as the center piece and be allied to the U.S., so as to be able to keep its status as a global city in the mid of Southeast Asia.

Indonesia: There will be both Presidential and Parliamentary elections next year. Since President Megawati's PDI-P party is split at the center as well as in the regions, her re-election, which until 6 months ago was expected to be a "walkover", is now more suspect. In fact, if the Golkar Party becomes the winning party in parliament, as is widely expected because its political machine

is functioning well, then they have a fighting chance to win the presidency as well, but only if they could offer a respected candidate.

If that happens, a more “experienced hand” will take over, backed by an existing political machine across Indonesia and a formidable representation in Parliament, which under the new constitution is supreme and powerful compared to the executive branch. This will make Indonesian policies and institutions more credible and more consistent. Greater attention will be given to foreign policy, which will be more pragmatic because of a more experienced and steady hand at the presidency and in Parliament. This also means that Indonesia could again play its leadership role in ASEAN and in East Asia commensurate with its size and with the expectations of the region.

In turn, ASEAN could again play a more pro-active and positive role in the East Asian region. In the security realm, Indonesia could become more dependable in overcoming global and regional terrorism. And in the economic field, the necessary reforms have a greater chance to be pushed through. While staying non-aligned in principle in its foreign policy, Indonesia could become a better partner for the region and for the world.

Concluding Remarks

What could be concluded from the above analysis of change in leadership in the East Asian countries for international and regional relations?

First is the fact that although personnel changes happened or is going to happen in the various countries of East Asia, the strategic environment is likely to remain the same. Some of the new leaders might want to change the policies, but in the short and medium term, it will be very difficult for them to do so.

The strategic environment is very much dependent on U.S. strategic presence in the region as the balancer or arbiter for peace and security as well as an important engine for the region's economies. It should be noted that the region is still dependent on a balance of power concept a la Europe of the 19th century. And since there are no strong regional institutions to maintaining peace and stability, such as in Europe through the EU and NATO, that role has been played by the U.S. military and their strategic presence in East Asia.

In fact, there is no congruence yet in the security outlook of the countries in the region. Even among ASEAN countries there is a need for closer cooperation and to work on a common perception of peace and security in the region. That is why ASEAN leaders in the Concord II Agreement at the Bali Summit, have agreed to establish an ASEAN Security Community, to coordinate and cooperate on common perceptions and to establish understanding and willingness to prevent conflicts among themselves. U.S. positive role in the East Asian region has been accepted by every country in the region, including by China, and with the exception of North Korea.

In the longer term, this could change if relations and cooperation in the region will be intensified. This will not happen in the foreseeable future. This has been recognised by President Roh of South Korea, especially in dealing with the North Koreans. That is also what the Chinese have recognized and therefore, they are willing to cooperate with the U.S. on global terrorism and have accepted U.S. presence in the East Asian region in a positive way. Of course, the unilateralist tendencies of this U.S. administration have to be corrected, but that could be done if there is rapport with the U.S. and if done together with other friends and allies of the U.S.

In that sense, maybe, the words of PM Wen at the Boao Forum should be interpreted as a common effort by East Asians to correct the U.S. for her own interest. That is especially true for China in relation to the Taiwan question.

The U.S. has to understand and appreciate the emotional historical baggage of the Civil War in China, and despite the ideals of democracy etc., she has to dampen adventurous tendencies of the Chen Sui Bian Administration in Taiwan. That view is also shared by most if not all of the countries in East Asia.

No government is willing to oppose the U.S. frontally at this stage. Too much national interests are involved for everyone in the relationship to be able or willing to do that. Even for Indonesia, while the Indonesian community, especially the Muslims, are against the Iraq War, the government has been very pro-active in restraining the reactions of the Muslim community so as not to get it out of hand, and damage the national interest in relations to the U.S., which is considered of vital importance. But corrections, advices, even protest and criticisms have to be given to the U.S. as a friend, in order to make her more politically acceptable in the region and, therefore, make her policies more effective. Japan's role in dealing with the U.S. is of paramount importance as the main ally of the U.S. in the region. Japan can also correct and criticize the U.S. whenever needed.

In that context, the East Asian Community is an idea whose time has come, and has to be pursued by every East Asian country. But here again it is important that the U.S. understands its rationale. In this regard Japan can play an important role as she has done earlier to make the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) acceptable to the U.S.

Another important effort by the East Asians is to support and strengthen APEC a Pacific wide regional institution where the U.S. is a member. This will also give credibility to the argument that the East Asian Community will not split the Pacific politically.