
Chasing the East Asian Sun

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN W. BOSWORTH

DECEMBER 5, 2006

Stephen W. Bosworth is the Dean of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, a position he assumed in February 2001. Prior to his appointment at The Fletcher School, he served as the United States Ambassador to the Republic of Korea from November 1997 to February of 2001.

From 1995 to 1997, Dean Bosworth was the Executive Director of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), an inter-governmental organization established by the United States, the Republic of Korea, and Japan to deal with North Korea. Before joining KEDO, he served seven years as President of the United States Japan Foundation, a private American grant-making institution

Dean Bosworth has had an extensive career in the United States Foreign Service, including service as Ambassador to Tunisia from 1979 to 1981 and Ambassador to the Philippines from 1984 to 1987. He also served in a number of senior positions in the Department of State, including Director of Policy Planning, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs.

In 2006, with Morton Abromowitz, Dean Bosworth published Chasing the Sun: Rethinking East Asian Policy (Century Foundation Press). The Forum spoke with him about Asian international affairs and policy.

FLETCHER FORUM: *How should the U.S. respond to the growing clout of China? Is the rise of China a threat to the U.S., and what should be U.S. policy toward China, in your view?*

DEAN BOSWORTH: First of all, I would stipulate that this is probably the most daunting challenge American foreign policymakers have ever faced. It is much tougher to figure out how to deal with China than it was to figure out how to deal with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was a singular threat. We didn't really have any economic engagement with the Soviet Union, so we could view the problem purely in a security framework. With

China, we have so many different and often conflicting interests: we have economic interests, human rights interests, and democracy interests.

We also have security concerns. Certainly I would not say the security dimension in our dealings with China can be ignored. We would like more transparency in their military spending, although I find it a little difficult to understand why the United States, a country that spends more on defense than the rest of the world combined, is so preoccupied and driven by what is undoubtedly a significant rate of increase in China's military spending. From a military point of view, China's goals for the medium term—that is, for at least the next generation—are relatively limited. They want to be able to impose some pain on the U.S. in the event of a conflict across the Taiwan Strait, and they're reaching a point where they could probably do so. In their view, this is a deterrent against a proactive U.S. policy that would have us deeply engaged in a conflict across the Strait.

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China—into the global system and to try to ensure that their view of the world and their role in it is not all that different from our view of the world and their role in it. But I think we have to be prepared for the fact that China is probably not going to simply say: “Okay, we want

to join the club that the U.S. and the rest of the west started half a century ago—just tell us what the rules are, and we will proceed accordingly.” China, being China, is going to want to have some role in defining the rules and not simply accept what has been laid down in the past.

FORUM: *Do you think there is any validity to the view that the rise of China and the rise of the Chinese view of the world is directly opposed to that of the U.S.? What if China cannot be influenced? Is that a legitimate concern?*

BOSWORTH: I think China has a greater interest, or at least as great an interest, in having a reasonably harmonious relationship with the United States as we do in having a reasonably harmonious relationship with China. China is very dependent on the U.S. market and very dependent on U.S. capital and U.S. technology. China respects American military power.

Now, they may think that we overemphasize the importance of the military dimension—and I think they do—but they understand that U.S. military power is not going to diminish or go away. I think we have to understand that the U.S. is no longer the only big boy on the block. China is

increasingly a force to be reckoned with in all areas, particularly for other Asians. Washington is no longer the only magnetic north on Asia's geostrategic compass. Asians may want to be responsive to the U.S., and they may want to know what our views are, but they cannot ignore China, and they have to be responsive to China in some measure as well.

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FORUM: *There is a certain amount of speculation that political leaders in Taiwan will take provocative steps toward independence during the 2008 Olympics because of the amount of attention that will be focused on China. What is the probability of this, in your view?*

BOSWORTH: It cannot be ruled out, but I do not think the probability is high. Clearly there are deep differences within Taiwan as to the future of Taiwan. There is no question that Taiwan is becoming increasingly democratic, which makes our dealings with Taiwan more complicated. Taiwan is going through its own internal political crisis at the moment, and it is a little difficult to see where they might be in 2008.

I think the only thing the United States can do is continue, as we have so far done quite effectively, to stress our adherence to the concept of one China, while also stressing our adherence to the principle that how the one China concept becomes a fact is up to the Chinese themselves on both sides of the Strait—it should under no circumstances take place through the use of force or threat.

For most of the last 20-odd years, we have thought that as Taiwan became increasingly integrated into the mainland economy, the likelihood of conflict would continue to diminish. There is still reason to believe that this is not an unachievable outcome. I think most people on Taiwan are very aware of all that they have achieved and how much that would be threatened by pursuing independence or even greater autonomy.

Is this fair? Probably not. It is an unfair world. Taiwan has been a great success economically; they have worked hard, saved, and invested. They have built democratic structures. So it is understandable that people in Taiwan would want to be an independent country. I can understand that, but it is not going to happen.

FORUM: *The trade relationship between China and India is booming, but there is lingering suspicion between the two countries due to unresolved territorial issues and China's close ties with Pakistan. Is India likely to match China's economic and strategic prominence in the next few decades, and how does the*

U.S. factor into the equation?

BOSWORTH: I do not know. I think India is going to continue to do well given the continuation of current circumstances, and I hope China continues to do well. But it is not a question of whether India is going to catch China or become more important than China. They are very different countries. And if you visit them, you are struck as much, if not more, by the differences than by the similarities.

I think the challenge is for the U.S. is to have reasonably good relationships with both of them. And I think that certainly is achievable. But there are going to be continuing problems between China and India—points of contention and controversy over territory and so on. My own view is that the U.S. is best served when all of its principal partners have good relations with one another. And I think certainly we should hope and do what we can, which may not be all that much, to make sure that China and India continue to have a reasonably satisfactory relationship.

China is clearly the driving force in East Asia economically, along with Japan, to some extent. Frequently when I talk about Asia, people bridle a little bit at the fact that I am talking about East Asia—not all of Asia. Except for a couple of instances in Southeast Asia, I do not think that India has really become an active integrated part of East Asia. There are not the same kind of economic ties between India and East Asia that exist within East Asia. This is not to say they will not grow, and I hope for everyone's sake that they do. But, so far, I do not think that Indians really consider themselves part of East Asia.

FORUM: *Shinzo Abe, Japan's new prime minister, has tried to repair strained relations between Japan and China. It seems inevitable that China's growing power and Japan's search for a more robust defense policy following the North Korean nuclear test will heighten the rivalry between the two countries. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of Sino-Japanese relations?*

BOSWORTH: I am neither wildly optimistic nor hopelessly pessimistic. I think both countries have a deep and vital interest in maintaining a reasonably satisfactory relationship with one another. A difficult or tense relationship, to say nothing of the possibility of actual conflict, would be a disaster for them, for the rest of Asia, and for the United States.

The roots of this tension are deep, and they will not be easily extirpated. They go back far—to before the 1930s and World War II. There is a feeling in China, and in the rest of East Asia, that Japan has never really come to terms or taken responsibility for its behavior in that period. I can understand why people believe that. It is a blank period for the most part

in Japanese textbooks and in Japan's recounting of contemporary history. But I think our stake in all of this is substantial enough that we should be working actively to ensure that China and Japan do find ways of accommodating one another and smoothing out the tension in their relationship. Prime Minister Abe is in a good position to do that even though he has been regarded over his political career as much more hard-line on China than Koizumi was, for example. Maybe it is a little bit like the Nixon-to-China syndrome. Maybe he is in a better position to address some of these issues than would be a person with less hard-line historical views.

I do not think Japan wants to become a major military power. They have confirmed recently that they are not intending to seek nuclear weapons, which is something that they could easily achieve. As long as the U.S. security umbrella exists Japan is probably quite content with continuing to live under that umbrella. Perhaps unwisely, we have encouraged Japan over the last several years to take a more vigorous position in the area immediately around Japan in terms of naval presence, air presence, and the like. We found it useful that they were providing support to U.S. forces in Afghanistan by having a naval vessel stationed in the Indian Ocean, for example.

I do think we have got to be careful. It is all well and good to talk about a greater sharing of the security burden in East Asia, but we have got to be careful that this does not seem to China to be the beginnings of a policy of containment. That would be disastrous. It has also never been quite clear to me why the U.S. would encourage a country of enormous economic power to become a major military power. I am not sure that is really in our interest.

FORUM: *Are there people in the U.S. who think that encirclement or containment of China is a good idea?*

BOSWORTH: There are people who believe that China's rise is a threat to the United States. Clearly, China's rise means that the U.S. sway in Asia and in the world in general is going to be less dominant than it has been since the end of the Cold War. That will probably be a return to a more stable equilibrium. Anyway, there is not much we can do about it.

FORUM: *Are those voices on the way out?*

BOSWORTH: Some of those voices are given resonance over the issue of Taiwan—for example, those who believe that U.S. policy in a region should be determined primarily by support for Taiwan and Taiwanese aspirations. There are people in the Pentagon, uniformed military, who, as they should

be, are drawing up contingency plans every day—and that is what they are paid to do.

I thought Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was a little too rabid on this subject, suggesting that China had some hidden purpose in terms of its military buildup. But no country that has been preeminent as long as the U.S. is going to welcome somebody else into the preeminence club gracefully. But that is not to say that we cannot coexist and cooperate in ways that are mutually beneficial, which is what has happened over the last 30-odd years.

China as a modern player in the world is very new. We get very upset about things like China's dealings with Zimbabwe and Angola, Sudan and Venezuela. And, in truth, there are areas and ways in which China is not actually meeting all of its obligations to what we call "the international community." I do not become particularly exercised, however, by the claim that China is trying to lock up oil supplies by dealing with Sudan and Angola, etc. My view is that the more China can satisfy its demand for oil in these ways, the less China's oil demand will exert pressure on the global market. These are oil supplies that are probably not going to come on stream in the foreseeable future unless somebody like China is willing to pay a lot of money to bring them on stream. But I think we should probably be talking to them more seriously than we are now about global energy trends, and I think it would be useful to involve them in the International Energy Association energy consultation process.

FORUM: *The members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have different perspectives on regional integration. What are the main impediments to economic and political integration in Southeast Asia, and how can the U.S. help foster ASEAN's integration?*

BOSWORTH: Economic integration in East Asia has been driven primarily by flows of foreign direct investment into and within the region. ASEAN has traditionally been one of the beneficiaries of that. Economic integration is also being driven by trade flows, which tend to reflect investment flows.

One of the main impediments to economic and political integration in ASEAN is that its ten member countries are quite similar for the most part. There are not many easily discovered areas of comparative advantage. And there is a fair amount of lingering political suspicion among the countries stemming from a long history of non-cooperation that has to be overcome. But it is remarkable to compare where ASEAN and the Northeast Asian countries are now in terms of economic integration with where they

were a decade ago—the progress has been really quite remarkable. Political integration is a more challenging affair and probably will proceed on a slower track. I think one of the more interesting things to note is that integration within Asia has been quite different than in Western Europe, where political integration was the driving force for economic integration. In Europe, the private sector responded to the collective efforts of governments to stimulate economic growth and integration.

FORUM: *You have described Vietnam as a particularly dynamic economy. You are clearly impressed by it. What is so special about Vietnam today, and what do you think the country's future prospects might be?*

BOSWORTH: Vietnam exhibits many of the same characteristics that have driven rapid growth elsewhere in East Asia. Vietnam is a country with a very high savings rate and it is increasingly open to foreign direct investment. It is a country very much like China was 10 or 15 years ago; the prospect of immediate increases in per capita income drives the economy as income from export production becomes available for private consumption. So, I think the prospects for Vietnam are very good. With the latest meeting of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) in Hanoi, the rest of Asia—and the world—is recognizing Vietnam's economic potential.

Clearly, there is still some discontinuity in Vietnam between economic liberalization on the one hand and what is still a quite rigid government structure on the other. I think everyone's hope and expectation is that with time Vietnam will become a more liberal state. But that may be some time away.

If you look at China, it is far from being a pluralistic democracy—but neither can it really be described as a communist state. The process of economic growth and modernization has inevitably had a loosening effect on the political structure. Both China and Vietnam, and particularly Vietnam, are very worried about maintaining stability. Some of those in the leadership positions tend to view political liberalization as potentially destabilizing and therefore threatening—not just to the position of the regime but also to the overall effort to modernize the country.

FORUM: *South Korea's current leadership has called for a reduced U.S. troop presence in the peninsula. Is the U.S.-South Korean alliance weakening or is this just policy drift on the part of the deeply unpopular Uri government facing an imminent election? What is the future of the U.S.-South Korean alliance in light of South Korea's growing ties with China?*

BOSWORTH: I think it is both a weakening at the base of the alliance and

to some extent policy drift—not only on the part of the Uri government in South Korea but also, frankly, on the part of Washington as well. What has really happened, I think, is that the U.S. and South Korea are no longer confident that they share a common vision for the future of the Korean Peninsula.

For many years our mission there was quite simple to define: it was to be present and to deter any North Korean effort aimed at military conflict on the Korean Peninsula—to deter another attack of the kind that sparked the Korean War. South Korea now is pursuing its own policy of reunification, which is a policy of engagement in which the goal is seen as a very long-term one—not something that will be achieved in the foreseeable future. That would be fine as far as the U.S. is concerned if it were not for the problem of North Korea's nuclear program, which we tend to view with much greater alarm than does the South Korean government or the majority of the South Korean people. So our lack of a common vision for the future of the peninsula is driven to a very large extent by our differences over the nature of the threat from North Korea's nuclear program and how to respond to it.

In addition, there is a certain generational change underway in South Korea. As they have been successful economically and politically, they have become less willing to find themselves in a subordinate position within the alliance. They want to be treated as an equal partner, which is a little difficult for the United States at times. And there is no question that South Korea's relationship with China has affected South Korea's view of the world, although we tend to think that all South Koreans are enthusiastic about the relationship with China—and that is not the case. There are thousands of years' worth of suspicion ingrained in South Korea about the intentions of this huge country to the north.

FORUM: *North Korea continues to exploit divisions among the participants in the six-party talks. The U.S. and Japan seem primarily concerned about the dangers posed by the regime and tend to want to use sticks to influence North Korea's behavior. But the priority for South Korea and China is to prevent North Korea's collapse—hence they are reluctant to take away the carrots. In light of this situation, what is the way forward in the six-party talks?*

BOSWORTH: I think that analysis is correct. There is a common interest among all of the countries in the neighborhood, in that they would prefer that North Korea not have nuclear weapons. But their interests with regard to North Korea are not identical. You are correct that South Korea and China are loath to see the collapse of the North Korean regime or anything that would threaten protracted instability on the Korean peninsula. The

U.S. in particular, but also to some extent Japan, would love to see a new regime in North Korea. They probably would also be happy to see North Korea integrated into South Korea. But we are unlikely to have to pay the economic, social, and political bill for that process.

I think the answer lies in addressing more carefully what it is North Korea really wants. It may be that the six-party process is a useful mechanism in dealing with North Korea. But, in my judgment, it is not the only mechanism. It is necessary, perhaps, but certainly not sufficient. I think the United States has to become more directly engaged with North Korea if only because only we have what they say they really want, which is some assurance that we are not going to attack them. Now for people in the West, particularly in the United States, it is sometimes difficult to believe that North Korea could really be afraid that the U.S. is going to attack them. But if you were sitting in Pyongyang and watching U.S. policy around the world, you could reasonably think that there is some risk of that happening.

It may be that the six-party process is a useful mechanism in dealing with North Korea. But, in my judgment, it is not the only mechanism. It is necessary, perhaps, but certainly not sufficient.

North Korea is a charter member of the axis of evil. One of the other two members is now under American occupation. And our relationship with the third, Iran, is obviously under strain. So I think the North Koreans do fear that the U.S. could attack them. At some point, could produce something with which they would not be happy. This means that the U.S. has to engage the regime directly. I am not saying that that the offer of a security assurance should be the only way we engage with North Korea, but it should be one of the ways.

FORUM: *It is incredibly difficult to know what is going on inside North Korea. There is a dearth of intelligence and engagement would offer a way to gain knowledge through talks. But how impenetrable is the regime, really? How much information is going in and coming out?*

BOSWORTH: I think North Korea is somewhat less opaque than it used to be and somewhat less impenetrable—but not much. For many years it has been the toughest intelligence target U.S. intelligence agencies have had.

It is very hard to have contact with North Koreans in North Korea. As more and more humanitarian aid agencies have worked in North Korea over the last decade, we have somewhat greater access and a somewhat

greater knowledge of what conditions are like there. But from an intelligence point of view, the regime remains probably without question the toughest target there is, particularly with regard to human intelligence. We know very little about who makes decisions in North Korea, how those decisions are made, or what the process looks like, and we do not know all that much about loyalties. How loyal is the military? What are the convictions of the people at the very top? And is it the case that Kim Jong Il is more or less unchallenged as the decision maker, the “decider,” if you will, in North Korea? We really do not know. And that makes it very difficult to craft proposals.

FORUM: *You mentioned that the regime in North Korea has some basis for fear of U.S. attack based on U.S. policy in the last few years, and that engagement is something the U.S. should do directly. Are there any specific steps that you think the U.S. can take to ameliorate the fears that North Korea may have about the U.S. attacking them directly or indirectly?*

BOSWORTH: I think talking to them would be one way of at least ameliorating those fears, though it would not remove them. Just to have conversations with them would, I think, be extremely useful to provide a better basis

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for whatever diplomatic tack we decide to take. Also, North Korea would perhaps be a little less paranoid if we were actually having conversations. I agree with Jim Baker: it is important to talk to your friends, but it is also at least as important to talk to your enemies. Just talking to North Korea does not convey approval of North Korea.

convey approval of North Korea.

FORUM: *Many thanks for taking the time to speak with us.*

BOSWORTH: My pleasure. ■