

Leif-Eric Easley, "Opportunity of New Leadership in Asia: Clean Slates to Advance Foreign Policy," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), September 27, 2007, page 10; *IHT-Asahi Shimbun*, September 27, 2007, page 27; *China Post*, September 29, 2007, page 4; *OMNI*, September 30, 2007, page 1.

New leadership is soon coming to power across the Asia Pacific. Incoming prime ministers and presidents are of interest not only to the populations they represent, but also to people of other countries concerned with how the policies of new leaders will affect them. In all likelihood, the foreign policies of the next administrations in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the United States will not be drastically different from those of today.

What will be different – at least until the shine wears off – is the "clean slate" effect: the optimism that new leaders will be unlike their predecessors, learn from the past and become agents of positive change. Governments benefit from this optimism during the so-called "honeymoon period" when new leaders are given time to settle into office before facing inevitable criticism from the public, media, domestic political competitors and international players.

Nearly all governments look to build political momentum in the honeymoon period. Astute leaders take advantage of the clean slate to make progress in key areas where predecessors were constrained by political baggage. An example is how Shinzo Abe held summits with China and South Korea within his first month as Japanese prime minister. Mr. Abe was able to improve Japan's regional relations because of his clean slate, having not visited Yasukuni as prime minister, in contrast to his predecessor's regular visits to the controversial shrine.

Unfortunately for Mr. Abe, his clean slate was quickly replaced with a list of political liabilities. Yasuo Fukuda comes to office without Abe's nationalist image, and with less guilt by association to the scandals that broke during Abe's one-year tenure. The new Japanese prime minister can use his clean slate to reach a compromise with the opposition Democratic Party to extend the Anti-terrorism Special Measures Law, which supports international efforts in Afghanistan with Japanese refueling operations in the Indian Ocean. Mr. Fukuda should also continue trust-building efforts with Beijing and Seoul, while avoiding gaffes on historical matters. Free from Abe's hard-line on the abduction issue, the Fukuda cabinet can more closely coordinate with partners in the Six-party Talks to demand North Korea's denuclearization.

South Korea will elect a new president on December 19 who will come to office without President Roh Moo-hyun's spotted record on foreign affairs and the economy. The next South Korean president can use his clean slate to re-anchor security policy with a strong U.S.-ROK alliance and closer relations with Japan. He should demand greater respect and reciprocity from North Korea, engaging Pyongyang out of strength rather than

political desperation. Essential for South Korea's economic relations, the next president can show unwavering commitment to implementing free trade agreements.

Taiwan will hold its presidential election on March 22, 2008. President Chen Shui-bian has earned a reputation of making trouble for cross-Strait stability, even though it is China that militarily threatens democratic Taiwan. Free from Chen's political baggage, the next Taiwan president should forge a compromise with the Legislature to better fund Taiwan's defense. He could also look to project "soft power" by highlighting Taiwan's responsible international contributions rather than politicizing an ill-fated bid to join the United Nations. Finally, the next Taiwan president should credibly engage China on economic links and security guarantees, putting the political ball in Beijing's court ahead of the 2008 Olympics.

The United States will hold its presidential election on November 4, 2008. The outgoing Bush administration has the reputation (in some ways deservedly, in others unfairly) of being hawkish and unilateralist. The new U.S. president can shed this image, or at least avoid it long enough to make progress on a multilateral agenda. Rather than inaugurating his or her term promoting the war on terror, the next U.S. president might speak more about trade, development and transnational issues such as the environment. This is not to say that the next U.S. administration should deemphasize security policy, but could productively focus the honeymoon period on a successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. Such early multilateral achievements can garner greater international contributions for counterterrorism and help dispel misperceptions of U.S. disengagement.

While the foreign policy initiatives above would offer positive and lasting implications, the staying power of leaders usually comes down to how well they promote the economic livelihoods of their citizens. Leaders that neglect "bread and butter issues" for the sake of foreign policy or ideological pursuits do so at their own peril. However, navigating the vested interests of domestic groups to push forward socio-economic reforms usually requires leaders to gain forward momentum, which can be provided in part by early accomplishments in foreign policy.

Successes and failures in international relations are commonly over-attributed to top decision makers, producing exaggerated expectations for different policies by new leaders. Incoming administrations cannot remake the world in their first 100 days, but can use the clean slate effect to score foreign policy victories that their tarnished predecessors could not. Succeeding in this requires political preparation, a keen sense of priorities and determination to follow through. One of the benefits of democracy is how it regularly provides a fresh start. Let's hope that new leaders in the Asia Pacific make the best of the opportunity.

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