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China and Japan: Trouble Ahead?

Future stability in East Asia depends heavily on the relationship between the region's main powers, China and Japan. After normalizing their diplomatic relations 30 years ago, these two countries downplayed their differences in favor of mutually beneficial economics and cooperation against Soviet expansion. Following the demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and its strategic influence in East Asia, Japan and China initially continued to conduct their bilateral relations amicably. Recent friction, however, has strained the balance between them.

Rivalry for Asia

A negative trend in the Sino-Japanese relationship has prompted warnings of intensified rivalry for leadership in Asia.[1] The rise of China's power and influence in Asian affairs in the 1990s and China's military assertiveness over Taiwan and the South China Sea coincided with a protracted period of lackluster Japanese economic performance and weak political leadership. The past disparity of the economic relationship between the two powers adds to ongoing differences over territorial, strategic, historical, and economic issues and has strengthened mutual wariness and antipathy.

Japanese opinion-makers have targeted China's increasing power as Japan's key long-term security concern. Many Japanese view China's size and remarkable economic growth as undercutting their country's leading economic role in Asia. Rising Japanese nationalism, generational change in Japanese leadership, and Beijing's loss of moral standing in the eyes of the Japanese have also contributed to this sentiment and diminished

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Japan's willingness to accommodate Chinese demands on historical and other issues.[2]

On the other side, long-standing Chinese concerns about Japan's impressive military capabilities have increased since 1996 as a result of U.S.-Japanese agreements broadening Japan's strategic role in Asia to include recent Japanese naval deployments in the Indian Ocean.[3] Recent plans for a Japanese-U.S.-Australian strategic dialogue have elicited repeated expressions of concern from China.[4]

Some have warned of an intensified rivalry for leadership in Asia.

Chinese leaders have appealed to nationalism and the sensibility that foreign aggressors have victimized China in the past. These feelings have largely focused on Japan, by far the most despised foreign aggressor in modern Chinese history, and have exacerbated Chinese antipathy toward Japan.[5] In this context, Chinese officials resent Japan's cuts in aid and reluctance to accommodate their country.

Heading the list of signs of increased Sino-Japanese friction in Asia are the seemingly competing proposals by China and Japan in late 2001 and early 2002 to establish free-trade agreements with the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In addition, Japan's increased support for Taiwan and its cooperation with the Bush administration for stronger U.S. backing of Taiwan, including active dialogue by senior Japanese defense and foreign policy officials with their U.S. counterparts concerning Taiwan, have raised Chinese apprehension.[6] Chinese officials are worried that the planned Japanese-U.S.-Australian strategic dialogue may focus on Taiwan contingencies.

Other evidence of this friction includes the first significant cutbacks in Japanese aid to China since the normalization of bilateral relations and the stepped-up Japanese efforts to improve security, aid, and other cooperation with India and other nations on China's southern and western flanks. These efforts involve significant Japanese aid efforts in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In the face of China's steadily increasing economic ties with and political influence in South Korea, Japan also has made recent efforts to improve relations with Seoul.

A closer look at the two powers' recent approaches to Asia underscores China's growing influence and greater activism and Japan's relative decline. Consultations with dozens of Japanese media, academic, government, business, and other opinion leaders in four Japanese cities in May 2002 reflected a deepening anxiety over Japan's uncertain future in the face of China's continued remarkable economic growth and expanding military power and in-

fluence. Those interviewed believed that the expected continued stagnation in Japan's economic growth and a perceived "hollowing out" of Japanese manufacturing due to relocation to China means that the United States and other world powers will inevitably devote less attention to Japan and more attention to China in the future. They say they are at a loss to define an appropriate policy for Japan to deal with these adverse developments.[7]

Despite these signs of conflict, binding forces still exist. A comprehensive assessment of Sino-Japanese relations fairly quickly gets beyond expressions of angst and signs of friction to focus on strong and often growing areas of mutual interest. Strong external forces also are likely to dampen any nascent rivalry between China and Japan in Asia for some time to come.

Countervailing Factors

The most important of these factors is that both the Japanese and Chinese governments are domestically focused on the economic development of their countries. They believe that economic development requires a prolonged, peaceful, and cooperative relationship with their Asian neighbors, notably one another. China depends heavily on Japan for economic assistance, for technology and investment, and as a market for Chinese goods. Japan is increasingly dependent on China as a market, a source of imports, and an offshore manufacturing base.

Personnel exchanges between Japan and China have grown markedly. Tens of thousands of Japanese students visit or study in China each year. Government-sponsored exchange programs abound, and even if they do not always promote positive feelings, they probably do promote more realistic mutual perceptions.

Considering other external forces, no government with an interest in Asian affairs would benefit from greater Sino-Japanese friction, including the United States. The Bush administration has been careful to balance its strong pro-Japan slant by reaffirming its continued interest in closer, mutually beneficial relations with China, designed in part to sustain regional peace and stability. Meanwhile, because the United States remains such a dominant military and economic power in the region, the U.S.-Japanese alliance has resulted in a marked asymmetry in recent Japanese and Chinese perceptions of rivalry. Although Japanese elite and popular opinion focuses on China as a future concern, Chinese elite and popular opinion is much more preoccupied with the United States as a possible concern. Japan is seen as performing a secondary role, the junior partner in the U.S. alliances and security arrangements that affect Chinese interests. Given the Chinese focus on dealing with the more important concern posed by the United

States, one result that works against Sino-Japanese rivalry is that Chinese officials have at times sought to avoid disputes with Japan. In fact, they have tried to woo Japan away from close alignment with the United States and toward positions more favorable to China.[8]

The Balance between Frictional and Favorable Forces

Asia's future hangs in the balance between the growing friction in Sino-Japanese relations and the strong forces favoring continued cooperation. An antagonistic relationship between the two powers could force other Asian governments to choose sides that could split the region in ways not seen since the Sino-Soviet rivalry of the Cold War.

Fortunately, China's and Japan's recent policy and behavior in Asia show little sign of becoming seriously divisive for the foreseeable future. Neither Beijing nor Tokyo appears to give primary attention to offsetting the influence of the other in seeking their respective regional goals; they are focused on more general priorities and concerns. Although Sino-Japanese differences may flare from time to time over issues grounded in the two countries' changing power and influence in Asian and world affairs, the differences are bounded within confines that help to avoid serious disruption and to preserve regional stability and prosperity.

China

In recent years, by prioritizing domestic economic development and political stability and seeking to avoid major confrontation or controversy in foreign affairs, China's approach toward Asia has shifted toward greater engagement. The year 1997 saw the unveiling of China's "New Security Concept," emphasizing the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, mutually beneficial economic contacts, and greater dialogue promoting trust and peaceful settlement of disputes. Although the concept opposed using improved Chinese relations against a third party, it took aim at the Cold War mentality seen in efforts by the United States to strengthen its alliances with NATO and Japan.[9]

Concurrently, Chinese leaders sought to establish "partnerships" or "strategic partnerships" with most of the powers along China's periphery, notably in Southeast Asia, where Japan loomed large in the 1980s and 1990s but pulled back after the Asian economic crisis of 1997–1998, and on the Korean Peninsula. They emphasized putting aside differences and seeking common ground.

Chinese political and military leaders, including Vice President Hu Jintao and other leaders expected to take leadership positions at the Chinese party

congress in the fall of 2002, also began actively meeting visitors from Asia and traveling throughout the region. These officials seem prepared to adhere to the current Chinese approach to the Asian region. They are likely to remain focused primarily on the many domestic challenges posed by economic, social, and political issues.

Regarding regional organizations, Chinese officials were instrumental in the establishment in 2000 of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which also includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; and they have worked assiduously to improve China's relations with ASEAN, proposing an ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement. China also worked closely with Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN in the so-called ASEAN Plus Three dialogue that emerged around the time of the Asian economic crisis.

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Despite assessments that Chinese activism has recently increased because of perceptions of U.S. containment around China's periphery, rivalry with Japan, or other similar concerns, the motives of the People's Republic of China (PRC) seem more multifaceted and long-term. The multitude of new endeavors, in fact, appears to assist several of the following important Chinese objectives:

- Securing China's foreign policy environment at a time when the PRC regime is focused on sustaining economic development and political stability.
- Promoting economic exchange that assists China's internal economic development.
- Reassuring Asian neighbors through increased contact about how China will use its rising power and influence.
- Boosting China's regional and international power and influence and helping to secure a multipolar world order—Chinese leaders seem more confident of China's power and influence but they also remain wary of U.S.-led or other regional efforts to work against China.

In addition to advances in relations with Southeast Asia and Korea, China's relations with other powers around its periphery, with the possible exception of Japan, have improved. One must consider other factors as well, however, for this development. For instance, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership has served the interests of each side despite obvious limitations. President Vladimir Putin's approach to the United States following the September 11 attacks set back Chinese efforts to use improved ties

with Russia as a counterweight to the United States. The subsequent U.S.-led war against terrorism in Afghanistan markedly increased U.S. military presence and influence throughout Central and South Asia and appeared to upset Chinese efforts to use the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other instruments to check the spread of U.S. influence along China's western flank. The antiterrorism campaign also lowered the priority of China's and India's slow but steady efforts to improve their relations with each other in recent years.

Japan

Regional military pressures, stemming from such developments as the rise of China's military power or North Korea's military posture, may lead Japan to strengthen its ties with the United States. These pressures also may lead Japan to consider a more competitive stance toward China. Yet, economic and political pressures associated with globalization position Japan to accelerate efforts toward regional economic integration. Tokyo's multidimensional approach to Asia requires some degree of finesse and compromise, especially when military security interests run up against those of economic security.

The Japanese widely perceive economic and technical leadership of a well-integrated Asia as an important advantage in global economic competition. In many Japanese quarters, the belief still holds that closer political relations, increased trade, and popular contact can harmonize relations. This "Asia first" approach emphasizes closer economic, political, and other interactions with both Southeast Asia and China in a variety of forums. One can see it most notably in the ASEAN Plus Three dialogue, which is designed to address regional problems and promote cooperation among members in the face of the perceived negative side effects of globalization. Within Japan, economic and foreign policy bureaucracies and industrial leaders and associations, along with politicians sympathetic to them, support greater Asian cooperation.[10]

Southeast Asia

This area has experienced a growth of Chinese influence, coinciding with a period of relative decline in U.S. and Japanese attention. Beijing's sometimes heavy-handed pursuit of claims in the South China Sea and China's provocative behavior in the 1995 and 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis alarmed Southeast Asian governments. Since then, Beijing's leaders have endeavored through high-level political, economic, and military contacts; attentive diplomacy; summit declarations; and bilateral and multilateral meetings to reassure regional governments and win their support. ASEAN members

tend to view the recent Chinese approach as broadly compatible with the so-called Gulliver Strategy they have been using in recent years in order to enmesh China in regional economic and security organizations. An example of this tactic is the ASEAN Regional Forum, which aims to persuade China to conform to norms that support regional stability.

China's geographic proximity to Southeast Asia gives it a special advantage in working on such projects as the Mekong Development Plan and in spreading China's influence through the use of business entrepreneurs along the Chinese border. Beijing has shown some flexibility regarding the disputed territories in the South China Sea, working constructively but slowly in the efforts with ASEAN to develop a code of conduct that would regulate tension over the disputes and avoid military clashes.

Both governments are domestically focused on developing their economy.

In contrast to China's conduct in Southeast Asia, Japanese governmental and nongovernmental leaders reacted to the Asian economic crisis by focusing more on Japanese domestic economic concerns and by reducing their exposure to the volatile markets of Southeast Asia. Given the Japanese government's financial difficulties, Japanese aid allocations were also reduced. Japanese leaders used proposals favoring regional economic and political integration to highlight Japan's leading role and worked in support of ASEAN Plus Three, as well as other initiatives designed to help the regional economies to deal with the consequences of globalization. Japanese firms' efforts to integrate with Asian economies have notably focused more closely on China than on Southeast Asia in recent years.[11]

The Chinese initiative in late 2001 calling for an ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement appeared to catch Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's government unprepared. Koizumi tried to regain the political initiative during his swing through Southeast Asia in early 2002 when he offered Japanese proposals for broader regional economic cooperation and free-trade arrangements. Regional reaction was mixed, with a good deal of skepticism that Japan would be positioned to follow through with trade liberalization programs beneficial to Southeast Asia, at a time when its leaders were preoccupied with dire domestic economic conditions and strong protectionist pressures from Japanese farmers.[12] Meanwhile, Japan has incrementally boosted its military standing in the region, engaging in antipiracy and minesweeping activities, prior to the more high-profile dispatch of warships to the Indian Ocean during the antiterrorism war in Afghanistan.[13]

Korean Peninsula

After the Cold War, Beijing adjusted Chinese relations to take advantage of economic and other opportunities with South Korea, while sustaining its position as North Korea's most important foreign ally. Chinese officials have used economic aid and continued military and political exchanges to help stabilize and preserve Chinese relations with the North, while working closely with South Korea, and at times the United States, in seeking a peaceful resolution to tensions on the peninsula.

Beijing is wary of other countries perceiving it as directly challenging U.S. leadership or Japan's role in Korean affairs. It seems to judge that Chinese interests are best met with a broadly accommodating posture that allows for concurrent improvements in China's relations with both Korean governments. Encouraging economic reform and increased international outreach by the North, Beijing urges the United States and others to support the asymmetrical accommodation seen in South Korean president Kim Dae-jung's engagement policy and to avoid increased tensions. It does not make major issues of its differences with the United States over the Bush administration's tougher posture toward the North, though it is critical of the United States strengthening alliances in Asia (mainly with Japan) and U.S. missile defense plans focused on the North Korean threat. Beijing manages difficult issues related to North Koreans seeking asylum in diplomatic posts in China in ways that seek to limit the damage to China's relations both with North and South Korea.

Personnel exchanges between Japan and China have grown markedly.

Japan has had a more difficult time sustaining gains in relations with South Korea, while Pyongyang has persisted with a policy that shows less interest in improved relations with Japan than with any other major power. Differences with Seoul over Japanese history textbooks, Koizumi's visits to the Yakasuni Shrine honoring war dead (including notorious, internationally convicted war criminals from World War II), and the negative effects on South Korean exports of the relatively low value of the Japanese yen have been among issues recently marring a bilateral relationship that had improved at the initiative of the current South Korean president.

The two economies remain closely intertwined nonetheless, with Japan as South Korea's second-largest trading partner and main supplier of capital goods and components.[14] Japan is an active participant in the U.S.–South Korean–Japanese trilateral consultations over policy toward North Korea. Tokyo's more reserved stance toward the North, which repeatedly treats

Japanese concerns with disdain and contempt, is more in line with the Bush administration's policy than with South Korea's sunshine policy.

Russia

Despite the conclusion of a friendship treaty in 2001 and numerous bilateral agreements, China's and Russia's "strategic partnership" is volatile. Relations develop along three main tracks:

- Arms sales and technology transfers keep growing primarily because Russian economic difficulties and Putin's emphasis on defense industries complement China's need for advanced military equipment and technology to prepare for regional contingencies.
- Economic relations continue to move slowly.
- Russia and China pursue good neighborly relations and bilateral confidence-building measures, in principle oppose the regional and global domination of a single power, and work cooperatively against U.S. efforts they jointly perceive as unilateralist or interventionist.

Moscow and Beijing try to avoid confronting Washington in ways that would jeopardize the advantages they derive from engagement with the United States. Historical mutual suspicions and respective concerns about each other's long-term threat potential also limit Russian-Chinese political cooperation.

Japan's relations with Russia remain poor and are based on a long history of hostility. Japan has better places to invest its money and sell its goods than in Russia's poor business environment. The territorial dispute over islands north of Hokkaido curbs Japanese interest in improved economic and political ties. China's rising power, however, could draw Japan and Russia together. Both governments sustain regular contacts and discussions that leave open the option of greater cooperation.[15]

India and Central Asia

Japan is India's largest aid donor, and the two have recently improved political and defense contacts with an eye toward building a hedge against China's rising influence.[16] They have tentatively begun military-to-military cooperation. Similar activities have occurred in the context of India's "Look East" policy, which refers to its renewed efforts at improving ties with other East Asian states, including Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Indo-Japanese cooperation could become the fulcrum of a future geopolitical alignment that ties the Asian rim into a cooperative force

that could contain China if Beijing threatens to disrupt the Asian balance of power.[17]

The U.S.-led war in Afghanistan has raised Japan's profile in Central and South Asia. As a major aid donor, the host of the 2002 world donors' conference on postwar Afghanistan, and a close U.S. ally, Japan has been exerting increasing influence, especially in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Following the donors' conference, Japan resumed aid to Pakistan and became a leading provider of assistance to Afghanistan.

For its part, China's leadership has worked tirelessly in recent years to ease tensions and advance Chinese influence incrementally with countries along China's South and Central Asian borders. The end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union opened opportunities to extend Chinese interests in both areas. The upswing of U.S. and allied influence in Central and South Asia since the start of the war in Afghanistan, however, has worked against Chinese efforts to exclude the United States and has dampened the priority New Delhi and others devote to improving relations with Beijing.

Implications for U.S. Leadership in Asia

Little appears to be on the horizon that will substantially change the recent balance between friction and cooperation in Sino-Japanese relations in a way that would pose serious challenges for U.S. leadership in Asia or U.S. interest in regional stability and development. The shock of the September 11 attacks on the United States along with the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan had the effect of somewhat reducing China's relative influence in Asia while providing Japan an opportunity to expand its role in South and Central Asia. Policy changes after the presidential elections in South Korea late this year could upset the delicate equilibrium on the peninsula, though few see viable alternatives to some continued South Korean engagement with the North. The Chinese leadership transition in 2002–2003 is not expected to result in significant changes in policy toward Asia, as Beijing strives to maintain a calm external environment and focuses on internal priorities. An Indo-Pakistani nuclear war, a U.S.-led attack against Iraq, a terrorist attack using weapons of mass destruction against the United States, or other conceivable international conflicts would strongly affect the United States, though the impact on Sino-Japanese friction in Asia would probably be relatively small.

Realistically, the probability is low that a Sino-Japanese entente may emerge that would seriously complicate the existing U.S. security architecture in Asia or possibly challenge the leading U.S. economic role in the region. Thus, Sino-Japanese wariness probably means that the United States

has little to worry about from ASEAN Plus Three or other Japan and China–led groups that endeavor to exclude the United States. Although increased Sino-Japanese friction could divide Asian governments, with some feeling compelled to side with Japan (and presumably the United States) and others seemingly pressed to side with China, neither Beijing nor Tokyo sees such rivalry as in its broad national interests. Both powers appear more likely to continue pursuing priorities focused on domestic issues and economic development that require broad regional cooperation and avoiding confrontation and conflict.

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U.S. policymakers will continue to face a variety of delicate issues in Sino-Japanese relations requiring attentive diplomacy and careful strategy. Both Tokyo and Beijing will seek U.S. support on sensitive territorial disputes, such as those over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and on trade and diplomatic disputes, notably the Sino-Japanese argument in May 2002 over Chinese police arresting North Koreans seeking refuge inside the Japanese consulate in Shenyang, China. The Bush administration should seek continued positive U.S. interchange with China to balance the strong U.S. priority on working closely with Japan and keeping China at more of a distance than President Bill Clinton's administration. Otherwise, under extreme circumstances Beijing may conclude that the United States is colluding with Japan to contain China—a long-standing fear of Chinese leaders that could conceivably push China to put aside its basically pragmatic regional approach and engage in aggressive or more assertive actions against the United States and Japan.

Some broad trends in the post–Cold War period that seem likely to persist also warrant optimism about the future of U.S. policy in Asia, including effects on Sino-Japanese relations. The war on terrorism has enhanced U.S. national power—military, economic, political, and cultural—in Asia in a way that will help entrench U.S. preeminence in the region. It will certainly remain the most sought-after economic partner and the East Asian region's ultimate security guarantor.

Even the rising powers of East Asia, notably China, will remain focused and preoccupied with wide-ranging and difficult domestic issues. Under likely circumstances, these governments will be inclined to eschew aggressive regional policies that would put them at odds with U.S. power and interests and complicate their already difficult domestic agendas.

Continued maneuvering and hedging by China, Japan, and other regional powers will not lead to substantial regional cooperation or the formation of

blocs strongly opposed to the United States. Differences between and among regional powers will block the emergence of any regional anti-U.S. front.

U.S. leaders are better positioned than at any time since the end of the Cold War to manage the sometimes disruptive U.S. domestic impulses and pressures that often negatively affect U.S. policy toward Asia. The war on terrorism has muffled heretofore-vocal U.S. critics of China who otherwise would be prone to push U.S. policy to extremes, upsetting possible equanimity in the region.

These trends add to forces limiting Sino-Japanese rivalry in Asia. Differences between Beijing and Tokyo will continue to collide with the need to cooperate for respective national interests—a policy direction generally in accord with broad U.S. regional interests involving sustained U.S. leadership, regional stability, and development.

Notes

1. See Yoichi Funabashi, "New Geopolitics Rages over Various Parts of Asia," *Asahi Shimbun*, January 15, 2002; Michael Green, "Managing Chinese Power: The View from Japan," in *Engaging China*, ed. Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert Ross (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 170–172.
2. For a particularly articulate example of this line of thinking, see Yoshihisa Komori, "Rethinking Japan-China Relations: Beyond the History Issue" (paper presented at the Sigur Center for Asian Affairs, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., December 5, 2001). James Przystup's quarterly reviews of Sino-Japanese relations provide coverage of the history issue. See *Comparative Connections*, http://www.csis.org/pacfor/ccejournal.html.
3. For example, see Tian Peiliang, "Nationalism: China and Japan," *Foreign Affairs Journal* 63 (Beijing: Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, 2002): 63–83.
4. Robert Sutter, "Programs in Australia, May 27–30, 2002" (trip report to the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Public Diplomacy, June 2002).
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6. "Tokyo-Taipei Links 'Good' Despite Damning Reports," *Asia Times*, March 29, 2002. A Bush administration official with responsibility for relations with Japan reported on the active U.S.-Japanese dialogue regarding China during a background briefing in March 2002.
7. Robert Sutter, "Programs in Japan, May 21–24, 2002" (trip report to the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Public Diplomacy, June 2002).
8. David Pilling, "China and Japan Look to Restore Relations," *Financial Times*; Kwan Weng Kim, "China-Japan Ties Lack Spontaneity," *Straits Times*.
9. Robert Sutter, "China's Recent Approach to Asia," *NBR Analysis* 13, no. 1 (March 2002): 20.
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11. Ibid., p. 85.
12. Supalak Ganjanakhundee, "Koizumi Extends Hand of Cooperation to Southeast Asia," *The Nation* (Thailand), http://www.nationmultimedia.com/page.arcview.php3?clid=4&id=56283&usrsess=1 (accessed July 6, 2002).
13. Sheldon Simon, "Southeast Asia," in *Strategic Asia: Power and Purpose, 2001–2002*, ed. Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2001), pp. 282–283. See also Yukio Okamoto, "Japan and the United States: The Essential Alliance," *The Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (spring 2002): 59–72.
14. "Japan: Pragmatism Prevails as Korea Ties Grow," *Oxford Analytica*.
15. Rajan Menon, "Russia," in *Strategic Asia: Power and Purpose, 2001–2002*, ed. Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2001), pp. 208–209.
16. Yoichi Funabashi, "Elephants a Bridge between Japan and India," *Asahi Shimbun*.
17. Ashley Tellis, "South Asia," in *Strategic Asia: Power and Purpose, 2001–2002*, ed. Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2001), p. 256.