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Regional Overview: (Waiting for) The Dawn of a New Era
by Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman

"It is always darkest just before the dawn of a new day" goes the saying. Well, it looks pretty dark when it comes to U.S.-DPRK relations and the prospects for the Six-Party Talks. Hope springs eternal, however, as both sides continued to work toward a "third breakthrough." With a change of government in Seoul and impending change in Taipei, an era of improved relations with Washington may be dawning. It's a new day in Thailand as well, or perhaps a return to the (good?) old days. Election results in Malaysia indicate that politics as usual will no longer be the norm, while in Russia, a change in leadership seems to represent no change at all. No change is also the operative word in Burma. Unfortunately, it appears to be getting darker when it comes to Tibet as well. Finally, with the U.S. economy sneezing, how confident are we that Asia will not soon catch cold?

U.S.-Japan: Working through Tough Issues
by Michael J. Green and Nicholas Szechenyi

Japanese domestic politics was in turmoil this quarter due to a divided legislature centered on economic issues. Japan signaled a sustained commitment to the U.S.-Japan alliance and international security by passing a bill re-authorizing Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) refueling operations in the Indian Ocean. But a collision between an MSDF destroyer and a fishing boat, coupled with continued fallout from a bribery scandal, put the focus more on structural reform at the Defense Ministry than new policy initiatives. Rape allegations against a U.S. soldier and the detainment of another as a murder suspect sparked demonstrations against the U.S. military presence, though the two governments worked to prevent a crisis. Bilateral coordination on the Six-Party Talks continued and there were hints of renewed interest in a trilateral consultation framework with South Korea.

U.S.-China: Bilateral Stability, but Challenges on China's Borders
by Bonnie Glaser

Developments on China's domestic front were prominent this quarter with extreme winter weather coinciding with the Spring Festival, the annual convocation of the "two meetings" in Beijing, and protests in Tibet that spread to neighboring provinces with Tibetan populations. Key events included the fifth Senior Dialogue in Guiyang, a brief visit by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to kick-start the Six-Party Talks, and a visit by FBI Director Robert Mueller to discuss security for the August Olympic Games. In the military sphere, the Commander of U.S. Pacific Command Adm. Timothy Keating traveled to China and the Defense Policy Coordination Talks

produced several agreements. Stable and complicated were watchwords for the Sino-U.S. relationship.

U.S.-Korea: A New Day by Victor D. Cha

The major event of the quarter was the inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak government in South Korea. It offered some initial signals of the types of policies it intends to pursue both on and off the peninsula. While there is much that was accomplished under the Roh Moo-hyun government in U.S.-ROK relations, most experts agree that the overall tone between the new Lee government and the Bush administration will improve considerably. Meanwhile, U.S.-DPRK relations in the context of the Six-Party Talks remain stuck on completing the second phase of the denuclearization agreement. While we may be in the first quarter of the year, it may be the last quarter for the six-party process absent any progress.

U.S.-Russia: Weathering the Storm by Joseph Ferguson

As the most casual of observers knows, the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship has deteriorated steadily over the past five years. Signs point to this over the past quarter as the culmination of the confrontation between Moscow and Washington, with a number of key events scheduled to occur: a Kosovar declaration of independence, further NATO expansion, the Russian presidential election, and a 2+2 meeting focused on the controversial missile defense system in Eastern Europe. But as the quarter ended with an unexpected, yet cordial summit between Presidents Bush and Putin in Sochi, the relationship seemed to have weathered the cold winter and spring seems to have brought a harbinger of better relations – at least until U.S. election in November.

U.S.-Southeast Asia: Domestic Drama and a New Path to ASEAN by Catharin Dalpino

On a bilateral level, U.S. relations with Southeast Asia held steady in the face of complicated political transitions in Thailand and Malaysia. Incremental gains were seen in security ties with U.S. allies and partners in the region – Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore – while two issues remaining from the Vietnam War era complicated relations with Vietnam and Cambodia. Although the U.S. is no closer to signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, three new initiatives with ASEAN were put on the table in early 2008, suggesting an alternative path to a stronger regional role for the U.S. Burma's deteriorating situation casts a long shadow over U.S. relations with Southeast Asia. The regime's determination to go forward with a constitutional referendum in May is creating new fissures within the region and will make it more difficult for Washington to pursue comprehensive plans of any kind to strengthen relations with ASEAN.

China-Southeast Asia: Incremental Progress without Fanfare by Robert Sutter

Preoccupied this quarter with key decisions on appointments, budgets, and government reorganization in the lead-up to the 11th National People's Congress while facing serious disruption caused by February snowstorms and instability in Tibet during March, senior Chinese leaders had little time for travel to or substantial interaction with Southeast Asia. Chinese economic relations with the region moved forward, defense relations with Singapore and Indonesia advanced, and China and Vietnam seemed to calm disputes over territorial claims in the South China Sea.

China-Taiwan: Taiwan Voters Set a New Course by David G. Brown

In January, Taiwan's voters delivered a stunning defeat to the Democratic Progressive Party in the Legislative Yuan elections. These results both foreshadowed and influenced the resounding victory Kuomintang candidate Ma Ying-jeou won in the March presidential election. Most importantly for cross-Strait relations, the UN referendum promoted by Chen Shui-bian failed to pass as Beijing and Washington both breathed sighs of relief. Beijing now faces major challenges: how to avoid short-term actions that would undercut domestic support in Taiwan for Ma's more positive attitude toward China and, over the longer term, how to seize the opportunity to promote more stable cross-Strait relations.

North Korea-South Korea: Back to Belligerence by Aidan Foster-Carter

For almost the whole of the first quarter of 2008, official inter-Korean relations remained suspended in an uneasy limbo. That changed on March 27 when the North expelled 11 Southern officials from the Kaesong Industrial Complex, unleashing a war of fierce words. Pyongyang has begun to criticize the new South Korean leader calling him a "traitor" and threatened to turn South Korea to "ashes" as a sign of its discontent with Lee's harder line stance. So, just as the bitter Korean winter gave way to warm spring, the political weather looked headed the opposite way. Hopes that ten years of the "sunshine" policy had rendered such wild swings and squalls a thing of the past may thus have been premature after all.

China-Korea: Lee Myung-bak Era: Mixed Picture for China Relations by Scott Snyder

The South Korean political transition under President Lee Myung-bak catalyzed diplomatic contacts designed to size up the new leader and to establish the foundations for a new era in the relationship. Meanwhile, Beijing redoubled efforts to manage relations with Pyongyang through exchanges with Kim Jong-il. Chinese food assistance to North Korea and the North Korean commitments in the Six-Party Talks framework to declare nuclear-related programs dominated conversations with the Dear Leader. The rise in "fly-by-night" departures of South Korean small investors from China resulting from rising Chinese labor costs and changing incentives for investments in China requires diplomatic management. Finally, "yellow dust," Tibet, Taiwan, and quality controls on food exports to Korea are nagging issues that cloud the relationship.

Japan-China: All about Gyoza: Almost all the Time by James J. Przystup

While Japan and China worked to build the mutually beneficial strategic relationship and to advance the spring visit of China's President Hu Jintao, both sides found it hard going. The safety of imported Chinese *gyoza* (dumplings) became a major issue as reports of food poisoning in Japan became front-page news. Responsibility for the poisoning became the center of contention. Health Ministry and public safety officials in both countries pledged cooperation but failed to identify the cause. At the same time, expectations for a resolution of the East China Sea dispute before the upcoming Hu visit faded. By mid-March, both sides were taking the position that resolution should not be linked to a visit. Scheduling problems, failure to resolve the East China Sea dispute, and the *gyoza* controversy, combined to push the visit back to an early May time frame.

Japan-Korea: Inaction for Inaction by David Kang and Ji-Young Lee

This quarter's Japan-North Korea relations were uneventful. Tokyo criticized Pyongyang for missing the year-end deadline for declaring all its nuclear programs and facilities, urging North Korea to make a "political decision" to fulfill its commitment under the Six-Party Talks agreement. Pyongyang reiterated that Japan should be excluded from the talks, and blamed Japan for the U.S. failure to remove Pyongyang from its list of state sponsors of terror. It asserted there would be no improvement in their bilateral relations as long as Japan continues to press for resolution of the abduction issue. By mid-March, Tokyo had decided to extend economic sanctions against Pyongyang for another six months after they expire April 13. Meanwhile, with the change in South Korean leadership, Tokyo made efforts to bring South Korea closer to Japan by trying to form a united front between Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. against North Korea.

China-Russia: From Election Politics to Economic Posturing by Yu Bin

The first quarter was a period of transition for Moscow and Beijing. Vladimir Putin switched roles with successor Dmitry Medvedev, but did not fade away. Hu Jintao sailed into his second five-year term as the next generation of China's leaders emerges. Political changes in neighboring countries had strong implications for Russia and China. Beijing and Moscow were also confronted with a "domino" effect for self-rule: Kosova declared independence from Serbia; the status of Taiwan remained uncertain for most of the first quarter as Beijing and Washington worked to rein back efforts by Taiwan's President Chen to move toward *de jure* independence; and riots in Tibet in mid-March cast a long shadow over the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Sino-Russian bilateral relations switched from hibernation to hyperactivity in March: leaders congratulated each other on elections and reelections; defense ministers initiated a military hotline; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) worked out new areas of cooperation, and stepped up cooperation with Afghanistan while trying to dampen Iran's bid for SCO membership.