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**ETHNIC GROUP ACTIVISM AND U.S.-ASIA RELATIONS:  
The Asian American Experience**

By

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## Introduction: Ethnic Groups, Foreign Policy, and the Democratic Dilemma

“The problem of the democrat,” Robert Dahl once observed, “is to reconcile rationality with responsibility” (1950, 181). Perhaps no area consistently confronts the American democracy with this “problem” as does the foreign policymaking process. Indeed, as Hiroshi Nakanishi aptly describes it in a recent article in *Gaiko Forum*, this is “an age-old dilemma” (2005, 3).

While foreign policymaking poses some of democracy’s most formidable challenges, the issue of ethnic group activism in particular heightens the democratic dilemma. This activism must be understood within the larger context of the United States’ prolonged struggle to reconcile the promulgation of rational national interests with its democratic responsibilities.

As an accompaniment to the dramatic rise in immigration to the United States in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the current millennium, speculation has increased considerably about the extent and consequences of the foreign policy activism of America’s more diverse ethnic populations. In a 1997 report by the Council on Foreign Relations, Leslie Gelb, then President of the Council, addressed the likely scope of ethnic activism: ACurrent demographic projections suggest that the U.S. will enter the next century with a plurality of minorities even more so than in the past. These groups within society will affect America=s involvement in the world and our foreign policy agenda.@ This dynamic represents one of the Anew challenges@ the United States faces Athat will define its foreign policy@ (1997, vii).

A broad array of prominent scholars, politicians, and public officials agree with Gelb’s assessment that ethnic group activism in the foreign policy realm will accelerate. There are, however, often sharp disagreements over the desirability of this growing phenomenon. Thomas Ambrosia aptly labels at least two of the competing views as “parochial capture” versus “legitimate influence” (2002, 199). Samuel Huntington of Harvard University and Yossi Shain of Tel Aviv University are representative of divergent stances.

In an article written in *Foreign Affairs* at about the same time as the Gelb piece, Huntington noted the importance of ethnic activism and, in his view, the danger of parochial ethnic interests supplanting broader national interests.

Economic and ethnic particularism define the current American role in the world. The institutions and capabilities – political, military, economic, intelligence – created to serve a grand national purpose in the Cold War are now being suborned and redirected to serve narrow subnational, transnational, and even nonnational purposes....Ethnic groups promote the interests of people and entities outside the United States....The growing role of ethnic groups in shaping foreign policy is reinforced by the waves of recent immigration and by arguments for diversity and multiculturalism. In addition, the greater

wealth of ethnic communities and the dramatic improvements in communications and transportation now make it easier for ethnic groups to remain in touch with their home countries. As a result, these groups are being transformed from cultural communities within the boundaries of a state into diasporas that transcend these boundaries.

Huntington feared that “diasporas can influence the actions and policies of their host country and co-opt its resources and influence to serve the interests of their homeland. Ethnic groups have played active roles in politics throughout American history. Now, ethnic diaspora groups proliferate, are more active, and have greater self-consciousness, legitimacy, and political clout” (1997, 37-39).

The “legitimate influence” side emphasizes the allegedly constructive role played by ethnic activists. Writing in *Foreign Policy*, Shain asserted that:

The damaging impact of ethnic influences on U.S. foreign affairs has been overstated. Ethnic involvement in U.S. foreign affairs may be seen as an important vehicle through which disenfranchised groups may win an entry ticket into American society and politics. Indeed, one of the signs that an ethnic group has achieved a respectable position in American life is its acquisition of a meaningful voice in U.S. foreign affairs....In fact, in the aftermath of the Cold War and with the advent of a more unipolar, ideological world order that favors democracy and the free market economy, ethnic lobbies are likely to become mobilized diasporas. They are ‘commissioned’ by American decision makers to export and safeguard American values abroad.... Such commissioning, in turn, further legitimates the ethnic voice in America’s external affairs and enables diasporas to push American policymakers to adhere to America’s neo-Wilsonian values of promoting democracy and openness around the globe, even when such policies seem to obstruct ad hoc strategic interests.

...the new foreign policy role of ethnic groups is likely to reflect positively in American civic culture by reinforcing the values of democracy and pluralism at home. Contrary to conventional wisdom, diaspora politics has the potential to temper, rather than exacerbate, domestic culture, because it discourages tendencies toward Balkanization at home. In many ways, then, the participation of ethnic diasporas in shaping U.S. foreign policy is a truly positive phenomenon (1995, 87).

While the intense debates about democracy and foreign policy and the consequences of foreign policy activism by ethnic groups generally are important to keep in mind, the specific focus of this paper is the extent and consequences of this activism by Asian Americans. The Asian American population is at the forefront of the changing demographics referred to by Gelb. This segment, largely fed by immigration, has undergone more than a tenfold increase since 1960. Diversity within the group has also expanded. Substantial concentrations of Asian Americans are now drawn from a broader range of nations. Notable transformations have also been manifested. Japanese Americans, for example, who were the largest Asian ethnic

community in 1960, were by 2000 only the sixth largest Asian ethnic group.

If the equation that more immigration means more activism is accurate, then the prospects appear to be ripe for increased Asian American participation in the foreign policy realm. As the late Chang-Lin Tien, former Chancellor of the University of California Berkeley, remarked at a conference on "Bridges with Asia: Asian Americans in the United States," "Asian Americans are well-positioned to play a major role in foreign policy toward Asia" (1996). And, as an editorial in the *Northwest Asian Weekly* declared, "Asian Pacific Americans have a natural role to play in development of U.S. foreign policy" (1995).

Whether Asian Americans are "well-positioned" to play "a natural role" in the foreign policymaking process is as we will see in this discussion a matter of considerable dispute. Mirroring general arguments about ethnic activism, some individuals in the Asian American community encourage this involvement while others warn of potential peril. For those in the latter category, a prevalent paradigm drawn from the past posits the vulnerability of Asian Americans to the vagaries of foreign policies and to backlashes aimed at those who have sought to shape them.

Asian American efforts in the foreign policy arena and responses to them are apt to be influenced by dramatic transformations in the United States and the global milieu. Especially compelling is the confluence of forces of change in at least three realms: 1. the size and composition of Asian American communities, 2. the role of Asia in the international system, and 3. American foreign policy goals and the policymaking process.

## **Changes and Opportunities**

### *Asian America*

The explosion in the size and diversity of the Asian American population in the last generation has been extensively documented. Largely due to immigration, the Asian American population between 1970 and 2000 grew from 1.5 million to over 10 million. Especially notable is the fact that in 2000 nearly 70% of Asian American were foreign born. The projected growth of the Asian American population is also quite striking. In 2050 the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the Asian American population will number over 33 million and constitute 8% of the nation's residents.

As suggested already, beyond the sheer size of the Asian immigrant wave, its diversity may also influence foreign policy activism. Now more than ever before more Asian subgroups make-up the Asian American community. As recently as three decades ago, Chinese and Japanese constituted the bulk of Americans of Asian ancestry. The countries from which recent immigrants have come represent every part of Asia. Today, six Asian American groups - Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Indians, and Vietnamese - number more than half a million. Diversity is also represented in the socio-economic profile of the new Asian

immigration. In comparison with the older Asian immigration that drew heavily from poorer and less skilled sectors, many, although by no means all, of the recent immigrants have been drawn from broader social strata, including a larger portion of highly trained, well-educated professionals.

The impact of these transformations can take several forms. With more immigrants from different countries, the number of nations involved with the United States that may generate interest and activism among Asian Americans has increased. Furthermore, with a substantial portion of Asian immigrants arriving with well-developed skills and advanced socioeconomic status, the capabilities of the communities that they are a part of to engage in political enterprises are to some degree enhanced.

### *Asia on the Rise*

A little less than a decade ago a cover of the journal *Foreign Policy* captured perfectly the dynamic of an ascendant Asia. Under the title "The Rising East," there was a depiction of a smiling Buddha with a laptop computer nestled on his knees (1996). Clearly, depending on the issue, Asia is near the center of the international arena. Whether applauded or derided, feared or respected, the inescapable reality is that Asian nations are forces to be reckoned with.

The rise and restructuring of Asia are significant for Asian Americans in several ways. For example, the rapid increase in Asian immigration beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the present was and is directly part of the residue and reality of the United States' encounters with Asian nations. The Asian American community has been literally shaped by these experiences. Further changes will undoubtedly continue to leave their mark on the Asian American community. In addition, beyond being dramatically affected by what goes on in Asia and by United States policies toward Asian countries, Asian Americans in turn may be increasingly inclined to influence the contours of change and American policy responses.

Asian countries may also be more open to courting their diasporic communities, including those in the United States. The inclinations of these nations to look across the Pacific and regard Asian Americans as potential assets on the foreign policy front have been decidedly mixed. The temptation to reach out, however, may grow as the stature of Asian powers and Asian American communities are mutually enhanced.

### *United States Foreign Policy: Changing Roles and Processes*

The passing of the Cold War with its overriding emphasis on taming the Soviet Union ushered in a period of confusion and complexity. Fundamental assumptions about the international milieu and the role and position of the United States and other powers within it were altered. Although the dominant role of the United States on a variety of international chessboards remained solid, the articulation of American foreign policy goals and the identification of putative allies and opponents were muddled.

The unanticipated terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 have gone a long way to help clarify American foreign policy actions and objectives. The national security state with a heavy reliance on executive branch dominance that defined the Cold War years has been reinstated during the War on Terror. Although the international agenda for the United States has been more focused since 9/11, the issue domains remain broad and, consequently, the range of interests clamoring for attention is equally vast. Despite the preoccupation with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, therefore, many potential opportunities remain for Asian Americans to couple their interests with activism.

The convergence of changes at the global level and the American foreign policy agenda has definitely meant a movement away from the Eurocentric fixation that dominated much of the United States' experience as a superpower. Furthermore, the commitment to security considerations has been augmented by more complex economic, political, and social interactions that are at the core of relations with Asian states. As issues and policies become what Bayless Manning has described as more "intermestic," neither fully international nor domestic, the opportunities and motivations for activism may increase (1977, 306). Immigration, trade, and investment matters, for instance, blur the line between domestic and foreign policy and are near the top of the United States' Asian agenda.

In summary, the combined effects of recent transformations in the size and composition of the Asian American community, the expanded role of Asia in the world generally and its importance to the United States specifically, and the focus and structure of American foreign policy offer enhanced interest, opportunities, challenges, and critical scrutiny for Asian Americans intent on influencing foreign policy.

## **Asian Americans and U.S.-Asia Relations**

### *Ties that Bind and Define*

History amply demonstrates that the well-being of Asian Americans has been inextricably linked to the role and influence of Asian nations and to the nature of the relationships between their adopted and ancestral homes. The size and composition of the Asian American community as well as its legal standing, political participation, and physical well-being have all been coupled with events abroad.

Asian immigration to the United States has been significantly influenced by the nature of relations between the United States and Asian countries. When the United States has been a party to major Asian conflicts, it has contributed to dislocations driving immigration. Many refugees and immigrants have journeyed from areas experiencing political instability or war, and, after they arrive, their Asian origins continue to shape their lives in the United States.

When an Asian country has been deemed powerful, the treatment of the related

nationality group in the United States has been affected, although it is difficult to generalize about whether that impact has been consistently positive or negative. The growing activism of Japan in the early and mid-twentieth century, for example, had mixed results for the Japanese American community. The fact that the American government was slower and more reluctant to impose an outright exclusion on Japanese immigrants compared with the Chinese was largely a reflection of Japan's more formidable international position. The Gentlemen's Agreement was clearly an acknowledgment of Japan's status. As Japan became more aggressive, however, the government and people of the United States became more wary of the Japanese generally and increasingly hostile toward Americans of Japanese ancestry specifically, culminating in the World War II internment.

### *Interest*

In his often cited adage, former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Tip O'Neil proclaimed, "All politics is local." For several ethnic groups in America, however, a more appropriate maxim might be, "All politics is international." Cuban Americans, for example, in their political activism have reflected the primacy of foreign policy. Their preoccupation with the continuing hold of Fidel Castro in Cuba has largely defined their activities in both the foreign and local realms. Jewish Americans as well have tied much of their political involvement to an overarching determination to see that the United States' policies protect the safety and stability of Israel. Many Asian Americans share this preoccupation with homeland politics and United States foreign policy, often resulting in serious tensions among and within Asian American communities.

The existence of generational differences regarding interest in foreign policy has been routinely identified by many Asian Americans, but with little agreement as to the direction and impact of those differences. Some individuals, for example, claim that first generation immigrants have closer connections to foreign lands and, consequently, pay more attention to events abroad and external relations. Interest in these matters is said to wane with the passage of time as later generations of Asian Americans become more assimilated. Accordingly, the fact that most Asian Americans are foreign born would suggest a heightened preoccupation with and passionate following of policies inside of and toward Asian homelands.

Other individuals argue that first and second generation Asian Americans are so fully engaged in making a living and doing well in the United States that they devote little attention to matters involving foreign policy. For Asian Americans in the decades to come, Don Nakanishi maintains that the likelihood of declining interest will be mitigated by "the changing political economic conditions in states such as California, Washington, and Hawaii for Asian Pacific Americans and other groups. For example, large numbers of second- and third-generation Asian Pacific Americans, particularly those in business, law, journalism, high technology, and academics, are visibly involved in emerging Pacific Rim affairs and, more generally, in the structural transformations stemming from the internationalization of the political economies of many states" (2001, 120).

Furthermore, with the passage of time and generations, immigrant communities generally expand their socioeconomic and other resources and, thereby, enhance their abilities to exercise political and policymaking clout. A paradoxical dynamic, therefore, may be at work. As interest diminishes, capabilities crucial for effective involvement expand.

### *Activism*

Foreign relations have played a major role in defining the destiny of Asian Americans. Consequently their stake in the content of these relations has been substantial and their interest has been high as well. In the formulation of foreign policies toward Asian nations, however, Asian Americans, with some exceptions, have been pawns more than players. Prolonged stretches of sustained Asian American involvement in foreign policy have been rare.

Although activism has been uneven and episodic, it has not as some have contended been virtually nonexistent. Since the early days of their settlement in the United States, Asian Americans have on occasion turned their interest into foreign policy activism. For example, the Chinese Six Companies lobbied hard to shape the 1868 Burlingame Treaty. Over the years, broad sectors of the Chinese American community have been passionately involved on all sides of the China question. Thought (Taiwan independence) sympathizers in the United States have increased their visibility and organizational structure. They have selectively joined lobbying efforts to influence United States policy and have established national and regional offices. Chinese Americans have also mobilized on issues related to trade, human rights, health, religious freedom, and the environment.

The Committee of 100 was established in 1990 soon after the Tiananmen events with the goal of promoting improved interactions between the United States and China. Several prominent Chinese Americans have lent their prestige to the organization, including cellist Yo-Yo Ma, architect I.M. Pei, designer Maya Lin, scientist David Ho, former ambassador Julia Chang Bloch, and others. At their annual conferences, held in Washington, D.C., registrants have met with an "A list" of notable movers and shakers - members of Congress, senior government officials including cabinet secretaries, and leading scholars. In 2005, sessions focused on topics such as "U.S.-China Economic Integration," "The Making of China Policy in the U.S.," "National Security Issues and their Economic Impact on International Trade," and "APA Participation in the Political Arena."

In the early days of Korean settlement in the United States, Korean associations, which were principally religious, attempted to persuade the United States to restrain Japan's imperial ambitions. More recently, Korean American activists in organizations such as Young Koreans United and Nodutol have supported Korean reunification.

The Indian community, particularly concerning the issue of Indian independence, was engaged in foreign policy through the efforts of associations such as the Ghadar Party, the Indian

Welfare League, the Friends for the Freedom of India, the India Home Rule League, and the India League of America. Indian Americans have continued to lobby extensively on behalf of United States support for India. They have also spent some energy opposing what has often been perceived as an overly cordial relationship between the United States and Pakistan. Lately this has meant marshaling opposition to the sale by the United States of sophisticated military hardware including fighter jets to Pakistan and to curtailing Pakistan's nuclear weapons ambitions. On the other hand, Pakistani Americans have lobbied aggressively and with professional assistance for American aid to Pakistan and to restrain India's nuclear arsenal.

Filipino Americans through organizations such as Dimas Alang were involved early in the Philippine independence movement and much later in efforts to curtail the United States' support of the Ferdinand Marcos regime.

Among the more recent immigrants from Southeast Asia, many Vietnamese Americans were mobilized around the issue of United States diplomatic recognition and attempts at reconciliation. Many Cambodian Americans have sought support for measures aimed at establishing economic vitality, political order, and justice after the ravages imposed by Pol Pot. High on the agenda of many Americans of Cambodian descent are calls for the United States to politically and materially support the establishment of tribunals to seek an accounting of the genocide.

Several recent activist efforts have utilized imaginative technologies particularly in electronic communications. Many traditional communication instruments - letters, telegrams, faxes, and videos were utilized by activists in response to the Tiananmen massacre. Additionally protestors and their sympathizers took remarkably full-advantage of what were then relatively new communication technologies, namely the Internet and e-mail. A nationwide electronic service, the China News Digest, with over 35,000 subscribers was setup by Chinese American scholars and students after the Tiananmen experience. The Indian American community has deployed a similar service called IndiaNet.

In describing instances of Asian American involvement such as those just mentioned, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that interest may be high in foreign policy matters but activism relatively low. The historical experience of Asian Americans amply shows that interest in foreign policy does not automatically translate into activism and activism does not ensure success. This is true for many reasons and raises important questions about the causes of different levels of political involvement, about the distribution of politically useful resources, and about feelings of alienation and vulnerability. Although they have been deeply affected by and interested in United States foreign policy, Asian Americans have often engendered harsh treatment when attempting to alter its content.

### **Perpetual Foreigners**

The growth of the Asian American community as already noted can contribute

significantly to its potential political clout. On the other hand, the increase in size and activism may spur a backlash. Perceptions of Asian Americans as threats throughout American history have repeatedly resulted in vigorous opposition. The specter of alleged treachery has been easy to conjure up against Asian Americans. They have been viewed as perpetual foreigners and strangers. Foreign policy activism enhances these powerful sentiments.

Obviously, for some people, foreign policy involvement has been out of bounds. It has not been enough for Asian Americans inclined to play an activist role to simply assert the legitimacy of their actions. While in a formal sense the right to act may be unimpeachable, acting on that right has been a risky enterprise. In a dominant society suspicious of the activists' true allegiances, aggressive actions particularly against prevailing trends have tended to validate in many people's minds fears of divided loyalties.

Asian Americans, who have been consistently racialized as disguised foreigners, have been especially discouraged from foreign policy-related interests and activities, and they have been forced to confront a double-barreled assault. They have been barred from naturalizing, and faced exclusion and discrimination. Everything possible has been done to treat them as outsiders. Simultaneously, these Asian immigrants and their successors have also been condemned for "behaving foreign" and displaying any inkling of interest in the politics of and United States policy toward their nations of origin. As Arif Dirlik has noted:

This discourse rendered Asians into permanent foreigners, culturally and even genetically incapable of becoming 'real' Americans, an attitude that would serve as a justification for their exclusion from 1882 through World War II. This exclusion did not extinguish memories of ties to their native origins, or even their involvement in politics in their nations of origin, but it did turn affirmation of such ties into a further liability. Even where consciousness of origins was weak, as with generations born in the United States, the very 'Asianness' of Americans of Asian descent was deemed to preclude their becoming 'real' Americans...(1999, 32).

At times, the government's efforts to combat Asian Americans suspected of harmful foreign policy activities have been ruthless. In the case of Chinese Americans after the Communist victory in 1949, for example, while it was difficult to gauge the Chinese American community's political support for the new mainland government, the United States took no chances. "The fear of Red China," Robert G. Lee has written, "extended to the Chinese American community....The pro-Chiang Kai-shek Chinatown elite, working with the FBI, launched a systematic attempt to suppress any expression of support for the new communist regime in China. The Trading with the Enemy Act, which prohibited any currency transfers to the Peoples Republic of China, including remittances to family, was used as a tool to attempt to deport suspected communist sympathizers. Although only a few leftists and labor leaders were actually deported, the threat of deportation had a deeply chilling effect, since many hundreds of Chinese had come to the United States as 'paper sons; during the long decades of exclusion and were in the United States under false pretenses" (1999, 152). Similarly, the United States

government, in support of its British ally, deported several anti-colonial activists in the Indian American community.

Charges of disloyalty and unreliability have served as convenient fronts for nefarious and narrow purposes. In 1942, for example, General John DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command, in calling for the internment of Japanese Americans, maintained that ethnicity determines loyalty. For many Americans, agitation for the removal of Japanese Americans was largely a convenient and ruthless response to economic gains made by Japanese Americans and a manifestation of long-held and deeply entrenched racism.

Asian Americans much like other ethnic groups active in the foreign policy area have sometimes been perceived as tools, unwitting or otherwise, of foreign entities. Cozy relationships between immigrant communities and foreign governments, particularly through local consulates, are common and have aroused concern in some quarters.

Since much of the fear and trepidation prompted by Asian nations can easily be transferred to Asian Americans, one might argue that the proper strategy for Asian Americans would be to distance themselves from Asian affairs and United States policy. Although the wisdom of this strategy is debatable, it partially arises from the belief that expanded Asian American activism on foreign policy matters increases the likelihood of harsh backlashes. Given a host of factors, including historical experience, racism, and widely held suspicions about the appropriateness of this behavior, a likely accompaniment of foreign policy activism will be an escalation of decidedly nasty consequences.

The tendency of many Americans and their government often to confuse activism and dissent with disloyalty may indeed have a "chilling effect" on Asian Americans, dissuading them from even thinking about playing highly visible roles on the foreign policymaking stage. Many Asian Americans, whether in communities that have been here for decades or days, have continued to struggle with how they are perceived. Identity issues can be complicated, and they are central considerations in decisions about participating on foreign policy matters. Throughout the country, Asian Americans, who are self-confident about their own commitment and identity as Americans, nevertheless often become exceedingly anxious about perceptions of them as disloyal.

Asian Americans have responded in several ways to individuals contesting the validity of their foreign policy involvement. In order to assess these responses, the forces that promote discord among Asian Americans and those that might bolster unity need to be identified. Some additional barriers to Asian American involvement and effectiveness should also be considered.

## **Unity, Disunity, and Addressing Barriers**

*Tearing apart*

Important differences exist in the national origins, political affiliations, socioeconomic status, cultures, and beliefs of Asian Americans. It is no wonder that opinions on foreign policy matters reflect and, on occasion, have exacerbated this diversity. Differences that emerge within specific Asian American communities over foreign policy matters reflect many things including generational differences, contending political allegiances, and regional variations.

Indeed, foreign politics and policies have often contributed to lingering hostilities. Perhaps, nothing contributes more to the promulgation of what Dirlik has called “nationally defined ethnic self-perceptions” than foreign policy (1999, 36). Whether because of tenacious historical antagonisms or prevailing national differences, Asian Americans generally have become interested and involved in foreign policy not as a collective body, i.e., as Asian Americans, but as individualized Asian American entities, i.e., Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Vietnamese Americans, etc. When it comes to bridge-building, therefore, Asian Americans have some work to do spanning differences embedded in foreign policy.

Furthermore, external matters may feed divisions not only between but also within specific Asian American groups. For Asian American immigrants, deep-seated differences often doggedly persist in the new world. In his examination of the workings of the Kuomintang Party in the United States, Him Mark Lai observed, “the concern of the party with events in China frequently led to the injection of homeland political conflicts and struggles into the Chinese American communities, which often proved divisive and prevented cooperation for the common good” (1991, 199). In sizing up the more recent landscape, Yen Le Espiritu has written, “The Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian, and Vietnamese American communities continue to be divided among themselves over the politics of their countries of origin. Some of these political differences have sparked violence” (1992, 60).

Espiritu, however, has contested the view that schisms engendered by international forces must continue to manifest themselves in unbridgeable divisions among Asian Americans. She has argued that with the passage of time and experience in the United States the saliency of these divisions tends to recede. “As various groups in the United States interacted, they became aware of common problems and goals that transcended parochial interests and historical antagonisms” (1992, 30).

A fractious environment assuredly weakens political and policymaking influence. The persistence of myriad factors promoting potential disunity have made the establishment and maintenance of unity around foreign policy considerations more problematic for Asian Americans. Whether a unifying Asian American consciousness partially expressed in political mobilization will emerge as the Asian American community “matures” is not clear. Greater unity, however, is more likely to arise in the domestic arena around distinctly Asian American issues rather than issues related to United States policies toward Asia.

*Coming together*

Although it has been rare for Asian Americans from different homelands to unite for common foreign policy goals, there have been instances where support transcended individual ethnic communities. The long resistance to Japanese expansion early in the twentieth century at times brought together Chinese and Korean Americans for shared purposes and mutual support. In the early 1940s, the Indian and Korean American communities joined with Chinese Americans in calling for the lifting of limitations on the right of Asian immigrants to naturalize. A few decades later, young Asian Americans from diverse communities were drawn together partly to oppose the continued military involvement of the United States in Southeast Asia. More recently, Asian Americans have been at the forefront of resisting overbearing measures instituted in the name of national security that have targeted South Asians and other groups. The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), for example, has been especially active in this effort.

Although the development of a shared Asian American agenda, especially in the foreign policy realm, has been difficult, one can discern circumstances that might promote unity among diverse Asian American communities. A long and sometimes troubled history and painful recent experiences demonstrate that Asian Americans whatever their national origins share a stake in the nature and tone of relations between the United States and a variety of Asian nations. In a fairly undifferentiated fashion, for example, Asian Americans have in common experienced prejudice and abuses triggered by the actions of foreign governments and tensions involving the United States. Despite its origins in the clearly differentiated domain of foreign and international politics, this treatment has been a broadly shared component of the collective Asian American experience.

On numerous occasions in recent times, for example, violence against individual Asians no matter what their nationality has been linked to hostilities and tensions involving a particular Asian nation. Consequently, actions such as the disturbingly familiar use of the widely accessible epithet "Gook" to refer to all Asian Americans by those with lingering hatred from the Vietnam experience, the beating death of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American in Detroit, as a scapegoat for hatred directed at Japan, and the sharp rise in anti-Asian American violence generally are all unfortunate results of individuals too ignorant or racist to be cognizant of differences.

Perhaps a succinct appraisal of the dynamic of Asian American political integration and segregation is that homeland and Asian experiences tend to divide Asian Americans while shared American experiences provide opportunities to unite them. Furthermore whether a common identity emerges among diverse Asian Americans may not be as vital to their well-being as one imposed from outside.

As action and organization evolve on issues that elicit more unified responses, the prospects for coordination and activism on matters ensconced within the foreign policy sphere are appreciably enhanced. Consciousness, networks, and relationships forged in one policy area facilitate counterparts in others.

All of this suggests that foreign policy activism by Asian Americans individually or collectively is especially called for when the consequences of policies impinge broadly on the welfare of Asian Americans. The reality for Asian Americans of a partially shared fate establishes a foundation for a modicum of shared activism. The need for participation, however, does not always elicit concerted responses. Some formidable barriers stand in the way of successful advocacy.

### *Barriers*

For decades the political involvement of Asian Americans was restricted by severe limitations on immigration and naturalization. These structural impediments made it extremely difficult for Asian Americans to be active, especially when coupled with their weak sense of political efficacy. Individuals who carry around images of their own political vulnerability and ineffectiveness have been disinclined to participate.

Many Asian Americans have been reluctant for various reasons to condone involvement in foreign policy matters. For instance, Asian American associations dedicated to promoting rapid assimilation, so-called "Americanism," although quite supportive of political participation by their members, have been wary of aggressive efforts to alter the shape of American foreign policy. For these associations, politics truly stops at the water's edge. During World War II despite the wholesale internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry, the JAACL was unwilling to advocate strongly against the policies of the United States government.

There is some reluctance as well in sectors of the Asian American community to support foreign policy activism because of the belief that domestic and local matters should be the principal arenas for political participation. Because of the scarce resources available to activists within the Asian American community, Asian Americans, according to this view, should prudently employ precious time and energies on behalf of concerns closer to home.

A contrary view suggests that foreign policy involvement generally enhances rather than diminishes attempts by Asian Americans to influence domestic policy. Demonstrations of interest and activism on foreign policy issues may have spillover effects. Awareness and attention generated by foreign policy concern and activism help in other struggles including some fully ensconced in the domestic arena.

### **In Defense of Activism**

Eloquent and effective advocates for Asian American involvement in influencing United States foreign policy can be found within Asian American communities. These individuals, while not oblivious to the often hostile reactions to this type of political activism, nevertheless are unapologetic about their right to participate. Furthermore they are able to identify some contributions that Asian Americans can make to the development of responsive and responsible

foreign policy. Here is a sampling of some of their views expressed to me.

From an Asian American woman in Chicago:

I'm from Vietnam originally so to me foreign relations is the heart of all the matters between U.S. and Asia because as a result of U.S. foreign policy we are here. I think it's really inevitable that the politics of the U.S. is based on interest groups and as Asians we have our own interests and we should be able to exercise these interests in every sphere including foreign relations. I think in the case of Japanese Americans because of the negative experience during World War II the leadership of that community may shy away from homeland issues, but I think for other communities who are recent immigrants it is a very natural thing to talk about U.S. and homeland policies.

Another Chicagoan noted the unique knowledge and perspectives that certain Asian Americans may contribute to the policymaking process:

My view of America in this post-Cold War and complex international community is that we should be able to benefit from the presence of the people who are here. I think many of the mistakes that may have been made in the past in terms of foreign policy are based on a certain ignorance about those countries. And we need to take advantage of the people who have first-hand knowledge. They may have certain biases, but I think those biases need to be brought to the table with people who may have studied these issues academically but may have no firsthand experience of what it's like being a third world person, what's it like being caught in the Cold War and having to play a certain role. Those experiences have to be brought to the foreign front so that they become part of the debate or solution or direction of policy.

Persons outside of the Asian American community have also championed the right of Asian Americans to participate and to contribute their expertise and insights and to forcefully present their concerns. In the main, Asian American activists welcome these sentiments. It should be noted, however, that politicians and others at times have used these activists as tools for their own narrow political purposes. Chinese Americans, for example, are regularly summoned to Capitol Hill to engage in some erstwhile China-bashing. Many individuals, who have cheered on dissidents such as Harry Wu as they lambasted the Chinese government, have not lifted a finger in support of human rights when the friendships of right-wing dictators and military juntas have been at stake.

## **Conclusion**

Although Asian Americans are deeply influenced by American foreign policy, they have not consistently played major roles in shaping that policy. It is easy, therefore, as some suggest, to conclude that Asian Americans are in many ways responsible for their status largely as pawns rather than players. This line of reasoning is certainly tempting, perhaps even self-satisfying, for

those who have imposed and condoned some of the harsh and restrictive measures forced upon Asian Americans in the name of "military necessity" and national security. Although appealing to some people, these arguments are fundamentally flawed. For Asian Americans, their ability to influence foreign policy has been determined not simply by how much they have yearned to be heard, but also by whether they have been allowed to speak.

Asian Americans have been neither simply uninterested nor naive about the consequences for them of foreign policies. The often harsh treatment of Asian Americans has retarded widespread activism in at least two ways. First, many Asians in America have been consciously and systematically denied access to the political process. Second, those who have attempted despite formidable barriers to influence foreign policy and to advocate for policy alternatives have become even more vulnerable because of their activism.

The legacy of responses to the linkage between Asian Americans and United States policies toward Asian nations, therefore, does not invite optimism about the prospects for extensive activism in the foreign policy realm. On the other hand, transformations in the size and makeup of the Asian American community coupled with the burgeoning importance of Asia have raised the stakes and the possibilities of expanded Asian American involvement. The opportunities accompanying these changes, despite the forces tugging differentially at the Asian American community and the formidable barriers to participation, may prove to be irresistible.

The growing importance and confidence of several Asian countries may influence the self-esteem and internal efficacy of Americans of Asian ancestry which in turn may contribute to positive political and psychological consequences. The pride, interest, and self-assurance of a rapidly growing Asian American population may be tied to the ascent of their ancestral homes.

Assuredly, however, the rise of Asia coupled with a stronger, more active Asian American community has in recent times revived several familiar paranoid reactions. Myriad aspects of the controversies involving political contributions by Asian Americans principally during the 1996 elections and the Wen Ho Lee affair offer ample evidence that many individuals in politics and the media are prepared to invoke swiftly and often irresponsibly a darker and more damaging side of the so-called "Asian connection."

In summary, the cumulative effects of profound changes and the persistence of certain continuities in the Asian, American, and Asian American experiences do not allow for easy predictions about the course of Asian American activism on foreign policy concerns. Perhaps the pull of the past and the persistence of powerful opposition will discourage activists. Or, reflective of Gelb's prediction cited at the beginning of this discussion, Asian Americans "will affect America's involvement in the world and our foreign policy agenda."

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