Clippings

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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Twice in the past half year, former Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield, now U.S. ambassador to Japan, has written on the page opposite about a dwindling American interest in Asia. In his first article, Mr. Mansfield flatly labeled this a “myth.” He said the United States had more than fulfilled its “overcommitment” in Indochina, remained ready to defend South Korea’s security, was attuning its China policy to Asian realities and was dedicated to present defense arrangements with Japan. Extolling the “moderate course” of the Carter administration, he said “the United States position in Asia is more favorable than at any time since World War II.”

In his second article, written to coincide with Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda’s current visit to this country, the ambassador was less confident. He diplomatically reiterated that present policies point in the right direction. But Mr. Mansfield confessed he is disturbed by “the perception, widely held in East Asia, that the United States no longer regards Asia as important or worthy of much attention.” Although he went on to state that the problem “is as much one of perception as of reality,” he rightly took small comfort in the distinction. Foreign policy is, after all, largely a matter of perceptions, and to the extent that perceptions run counter to intentions they represent a policy failure.

To the Asian concerns he had listed last October, Mr. Mansfield added a new one: a feeling that the administration’s emphasis on Europe was allowing the U.S. position in Asia to atrophy. Because Asia’s skepticism about the United States is largely a result of the Indochina experience, the ambassador warned that America would be judged henceforth “by our deeds rather than our rhetoric.”

As a subtle elder statesman, Ambassador Mansfield refrained from specifying what “deeds” he would propose. He merely urged patience and persistence in following the present “moderate course.” If successful, this presumably would lead to an easing of the severe trade tensions between the United States and Japan, to a more rapid pace in normalizing relations with mainland China, to a curtailment of the U.S. presence in South Korea that would not destabilize the whole peninsula and to a fulfillment of the very large U.S. moral commitment to help Southeast Asia recover from war. Each of these issues, plus the many others abounding in Asia, would require the kind of U.S. focus on Asia that Mr. Mansfield finds is missing.

Perhaps the former senator is suffering from “localitis,” i.e., too great a preoccupation with one’s host country. Perhaps Europe (and the Middle East) require some redress from the U.S. entanglement in Asia. Or perhaps the American people should now listen to Mr. Mansfield’s warnings not to neglect Asia as they did not listen to his early 1960s warnings against over-involvement in Vietnam.
The United States and East Asia: A Vital Link

Washington

IN the nearly one year I have served as ambassador to Japan, I have been asked numerous questions about the growing importance of East Asia in the world, particularly in strategic and economic terms. Whether or not there is a region of greater importance for the United States, as my colleagues have noted, and we have been talking about, is a question I will not answer.

But I have been disturbed by a growing phenomenon: the perception, widely held in East Asia, that the United States no longer regards Asia as an important or worthy area of effort. This is not true. If we do not reflect, at least paying insufficient attention to the problems and prospects of that vast region, this country, at best, may not be able to affect, for good or ill, our future well-being.

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