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**Research Report**

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# Obama's Visit to Asia

**"Return" of the United States as a Pacific Power?**

*Howard Loewen / Markus Tidten / Gudrun Wacker*

**In November 2009 U.S. President Barack Obama travelled for the first time to Japan, attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Singapore, met the heads of state of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – including the representative of the Burmese military junta –, spent three days in Shanghai and Peking, and concluded his trip in South Korea. Presenting himself as the first "Pacific" U.S. president and presenting the United States as a central actor in the region, he communicated three messages: The United States will uphold and strengthen the traditional bilateral alliances in Asia, get more involved in the existing multilateral organisations, and is ready to co-operate with China on today's global challenges. In the American and European media, the trip received a predominantly negative response, since it had not produced any tangible results, but instead had signalled the decline of the United States and its influence in the region. Behind this verdict stands the – misguided – expectation that Obama's new approaches would instantly lead to changed positions among U.S. partners.**

In his speech at Suntory Hall in Tokyo, the first station of his tour, U.S. President Obama underlined three focal points of his Asia strategy, namely the significance of the United States's traditional bilateral alliances in the region, co-operation with China – whose rise the United States would not seek to contain – and the role of regional multilateral organisations for improving security and welfare.

The speech also touched upon ways out of the global economic crisis, international co-operation to fight climate change, and the administration's new initiative for global nuclear disarmament. Finally, he stressed freedom and human dignity as universal rights and the basis of global stability. With this, he set the tone for his Asia trip and outlined the agenda of the United States as an Asian-Pacific power.

## Japan and Korea: Reconfirming the alliances

To symbolise the military-security framework, Obama started his Asia trip on 14 November in Japan and concluded it a week later in South Korea (ROK). With both countries, Washington maintains a defence alliance. For the U.S. military

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presence in the Asia-Pacific, these alliances have been the most important and most visible pillars of U.S. predominance in the region since the end of the Second World War (Japan) and the end of combat in the Korean War in 1953. While the partitioning of Korea has provided the raison d'être for the military alliance with the ROK, Japan and the United States see their bilateral security treaty as a broader partnership with the purpose of preserving peace and stability in the entire region.

The new U.S. president met an even newer government in Tokyo under the leadership of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama. His party, the DPJ (Democratic Party of Japan), had succeeded in bringing about the first real change of government that was deserving of being called so. For almost half a century, the conservative LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) had governed the country and shaped the relationship with the United States. Obama now met a dialogue partner in Tokyo who had successfully campaigned with slogans like "partnership with the U.S. at eye level" or "more transparency and reassessment in the security partnership with the U.S." Before Obama's visit, this had evoked criticism from Washington. For tactical reasons, Hatoyama had included the SPJ (Social Democratic Party of Japan) in the coalition. He needs this party to secure a majority for the upper house after the next election, which will be held in July 2010.

After tedious negotiations over several years, the previous government under the LDP had finally reached an agreement with the United States on the relocation of a U.S. Air Force base on the island Okinawa. Traditionally, however, the socialists have argued in favour of a reduced American military presence in Japan, and especially on Okinawa. Due to his new, more dialogue-oriented style of government, Hatoyama triggered a discussion in the coalition about the agreement concluded. Bilateral working groups with representatives from the foreign and defence ministries of both countries had unsuccessfully tried to find a compromise before Obama's arrival in Tokyo. Thus, the American president had to realise that the new government in Tokyo needed more time to come to a new understanding of the security alliance.

In principle, Hatoyama would like to bring Japan's alliance with the United States, which is so vital for Japan's comprehensive security, from "talks behind closed doors" à la the LDP into the broader public. Through more transparency and encouragement of public debates, Hatoyama hopes to create popular and robust backing in Japan for the alliance with the United States. Obama's appearance in Tokyo was meant to signal not only to the new government, but also to the public, the importance of the security partnership for both countries. This is less about Japan's territorial integrity, but rather about co-operation and division of labour in tackling new challenges. Japan's contribution in helping to solve the Afghanistan problem is currently the most important issue in this respect. Whether this contribution should be strictly financial and civil or also consist of military engagement is a major controversy within Japan. Participation in anti-piracy campaigns is another topic where Japan's co-operation has been called for, but military options have not gone beyond domestic debate.

With Washington reconfirming the importance of the alliance and Tokyo striving for a partnership at eye level, both will require a lengthy co-ordination process between the two countries. However, this does not constitute a deeper crisis in the relationship, nor does it mean a questioning of the alliance as such.

In Seoul, the final station on Obama's trip to Asia, the atmosphere was characterised by complete harmony. President Obama and his Korean counterpart, Lee Myung Bak, had only one important topic to discuss, namely their respective positions on North Korea (DPRK). In contrast to the comprehensive alliance with Japan, the U.S. defence pact with the ROK aims exclusively at the protection against potential

aggression from the North. This alliance is based on the partitioning of the Korean peninsula, and the 30,000 U.S. military personnel would in theory have to withdraw in case this partition were removed. However, the current situation does not make such a development very likely.

The new conservative government that took power in February 2009 has displayed a tougher attitude vis-à-vis the North than its predecessors. The ROK and the United States agree that new concessions to Pyongyang are only to be considered after North Korea has returned to the Six-Party Talks (6PT: both Koreas, China, Russia, Japan, and the United States) on denuclearisation. By sending U.S. special envoy Stephen Bosworth to Pyongyang, Washington formally complies with the DPRK's demands for direct bilateral talks. Obama and Lee both underlined, however, that Bosworth's mission was to be seen strictly within the context of the 6PT. The most important objective remains: to convince North Korea to return to the negotiating table with the six parties. This can also be seen as a signal to Beijing, which wants to have a say in all decisions concerning the North.

At the same time, the resumption of direct contacts between Washington and Pyongyang reconfirms the special role of the United States vis-à-vis the DPRK. The question of a peace treaty between both countries, at least, constitutes an item on the agenda that has to be dealt with outside the Six Party format. The North Korean issue also represents an important link between the U.S. alliances with South Korea and Japan. Obama made clear to both partners that the United States will continue to rely on its two important alliances. At the same time, he also encourages a close dialogue between Tokyo and Seoul. He thereby has officially given a green light to closer co-operation between the two partners.

On balance, the main message of the visits to Japan and South Korea was that the United States still considers itself as the leading power in the Asia-Pacific, but would like to intensify the dialogue with Tokyo and Seoul on the concrete structuring of U.S. policy in the region. By giving special consideration to his two alliance partners in East Asia, Obama made clear that with respect to China, the United States welcomes its rise as a responsible "great power" in the region, but that he sees Seoul and Tokyo as two special partners sharing common values, supporting and complementing the U.S. role as a Pacific power.

## ASEAN: Multilateral overtures

The city-state Singapore was Obama's second station in East Asia. During his stay there, he participated in the summit meeting of APEC. Within this context, he also met the heads of state of the 10 members of ASEAN. The talks focussed on the future content of the APEC agenda and deepening relations between the United States and ASEAN, including dealings with Burma.

APEC was founded in 1989 and now has 21 member states from the Pacific Rim. An important feature of this trans-Pacific organisation has been its focus on issues of trade liberalisation and investment facilitation. As a consequence of 9/11, the forum – which was initiated by Australia and has been dominated by the United States – underwent a transformation, with issues of fighting terrorism being included in the respective agenda. This joint Australian-American move blurred the objectives of the organisation and, in the eyes of many observers, helped to mutate it into a talk-shop without clear purpose.

With his trip, however, Obama did not initiate APEC's reinstitution as the main vehicle for trade liberalisation in the region. The fact that he missed this opportunity can certainly be traced to American domestic politics, which for the time being forces the president to tread carefully regarding free trade commitments. The

U.S.-Korean free trade agreement (KORUS) can be cited as an example here: It was signed but is awaiting ratification by U.S. Congress. Nevertheless, Obama declared his support for a trade agreement within the trans-Pacific partnership, which at present comprises Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore, and which is expected to be extended to Australia, Vietnam, Peru, and the United States.

During the two terms of President George W. Bush, the United States had significantly reduced its presence in Southeast Asia. For example, then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stayed away from several ministerial meetings of ASEAN, and the U.S. administration in general hardly acknowledged Asia's role in U.S. foreign policy beyond the American "war against terror". At the same time, China was able to expand its influence in East Asia with a charm offensive supported by material offers. Against this background, some ASEAN member states were concerned that a weaker U.S. position in the region would limit their foreign policy options.

In the months since Obama has taken office, however, there have been a series of new developments. First, the United States joined the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which obligates signatories to resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner. Accession, which had been discussed and prevented for a long time in the United States, does not merely represent a symbolic step towards ASEAN, but opens for the United States the option to join the East Asia Summit (EAS). Even though EAS is formally seen as a forum of ideas for the future shape of an East Asian Community, it de facto plays a balancing role in the region. Secondly, for the first time *all* heads of state of ASEAN met with a U.S. president. The results of this first "ASEAN-U.S. Leaders' Meeting" are easy to summarise: Meetings on the highest political level are to be continued, the United States will support ASEAN efforts to build an East Asian Community by 2015, and both sides aspire to closer co-operation on global issues in the economic, security, and environmental fields. Southeast Asian states appreciate the renewed American engagement by joining TAC and by hailing the ASEAN-U.S. Leaders' Meeting as an important contribution to deepening the relation.

The Burmese Prime Minister, General Thein Sein, attended the meeting of ASEAN with the U.S. president. This was the first encounter of an American president with a leading representative of the military junta in 40 years. Although no direct talks took place between Obama and Sein, it was a clear sign that the U.S. president is willing to try out a less confrontational stance than his predecessor with respect to the military regime, which up to now has been ostracised by the West. The American side announced its overall willingness to put relations between both countries on a new and more constructive basis. Before and during his meeting with ASEAN heads of state, President Obama underlined that the improvement of relations would depend on whether political prisoners would be released and a serious dialogue between government and opposition would be initiated. This new openness towards Burma also implies the possible renunciation of 20 years of sanctions. Talks between both states on this issue were started in September 2009. In this context, increases in humanitarian aid for Burma's suffering civil population takes centre stage. Through this measure, the United States, in conjunction with ASEAN member states, is also trying to create a counterweight to the presumably unconditional – but ultimately self-serving – developmental aid of China to the military junta.

## China: Global partner at eye level?

In his talks with top-level Chinese leaders, President Obama confirmed the general message that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had suggested earlier in 2009, namely a willingness to co-operate with China on all global issues. Though neither of the two sides speaks officially of a "G2",

the rise of China and the growing interdependence of the United States and China, made visible by the global economic and financial crisis, have consolidated the perception that the world could be heading for a new bi-polarity and that the big challenges can only be tackled if both countries are committed to a solution.

During the two terms of the Bush Administration, after China had sided with Washington in the war on terror, some points of friction were apparent, especially in the economic field (trade deficit, undervaluation of the Chinese currency, etc.), and, of course, on human rights, but no dramatic conflicts had come / came to the surface. In contrast to earlier such occasions, China did not come up as a central topic in the presidential campaign. Thus, the new U.S. administration was able to build upon very robust Chinese-American relations. One of the first measures of the new administration was to upgrade the "Strategic Economic Dialogue", which had been begun by the previous administration, to a "Strategic and Economic Dialogue" under the joint leadership of the State Department and Treasury.

For Obama's meetings in Beijing, global and regional issues were high on the agenda, namely the economic and financial crisis, climate change and clean energy, the nuclear programmes of North Korea and Iran, as well as the situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The length and depth of the Joint Statement issued by the two top leaders surprised most observers. The document takes stock of all fields of co-operation, including the topics mentioned as well as bilateral issues. Among other things, both sides plan to expand their military exchanges – up to now the weakest link in the relationship between China and the United States.

One passage in the U.S.-China Joint Statement was destined to cause some irritation in India since it mentions stronger co-operation between both sides for peace, stability, and development in South Asia. However, with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh having been scheduled for a state visit in Washington a week later, the reaction in Delhi was indignant, but at the same time relatively subdued.

The formulation in the document that could turn out to be most problematic refers to the importance of "respecting each other's core interests [...] to ensure steady progress in U.S.-China relations." Since there is no definition of what these "core interests" are, new issues might be declared as such in future. However, the passage is not as significant as it first seems: In fact, the document does not actually state that both sides *do* respect each other's core interests – it merely acknowledges that such respect constitutes an important factor for the future development of their relations.

Most Western media reports declared Obama's visit to China a failure, citing as evidence for this claim that the U.S. president let the Chinese side dictate conditions for his public appearances in China (among other things, no nationwide live broadcast of the town hall meeting with students in Shanghai, and a press conference with Hu Jintao where no Q&A was allowed). Moreover, no meetings with Chinese civil society representatives were scheduled during the trip. Prior to the visit, Obama had been widely criticised in the media for not having been willing to meet the Dalai Lama in order to create the best possible atmosphere for his upcoming talks with Chinese leaders. Despite all these concessions, Obama had – from the perspective of the press – not secured a single offer of co-operation from the Chinese side.

Indeed, the question for China's political decision-makers is how far they are willing to shoulder more international responsibility. China is reluctant to take a leading role in policy fields that, from their perspective, are not of vital national interest and that would constrain their flexibility and room for manoeuvre. There is a widespread belief in China – especially among academics – that, in reality, the idea of a "G2" is a trap to lure China into taking on

more international responsibility. This would then drain Beijing of resources – resources that are needed to accomplish China's self-defined, predominantly domestic agenda. Even though China has been acting more and more self-confident, considerable doubts and insecurity persist when it comes to taking on a bigger international role. Like on other issues, China will seek its own path – based on national priorities and, to a great extent, independently of the United States, even though co-operation with Washington might be considered if it is in China's self-perceived interests. Winning international prestige and status can be one of these interests.

China does not want to risk its credibility, especially among other developing and emerging countries, by co-ordinating too intimately with the power that it had criticised for decades as a "hegemon" in world politics.

The United States, too, has to be cautious in presenting its new relationship with China as a new "dual leadership", since old alliance partners like Japan and new partners like India respond with sensitivity to any steps that might diminish their own respective roles and positions.

## Mission failed?

Before his Asia trip, Obama's staff had tried to moderate expectations among the media and public and had warned that no major breakthroughs were in the offing. Despite these efforts, the response to the president's performance in Asia in the American as well as the European press was predominantly negative since he had not received anything tangible in return for his offers of co-operation.

One can argue, however, that this criticism misses the point. First of all, not raising a topic in public does not mean that it was not raised at all. Secondly, the main purpose of the trip was to signal to East Asian countries the "return" of the United States, yet in a modified and new form: a United States that has overcome its lopsided fixation on the war on terror, that puts more emphasis on consultation than the previous administration, that appeals for support and is ready to try new approaches where sanctions had failed to change anything.

It comes as no surprise that Asia's leaders acknowledge the message but have not come forward immediately with concessions and concrete returns. One only needs to see how cautious, and even reluctant, the European responses have been – despite Obama's popularity. The last eight years of American (unilateral) foreign policy cannot be reversed with a few positive signals. Additionally, domestic political factors – as in the case of Japan (new government) and China (priority of national modernisation goals) – constrain the room for co-operation.

The new readiness to talk to states like North Korea or Burma carries the risk that dialogue might not – or only in the longer run – bring about the desired effects from the other side. But since sanctioning and denying direct talks on the side of the United States, as practiced over the last years, have not led to positive results either, the risk might more likely lie in the interpretation by the political class within the United States that these new approaches are signs of weakness and – due to the absence of immediate success – principally flawed.

Signing the TAC; the first meeting between ASEAN heads of state and a U.S. president; supporting ASEAN as the centre of regional co-operation; and the re-orientation away from the anti-terror agenda back to the original economic objectives of APEC – all this points to a significant willingness of the United States to shape multilateralism jointly with countries in East Asia. To call Obama's trip a failure due to the absence of concrete results is wrong and ignores the political implications of this multilateral initiative. ASEAN states in particular welcome the new U.S. engagement, which helps them safeguard or even expand their options vis-à-vis China.

Moreover, they expect more political pressure from the United States on China to assume regional and global responsibility.

With respect to co-operation between the United States and China, two developments imply that there has, after all, been agreement behind the scenes: Shortly after Obama's visit, both sides presented targets for their own country in fighting climate change and both Obama and Wen Jiabao announced that they would travel to Copenhagen. Neither state wants to be seen as a spoiler. Moreover, China signalled willingness to support a new resolution on Iran's nuclear programme in the U.N. Security Council, or at least not to veto it. It thereby has moved in the direction of the United States without, however, giving up the plea for a peaceful resolution through negotiations.

## Implications for Europe

The involvement of the European Union and its member states in East Asia might still be predominantly in the economic field. However, deriving from this economic engagement, Europe has a clear interest in peace and stability in the region. Moreover, the European Union has a broadly defined global agenda comprising climate change, non-proliferation, and global governance. On all these issues, countries in East Asia have become indispensable partners.

Obama's focus on the Asia-Pacific as the economically most vibrant and promising as well as strategically important region has caused some concern in Europe about its marginalisation ("Asia is the new Europe"). It depends on the European Union and its member states to lend substance to their positions by improving their capacity to act. Signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation is a first step in the right direction – a step that has been under way for quite a while.

Even if Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in his meeting with President Obama distanced himself explicitly from the idea of a "G2" consisting of the United States and China, and even if the deep-seated mistrust between both sides will most likely not disappear anytime soon, U.S.-China relations are without doubt of crucial importance, especially for issues of global order. The new openness to co-operation with the Chinese side, which was signalled by Obama, will certainly not improve European Union's leverage in negotiating with China. The positions of the European Union and China in their bilateral relationship have hardened over the last years. Both sides keep raising the same list of complaints and demands – apparently without either side being able or willing to initiate a way out of this deadlocked situation. China seems to have made itself quite comfortable with the status quo. Therefore, if the Europeans want to change the impasse, it is up to them to act.



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