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The Obama Administration's Strategy in Asia

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Summary

This article analyses the scenario of Asian security from the perspective of the United States, a strategy that has yet to assume a definitive form, but which is entirely structured around China's emergence and the effects of same on the stability of the region – a stability that is the leitmotiv which governs Washington's Asian policy. Thus we are presented with an uncertain scenario in which the violent conflicts between nations of the 20th century are still ongoing, at the mercy of the burgeoning nationalism of – principally – India, China and Japan. Using a viewpoint that is very much present in India today, the author expresses his doubts as to the peaceful emergence of China, an idea which he believes to be discredited by the country's growing assertiveness in international disputes, to which the United States has initially appeared to submit, reducing its demands in the area of Human Rights (for example, with respect to Tibet) and giving maximum priority to bilateral dialogue, in an approach that the author situates in a long tradition of tolerance by US presidents toward China. However, the author points out, the Obama administration's strategy may have taken a new turn in the second half of 2010, by seeking from that point onward to strengthen its old alliances and to attempt to build new ones (especially in Southeast Asia), with the intention of offsetting China's potential power. That is why it is the security guarantees offered by the United States to its allies and partners, and their willingness to stand by the US at the moment of truth that will, over the long term, determine the strength and extent of the USA's system of security alliances in Asia.

Introduction

With the eastward movement of global power and influence, all the major actors on the international stage are defining new roles for themselves in Asia, a vast continent whose significance in international relations, in some respects, is beginning to rival that of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. As these powers seek to build new relation-

ships and equations, the stage has been set for greater cooperation and competition. Asia, home to more than half of the global population, is likely to help mold the future course of globalization. In fact, with the world's fastest-growing economies, the fastest-rising military expenditures, the fiercest resource competition and the most-serious hot spots, Asia holds the key to the future global order.

Asia has come a long way since the time two Koreas, two Chinas, two Vietnams and India's partition occurred. It has risen dramatically as the world's main creditor and economic locomotive. The ongoing global power shifts indeed are primarily linked to Asia's phenomenal economic rise, the speed and scale of which have no parallel in world history. How fast Asia has come up can be gauged from the 1968 book, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, by Swedish economist and Nobel laureate Gunnar Myrdal, who bemoaned the manner impoverishment, population

pressures and resource constraints were weighing down Asia. The story of endemic poverty has become a tale of spreading prosperity.

Yet, Asia faces major challenges. It has to cope with entrenched

territorial and maritime disputes, harmful historical legacies that weigh down all important interstate Asian relationships, sharpening competition over scarce resources, especially energy and water, growing military capabilities of important Asian actors, increasingly fervent nationalism and the rise of religious extremism. Asia, however, is becoming more interdependent through trade, investment, technology and tourism. The economic renaissance has been accompanied by the growing international recognition of Asia's soft power, as symbolized by its arts, fashion and cuisine. But while Asia is coming together economically, it is not coming together politically. If anything, with the gulf between the politics and economics widening, Asia is becoming more divided politically. In some respects, China's rise has contributed to making Asia more divided.

To compound matters, there is neither any security architecture in Asia nor a structural framework for regional security. The regional consultation mechanisms remain weak.

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Differences persist over whether any security architecture or community should extend across Asia or just be confined to an ill-defined regional construct, East Asia. The United States, India, Japan, Vietnam and several other countries wish to treat the Asian continent as a single entity. China, on the other hand, has sought a separate “East Asian” order.

One important point is that while the bloody wars in the first half of the 20th century have made wars unthinkable today in Europe, the wars in Asia in the second half of the 20th century did not resolve matters and have only accentuated bitter rivalries. A number of interstate wars were fought in Asia since 1950, the year both the Korean War and the annexation of Tibet started. Those wars, far from settling or ending disputes, have only kept disputes lingering.

Arrival of Obama

U.S. President Barack Obama came to office at a time when the qualitative reordering of power was already under way in the Asia-Pacific, with tectonic shifts challenging strategic stability. The impact of the still-ongoing shifts on U.S. foreign policy is being accentuated by America’s own growing challenges, including economic troubles and a faltering war in Afghanistan. That may explain why the Obama administration has been slow to develop a distinct Asia policy. Under Obama’s predecessor, George W. Bush, America’s Asia policy was guided by an overarching geopolitical framework.

In comparison, Obama’s Asia policy in the first one-and-a-half year of his term appeared fragmented in the absence of a distinct strategic blueprint. The Obama team quickly developed a policy approach toward each major Asian subregion and issue, but without devising an overall strategy on how to promote enduring power equilibrium in Asia — the pivot of global geopolitical change.

China, India, and Japan, Asia’s three main economic powers, constitute a unique strategic triangle. Obama declared soon after taking office that America’s “most important bilateral relationship in the world” is with China, going to the extent of demoting human rights to put the accent on security, financial, trade, and environmental issues with Beijing. In fact, his administration tried to assiduously court China. The catchphrase coined by Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg in relation to China, “strategic reassurance,” signalled an American intent to be more accommo-

datived of China’s ambitions — a message reinforced earlier by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she went out of her way to downgrade human rights in America’s China policy during a visit to Beijing.

But Obama was slow to fashion a well-defined Japan policy or India policy. While a narrow East Asia policy framework still guides U.S. ties with Japan under Obama, Washington is again looking at India primarily through the Pakistan-Afghanistan (“Af-Pak”) prism. That translates into a renewed U.S. focus on India-Pakistan engagement, resurrection of the Kashmir issue, and preoccupation with counterinsurgency in the Afpak region, including implications for American homeland security. That is in sharp contrast to Bush, who declared in his valedictory speech that, “We opened a new historic and strategic partnership with India.”

Obama’s choice of ambassadors said it all. While Obama named John Huntsman — the Utah state governor and a rising Republican star seen even as a potential 2012 rival to the president — as his ambassador to China, he picked an obscure former congressman Timothy Roemer as envoy to India and a low-profile internet and biotechnology lawyer, John Roos, as ambassador to Japan. Obama underlined China’s centrality in his foreign policy by personally announcing his choice of Huntsman. In contrast, Roemer and Roos were among a slew of ambassadors named in an official news release.

The U.S., of course, has every reason to engage China more deeply at a time when its dependence on Beijing to bankroll American debt has only grown. Just as America and the Soviet Union achieved mutually assured

destruction (MAD), America and China are now locked in MAD — but in economic terms. The two today are so tied in a mutually dependent relationship for their economic well-being that attempts to snap those ties would amount to mutually assured financial destruction. Just as the beleaguered U.S. economy cannot do without continuing capital inflows from China, the American market is the lifeline of the Chinese export juggernaut.

From being allies of convenience in the second half of the Cold War, the U.S. and China now have emerged as partners tied by such interdependence that economic historians Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick have coined the term, “Chimerica” — a fusion like the less-convincing “Chindia”. An article in China’s *Liaowang* magazine described the relationship as one of “complex interdependence” in which

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America and China “compete and consult” with each other. But China’s expanding naval role and maritime claims threaten to collide with U.S. interests, including Washington’s traditional emphasis on the freedom of the seas. U.S.-China economic ties also remain uneasy: America saves too little and borrows too much from China, while Beijing sells too much to the U.S. and buys too little.

Obama’s Asia policy, however, began changing in the second half of 2010 in response to China’s increasingly assertive actions. With China’s defence spending having grown almost twice as fast as its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Beijing has started to take the gloves off, confident that it has acquired the necessary muscle. Rising power is emboldening Beijing to pursue a more muscular foreign policy. That was exemplified by several developments in 2010 alone — from China’s inclusion of the South China Sea in its “core” national interests on a par with Taiwan and Tibet, an action that makes its claims to the disputed Spratly Islands non-negotiable, to its bellicose reaction to the South Korean-U.S. joint anti-submarine exercises off the Korean Peninsula. China has also publicly raked up the issue of Arunachal Pradesh, the northeastern Indian state that Beijing calls “Southern Tibet” and claims largely as its own. Indian defence officials have reported a rising number of Chinese military incursions across the entire 4,057-kilometer Himalayan border in recent years. That the Tibet issue remains at the core of the India-China divide is being underlined by Beijing itself by laying claim to additional Indian territories on the basis of alleged Tibetan ecclesial or tutelary links to them, not any professed Han connection.

But nothing fanned international unease and alarm more than Beijing’s disproportionate response to the brief Japanese detention of a fishing-trawler captain last September. While Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan’s standing at home took a beating for his meek capitulation to Chinese coercive pressure, the real loser was China. Japan’s passivity in the face of belligerence helped magnify Beijing’s hysterical and menacing reaction. In the process, China not only undercut its international interests by presenting itself as a bully, but it also precipitately exposed the cards it is likely to bring into play when faced with a diplomatic or military crisis next — from employing its trade muscle to inflict commercial pain to exploiting its monopoly on the global production of a vital resource, rare-earth minerals.

Its resort to economic warfare, even in the face of an insignificant provocation, has given other major states advance

notice to find ways to offset its leverage, including by avoiding any commercial dependency and reducing their reliance on imports of Chinese rare earths. A more tangible fallout has been that China is already coming under greater international pressure to play by the rules on a host of issues where it has secured unfair advantage — from keeping its currency substantially undervalued to maintaining state subsidies to help its firms win major overseas contracts.

With his China strategy threatening to fall apart, Obama has now started to do exactly what his predecessor attempted — to line up partners. This was best symbolized by his trip to Asia in late 2010. The very fact that Obama chose to visit Asia’s four leading democracies — India, Japan, Indonesia and South Korea — on that tour was significant. After all, the symbolism of a tour restricted to Asia’s major democracies could not be lost on Beijing at a time when Chinese assertiveness on exchange rates, trade and security issues has upset U.S. calculations.

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Larger issues

The fundamental U.S. strategic objective in Asia is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Indeed, the key U.S. inter-

est in Asia remains what it has been since 1898 when America took the Philippines as spoils of the naval war with Spain — the maintenance of a balance of power. The security thrust of America’s Asia policy also is unlikely to change. The United States has been, and will continue to be, the leading security player in Asia, building and maintaining strategic ties and arrangements with more Asian states than any other player.

This reality makes America’s China policy pivotal to shaping the larger geopolitical landscape in Asia. Given that Asian security, to a large extent, will remain anchored in the defence alliances and arrangements that the United States has fashioned, the natural corollary is that the manner Washington deals with the rise of an assertive China will have a bearing both on the Asian security landscape and on the long-term viability of those alliances and arrangements. For the past century, or at least since the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack (which was at least partly prompted by the U.S.-British-Dutch oil embargo against Japan), the United States has clearly signalled that American security begins not off the coast of California but at the western rim of the Pacific Ocean and beyond.

The American belief that U.S. security begins in the Pacific’s western rim may explain, even if partly, why the U.S. mili-

tary fought in Korea and Vietnam, why it entered into the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty, why U.S. security treaties with Japan and South Korea remain critical to American forward military deployment in the Asian theatre, why it has made a security commitment to Taiwan, and why it has forged new strategic relationships with several Southeast Asian countries and India.

In addition to its determination to stay Asia's security anchor, America's balance-of-power objective remains dominant in its Asia policy. During the first part of the Cold War, the United States chose to maintain the balance by forging security alliances with Japan and South Korea and also by keeping forward bases in Asia. By the time the Cold War entered the second phase, America's 'ping-pong diplomacy' led to Richard Nixon's historic handshake with Mao Zedong in 1972 in an 'opening' designed to reinforce the balance by employing a newly assertive, nuclear-armed China to countervail Soviet power in the Asia-Pacific region. Today, the United States would not want any single state to dominate the Asian continent or any region there. As part of its hedging strategy against China, the U.S. is reinforcing its existing military relationships and building new allies or partners, including roping in states that can serve as potential balancers in Asia. China too plays balance-of-power politics in Asia, but its balancing is primarily designed to keep its Asian rivals bottled up regionally.

Yet another important aspect of America's role in Asia is the long tradition of China-friendly approach in U.S. policy that dates back to the 19th century. In 1905, for example, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, who hosted the Japan-Russia peace conference in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, argued for the return of Manchuria to China and for a balance of power to continue in East Asia. The Russo-Japanese War actually ended up making the United States an active participant in China's affairs. In more-recent times, U.S. policy has aided the integration and then ascension of Communist China, which actually began as an international pariah state. Indeed, there has been a succession of China-friendly U.S. presidents in the past four decades — a significant period that has coincided with China first coming out of international isolation and then being on the path of ascension.

China's rise, in fact, owes a lot to an American decision post-1989. The fall of the Berlin Wall was not the only

defining event of 1989. Another defining event in 1989 was the Tiananmen Square massacre of pro-democracy protestors in Beijing. But for the end of the Cold War, the U.S. and its allies would not have let China off the hook over those killings. The Cold War's end, however, facilitated America's pragmatic approach to shun trade sanctions and help integrate China with global institutions through the liberalizing influence of foreign investment and trade. That the choice made was wise can be seen from the baneful impact of the opposite U.S. decision that was taken on Burma in the same period from the late 1980s — to pursue a penal approach centred on sanctions. Had the Burma-type

approach been applied against China internationally, the result would have been a less-prosperous, less-open and a potentially destabilizing China today.

Therefore, China's spectacular economic success — illustrated by its emergence with the world's biggest trade surplus and largest foreign-currency reserves — owes a lot to the

U.S. decision not to sustain trade sanctions. The limited U.S. sanctions imposed after Tiananmen were allowed to peter out by 1992. Without the expansion in U.S.-Chinese trade and financial relations since then, China's growth would have been much harder.

The U.S.-China relationship, already underpinned by closely intertwined economic ties and four decades of political cooperation on a range of regional and global issues, is expected to acquire a wider and deeper base. In fact, the mutually interdependent relationship with China suggests that the U.S. is unlikely to pursue overt competition or confrontation with Beijing. It speaks for itself that even on the democracy issue, the U.S. prefers to lecture some other dictatorships than the world's largest and oldest-surviving autocracy, China.

Yet, it is also true that the United States views with unease China's not-too-hidden aim to dominate Asia — an objective that runs counter to U.S. security and commercial interests and to the larger goal for a balance in power in Asia. To help avert such dominance, the U.S. has already started building potential countervailing influences, without making any attempt to contain China. At the same time, the U.S. shares important interests with China, including maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula, keeping oil supplies flowing from the Persian Gulf, propping up Pakistan, and seeking strategic stability in the Pacific. On issues of congruent interest, we can expect the U.S. to continue to work closely with China.

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For the United States, China's rising power actually helps validate American forward military deployments in the Asian theatre, keep existing allies in Asia, and win new strategic partners. An increasingly assertive China indeed has proven a diplomatic boon for Washington in strengthening and expanding U.S. security arrangements in Asia. South Korea has tightened its military alliance with the U.S., Japan has backed away from trying to get the U.S. to move its Marine airbase out of Okinawa, and India, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines, among others, have drawn closer to the United States. But the China factor can remain handy only as long as the United States is seen by its partners as a credible guarantor of stability and security, which is a function not of military strength but political will in Washington.

Against this background, Obama has sought to strengthen U.S. ties with old and new strategic partners in Asia, while simultaneously trying to deepen engagement with China. This was exemplified by the investment the Obama administration made to ensure the success of Chinese President Hu Jintao's U.S. tour in early 2011. That visit was noteworthy not for Hu's grudging admission that his country has a subpar human-rights record, with China's state-run media promptly expurgating his comment that "a lot still needs to be done in China in terms of human rights." Rather the visit was notable for the manner Obama bent over backward at the joint news conference with Hu to virtually rationalize China's human-rights abuses. Asked by a questioner to explain "how the U.S. can be so allied with a country that is known for treating its people so poorly [and] for using censorship and force to repress its people," Obama replied that "China has a different political system than we do"; that "China is at a different stage of development than we are"; and that "there has been an evolution in China over the last 30 years" and "my expectation is that 30 years from now we will have seen further evolution and further change." He made clear that differences over "the universality of certain rights" will not come in the way of better relations with China because "part of human rights is people being able to make a living and having enough to eat and having shelter and having electricity."

One question that has a bearing on future Asian security scenarios is whether U.S. policy toward Japan will change with the new geopolitical circumstances in East Asia. Without carrying out a single amendment, Japan has lived under a U.S.-imposed Constitution for more than six

decades — a period during which the Indian Constitution has been amended 114 times. Japan is the only democracy in East Asia that can balance the power of rising China in the region. While China will clearly prefer a Japan that remains dependent on America for its security than a Japan that can play a more independent role, the post-1945 system erected by the U.S. is more suited to keep Japan as an American protectorate than to allow Japan to effectively aid the central U.S.-policy objective in the Asia-Pacific: A stable balance of power. A U.S. policy approach that subtly encourages Tokyo to cut its overdependence on America and do more for its own defence can assist Japan in shaping a new strategic future for itself that directly contributes to Asian power equilibrium.

The prospect that the United States might be forced to retrench on its assets in Asia reinforces the need for such a policy shift. America faces a pressing need for comprehensive domestic renewal to arrest the erosion in its relative power and cut its huge deficit. That

imperative could prompt it to cut back on its ground capabilities in the Asia-Pacific.

The U.S. actually doesn't need the enormous and extensive assets on the ground that it presently maintains in Asia, with Bush having used the U.S.-led war against terror to rapidly expand U.S. military presence in the Asian continent. Furthermore, the U.S. can effectively advance its objectives by relying more on being an offshore balancer. But to make significant savings in defence expenditure while keeping its Asia-Pacific strategy robust, it will need to make fundamental changes in its Cold War-era hub-and-spoke system, which results in wasteful spending.

Yet another important issue is U.S. policy on Tibet. Even though the U.S. stopped doing anything for Tibet long ago, with the issue of Tibet now coming up only in relation to a presidential meeting with the Dalai Lama, the future of Tibet has become an issue that extends beyond China's internal security to the ecological interests of much of Asia. The Tibetan plateau is a barometer of climatic conditions in southern, southeastern and central Asia, as well as in mainland China. And the degradation of its natural ecosystems, as well as accelerated thawing of its glaciers, watershed deterioration and soil erosion, hold important implications for Asian nations that depend on rivers flowing in from the Tibetan plateau. The plateau is the source of most of Asia's great rivers. As water woes have aggravated in its northern plains owing to environmentally unsustainable intensive

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farming, China has increasingly turned its attention to the bounteous water reserves in Tibet, which it has cartographically dismembered. It is pursuing massive inter-basin and inter-river water transfer projects. These projects on international rivers carry seeds of interstate conflict.

In fact, the U.S. State Department in 2010 wisely upgraded water as “a central U.S. foreign-policy concern.” And it seems interested in playing a constructive role in the water issues between China and its neighbours. But on human rights in Tibet, the U.S. now pursues a “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach with Beijing. When Obama finally met with the Dalai Lama, it was a low-key meeting, with no joint public appearance or photo opportunity before reporters. The White House bent backward to explain that it was a private meeting, not an official meeting, and that it took place in the Map Room, where presidents stage private meetings, and not in the Oval Office.

Two questions arise in this context. If the U.S. is to remain cagey about Tibet and the Dalai Lama, what example will it set for India, the country left carrying the can on Tibet? India is the host of the Dalai Lama and the seat of his government-in-exile. Also, if downplaying human rights becomes an enduring feature of U.S. policy on China — which executes more people every year than the rest of the world combined — how acceptable will it be to beat up the small kids on the Asian bloc, the Burmas and the Kyrgyzstans, over their human-rights record? Nepal, after years of adhering to an United Nations-brokered agreement to allow Tibetan refugees safe passage to India, has now — under Beijing’s pressure — started arresting escapees from Tibet and handing them over to Chinese authorities. A more consistent U.S. human-rights policy will be able to stand up in defence of such hapless Tibetans.

While America’s continued central role in Asia is safe, the long-term viability of its security arrangements boils down to one word: Credibility. The credibility of America’s security assurances to allies and partners, and its readiness to stand by them when it comes to the crunch, will determine the long-term strength and size of its security-alliance sys-

tem in Asia. For their part, Asian states, in keeping with Asia’s growing role in world affairs, need to pursue policies that break free from history and are pragmatic, growth-oriented and forward-looking. China’s lengthening shadow has only reinforced the necessity to find ways to stabilize major-power relationships in Asia and promote cooperative approaches to help tackle festering security, energy, territorial and history issues. Rather than be the scene of a new cold war, Asia can chart a stable future for itself through shared security and prosperity.

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