
Obama's Foreign Policy in Asia: More Continuity than Change

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President Obama's stewardship of US foreign policy is continuing his predecessors' success in maintaining regional stability and the US pre-eminence in the region. Obama continues to engage China on one hand, while hedging against its growing military power on the other, all the while fostering a strategic partnership with India. Continuity also marks the Obama administration's relationships with Japan and South Korea, and with US efforts to denuclearise North Korea through the Six-Party Talks. New departures under Obama include seeking a comprehensive partnership with Indonesia, signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation that highly underscores the principle of non-interference and committing to regularly attend the ASEAN Regional Forum that has been sidelined during the Bush era. But such changes are more about the style than the substance of US foreign policy in Asia which is still focused on maintaining the US primacy in the region.¹

In Asia several US allies are located, rising powers are emerging, nuclear weapons proliferate, terrorist groups operate and territorial disputes remain unresolved. The United States must attend to these overarching complexities, not only for maintaining stability in the region but also to preserve US strategic primacy.

Following Barack Obama's election as the President of the world's single superpower, Asian states have looked to him to restore relationships that had been tarnished by George W. Bush's selective engagement and belligerent war on terror. But they also expected him to continue Bush's favourable legacies of an enhanced relationship with China, Japan and India, as well as the Six-Party Talks (SPT) in dealing with North Korea's nuclear program. In the first 100 days of his administration, Obama sent Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and China. Many argue that Clinton's trip marks US recognition of the significance of the so called 'Asian Century'. The United States is fully aware that Asia's strategic development is too powerful to be overlooked.

In examining US foreign policy in Asia under the Obama administration, this article highlights the continuities between most of Obama's policies towards Asia and those of President Bush. It attributes this continuity to the effectiveness of the foundation built by Bush in Asia in maintaining stability and preventing confrontation, particularly with China. Even though the goal

¹ This article is an edited version of an essay submitted to the 2009 round of the journal's Young Strategic Writer's Competition, sponsored by the Australian Defence Business Review.

of nuclear non-proliferation in North Korea is still far from realised, the SPT remain the most viable forum to deal with North Korea, considering the importance of maintaining stability in Korean Peninsula for US allies and also the US relationship with China. But Obama's policy differs from that of Bush in the former's promotion of multilateralism and closer engagement with Southeast Asian countries, especially Indonesia, in an effort to enhance US influence in the region. Overall, however, Obama's policy is fundamentally similar to Bush's in that it is intended to consolidate US strategic primacy in Asia.

Enduring Features from the Bush Administration

Whatever the merits of his ventures in Afghanistan and Iraq, Bush has left valuable legacies in Asia: His re-labelling of China from strategic competitor to a strategic partner, his affirmation of a One-China Policy, increasing China's role in the war on terror and, above all, engaging China (together with Russia, South Korea and Japan) in the SPT have been applauded in the international community. Secretary of State Colin Powell viewed the moment when China agreed to participate in the SPT, as "the best relation since President Nixon's first visit" to China.² Bush has also strengthened US alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand, as well as with Australia in the Pacific. The US bond with Japan as the key ally in the region has "reached an unprecedented level of intimacy".³ Bush was able to renew the alliance and urge Japan to be a "normal" country as Japan's Self Defence Forces take part in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Bush era was the first time since World War Two that the US relationships with Japan and China were strong at the same time.⁴

Elsewhere, Bush was also praised for his success in overseeing good US relationships with India and Pakistan simultaneously. Obama, then, has every reason to build on this track record.

The following sections of this article probe this track record more deeply in order to highlight the US interests underpinning the policy continuity already noted.

ENGAGING AND HEDGING CHINA

The relationship between the United States and China increased significantly after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. With China supporting counter-terrorism, the United States started to look at China as a partner

² Bonnie S. Glaser and Liang Wang, 'The North Korea Nuclear Crisis and US-China Cooperation', in Suisheng Zhao (ed.), *China and the United States: Cooperation and Competition in Northeast Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 151.

³ Victor D. Cha, 'Winning Asia; Washington's Untold Success Story', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 6 (November/December 2007).

⁴ Michael J. Green, 'The United States and Asia after Bush', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 21, no. 5 (2008), p. 585.

rather than a rival—in other words, a “responsible stakeholder”.⁵ In 2005, China accepted the United States’ requests to participate in a Senior Dialogue to discuss global strategic issues such as nuclear proliferation, human rights violations and the issue of Taiwan. A year after, a Strategic and Economic Dialogue was established to address, among other things, their trade frictions and China’s currency manipulation. China has also been actively involved in the SPT and has been willing to host a series of negotiations.

Against this background, Bush sought a “constructive, candid, and cooperative” relationship with China.⁶ Likewise, the Obama administration emphasises a “positive, cooperative, and comprehensive US-China relationship for the 21st Century”.⁷ Obama also continues asking China to act as a responsible stakeholder. As stated in the 2008 Democratic National Platform, the Obama administration would “encourage China to play a responsible role as a growing power to help lead in addressing the common problems”.⁸ This declaratory policy has since been given more practical substance through, for example, the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, and efforts to foster common interests in areas as diverse as nuclear non-proliferation, climate change, energy security, trade friction and currency, human rights and religious freedom, and transparency in military affairs. Both states have agreed to manage their maritime disputes through the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement.⁹

Like Bush, Obama’s policy towards China and Taiwan is based on the Three US-China communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act.¹⁰ During his campaign Obama supported US-Taiwan military relations, and declared that “I will do all that I can to support Taiwan’s democracy in the years ahead”.¹¹

⁵ Robert Zoellick, ‘Speech to the National Committee on US-China Relations’, 21 September 2005, <<http://www.ncuscr.org/articlesandspeeches/Zoellick.htm>> [Accessed 10 September 2009].

⁶ Dennis Wilder, ‘The US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue: Continuity and Change in Obama’s China Policy’, *China Brief*, vol. IX, no. 10 (15 May 2009), p. 5.

⁷ White House, ‘Statement on Bilateral Meeting with President Hu of China’, Office of the Press Secretary, Washington, DC, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Statement-On-Bilateral-Meeting-With-President-Hu-Of-China> [Accessed 8 October 2009]; Hillary R. Clinton, ‘Remarks after Her Meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi’, Washington DC, 11 March 2009a, <www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/03/120284.htm> [Accessed 27 September 2009].

⁸ United States Democratic Party, *The 2008 Democratic National Platform: Renewing Americas Promise*, Democratic National Convention Committee, 25 August 2008, <<http://www.democrats.org/a/party/platform.html>> [Accessed 30 September 2009], p. 38.

⁹ Shen Dingli, ‘New Configuration of Obama’s Asia—Part II: Cooperating and Competing, China and the US to begin Strategic Dialogue’, *Yale Global*, 23 July 2009, <<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/new-configuration-obama%E2%80%99s-asia-%E2%80%93part-ii>> [Accessed 30 September 2009].

¹⁰ Organizing for America, ‘Barack Obama and Joe Biden: Protecting US Interests and Advancing American Values in Our Relationship with China’, 2008, <<http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/FactSheetChina.pdf>> [Accessed 15 May 2009].

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Underpinning this statement is the stable relationship between Beijing and Taipei, where Taiwan's interests in improving its relationship with Beijing is greater than the attractions of formal independence.¹²

Obama has also retained the hedging strategy outlined by the Bush administration in the 2006 National Security Strategy.¹³ To this end, Obama is maintaining US military capabilities and commitments in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁴ Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has indicated that the United States will "project its power and help its allies in the Pacific by increasing its ability to strike from over the horizon and employ missile defenses" to face China's extensive military development.¹⁵ Overall, Obama will continue the Bush administration's "two-pronged strategy" by maintaining US presence in the region to hedge Chinese military power and at the same time seeking more cooperation and a proactive role by China in helping to solve the world problems as a responsible stakeholder.¹⁶

Nevertheless, Obama has adopted a more stringent stance in dealing with trade disputes with China. Obama decided to impose punitive tariffs on all car and light truck tyres from China.¹⁷ China strongly opposed the decision and responded by raising the issue of "grave trade protectionism" and accusing the United States of breaking commitments made during the G-20 Summit.¹⁸ Furthermore, the US bill imposing new tariffs on the import of solar panels to the United States including from China may exacerbate the tension.¹⁹ Additionally, after initially refusing to meet the Tibetan spiritual leader in October 2009, recently Obama held a closed meeting with the Dalai Lama in Washington, followed by a meeting between Dalai Lama and Secretary Clinton. The meetings prompted serious Chinese concern, with China's official statement describing the meetings as an intrusion into

¹² American Foreign Policy Interests, 'The Current State of U.S.-China-Taiwan Relations', *American Foreign Policy Interests*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2009), p. 59.

¹³ White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2006), p. 42.

¹⁴ Arms Control Today, '2008 Presidential Q&A: President-elect Barack Obama', *Arms Control Today*, vol. 38, no. 10 (December 2008), p. 34.

¹⁵ Robert M. Gates, 'A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age', 2009, <http://www.defenselink.mil/home/features/2009/0509_qdr/gates-article.html> [Accessed 30 September 2009].

¹⁶ Thomas J. Christensen, 'Shaping the Choices of a Rising China: Recent Lessons for the Obama Administration', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 3 (July 2009), p. 90.

¹⁷ Jing Jin and Jinwei Ming, 'U.S. Tariff Decision on Chinese Tires comes at Huge Price', *Xinhua*, 12 September 2009, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-09/12/content_12041545.htm> [Accessed 8 October 2009].

¹⁸ Shaobin Zhu and Shukun Ma, 'China: U.S. Tire Tariff Sends "Wrong Signal" to World', *Xinhua*, 2009, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-09/13/content_12043010.htm> [Accessed 12 October 2009].

¹⁹ Keith Bradsher, 'Solar Panel Tariff May Further Strain U.S.-China Trade', *The New York Times*, 1 October 2009.

China's domestic affairs that seriously damaged US-China relations.²⁰ These developments eventually could challenge the US-China growing bilateral relationship.

DENUCLEARISING NORTH KOREA

The Obama administration has been facing a more provocative North Korea. After withdrawing from the SPT and testing its long-range missile, North Korea went on to conduct an underground nuclear test and to test several short ranged ballistic missiles in May 2009. In response, Clinton and Gates have reaffirmed the Obama administration's commitment to "the complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea" and that it "will not accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state".²¹

In doing so the Obama administration signalled its preference for negotiation, offering North Korea the choice of more incentive to dismantle its nuclear program or imposing political and economic isolation if it refuses to cooperate.²² Underpinning this manoeuvring, however, is the Obama administration's continued commitment to the SPT as the prime vehicle for its efforts to denuclearise North Korea.²³

REENERGISING ALLIANCES

Alliances have been an important aspect of US relations with Asia, traditionally, explained in terms of the hub and spokes model that evolved during the Cold War. The Obama administration continues to give priority to keeping the Asia-Pacific alliance structures in good repair. The first two countries visited by Secretary Clinton were Japan and South Korea.

When visiting Japan in March 2009, Clinton ended a three year stalemate by signing an agreement on the relocation of 8000 US Marines from Okinawa to Guam by 2014 that had been initiated by Bush in 2006.²⁴ This relocation is likely to clear the way for greater military interoperability and reduced tensions with civilians in the host area, thereby "ensuring long-term domestic

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Ma Zhaoxu's Statement on US President Obama's Meeting with Dalai', 19 February 2010, <<http://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t659091.htm>> [Accessed 22 February 2010].

²¹ Robert M. Gates, 'America's Security Role in the Asia Pacific', Speech at the 8th IISS Asia Security Summit, The Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 30 May 2009, <<http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2009/plenary-session-speeches-2009/first-plenary-session/dr-robert-gates/>> [Accessed 12 September 2009]; Hillary R. Clinton, 'Remarks at the ASEAN Regional Forum', Phuket, 23 July 2009, <www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126373.htm> [Accessed 25 September 2009].

²² Arms Control Today, '2008 Presidential Q&A: President-elect Barack Obama', *Arms Control Today*, vol. 38, no. 10 (December 2008), p. 35.

²³ White House, 'Foreign Policy', 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/foreign_policy/> [Accessed 7 October 2009].

²⁴ Ralph A. Cossa, 'Continuity and Change: U.S. Asia Policy', *PacNet*, no. 18, Pacific Forum CSIS, Honolulu, 6 March 2009, <<http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/pac0918.pdf>> [Accessed 29 September 2009].

support for the alliance".²⁵ Obama and the newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama have also underscored that the US-Japan alliance would continue to be the "cornerstone" and "central pillar" of their security in the region.²⁶ On the same occasion, Obama emphasised the need to "strengthen and renew a US-Japan alliance that will be as strong in the 21st century as it was in the latter half of the 20th century".²⁷ In commemorating the 50th anniversary of US-Japan Security Treaty on 19 January 2010, both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the alliance.²⁸ However, there are challenges ahead to both the stability of the US-Japan alliance and to its utility. These potential challenges range from Hatoyama's tougher stance on the alliance (including his intention to reexamine the 2006 agreement), his tendency to favour "an Asia for Asians" through Hatoyama's proposal of establishing an East Asia Community (centring on Japan, China, South Korea and ASEAN countries while excluding the United States), and an incipient tilting toward China for the sake of Japanese economy (China is now Japan's largest trading partner).

Obama has also responded to South Korean anxiety that his Administration might accept North Korea as a nuclear state "as long as it does not proliferate".²⁹ During a summit with the South Korean President in July 2009, Obama reassured his counterpart about the durability of their alliance including commitment to ensure the security of South Korea through extended deterrence as well as the pledge to continue the process of ratification of the South Korea US Free Trade Agreement.³⁰

US-INDIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Obama, like Bush, has been quite supportive of India's emerging power. In the Bush era, the United States acknowledged that India would be "a major

²⁵ Cha, 'Winning Asia; Washington's Untold Success Story'.

²⁶ White House, 'Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Hatoyama of Japan After Bilateral Meeting', New York, 23 September 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Obama-And-Prime-Minister-Hatoyama-of-Japan-After-Bilateral-Meeting/> [Accessed 7 October 2009].

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ White House, 'Statement by the President on the 50th Anniversary of the Signing of the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security', Washington, DC, 19 January 2010, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/statement-president-50th-anniversary-signing-us-japan-treaty-mutual-cooperation-security>> [Accessed 22 February 2010]; Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 'Statement by Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security of Japan and the United States of America', Tokyo, 19 January 2010, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/hatoyama/statement/201001/19danwa_e.html> [Accessed 22 February 2010].

²⁹ Ralph A. Cossa and Bradd Glosserman, 'Reassuring Allies: Secretary Clinton's Most Important Mission', *PacNet*, no. 10, 6 February 2009, <<http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/pac0910.pdf>> [Accessed 29 September 2009].

³⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, 'Joint Remarks by President Obama and President Lee Myung-bak', June 2009, <<http://www.cfr.org/publication/19646/>> [Accessed 12 October 2009].

world power in the 21st century”.³¹ Bush accorded de facto recognition of India's acquisition of nuclear weapons³² and oversaw burgeoning US-Indian strategic relations since 9/11, including the lifting of military sanctions on India as the result of its nuclear tests in 1998.³³ This US-India alignment has been called the “greatest bilateral success story” for the United States and the “enduring part of the international landscape of the 21st century”.³⁴

The Obama administration also views India as a valuable strategic partner, despite focusing on Pakistan as the key partner in the war against al Qaida and the Taliban. Clinton's visit to New Delhi in July 2009 helped counter the criticism that dialogue and strategic partnership between the United States and India “has all but disappeared”.³⁵ Clinton and India's External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna have reinforced US-India relations through an “enhanced US-India strategic partnership” encompassing new agreements in space technology and defence relations, follow-up measures of civilian nuclear energy cooperation, as well as the establishment of a Strategic Dialogue chaired by both Ministers.³⁶

Changes under the Obama Administration

The Bush doctrines of “unilateralism, pre-emptive military actions and forcing regime change in rogue states”³⁷ were inimical to the multilateralism and non-interference espoused by most Asian states and affected US popularity in Asia. BBC polls in 2005 to 2008 conducted in seventeen countries including China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan and South Korea show that negative views to the US global influence overshadowed the positives.³⁸ The Pew polls also revealed that in the beginning of the “pre-

³¹ United States Department of State, ‘Background Briefing by Administration Officials on US-South Asia Relations’, Washington DC, 25 March 2005, <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/43853.htm>> [Accessed 8 October 2009].

³² Harsh V. Pant, ‘New Configuration of Obama's Asia: With New Concern Emerging, the Thrill is Gone from Indo-US Relations’, Yale Online, 29 July 2009, <<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/new-configuration-obama%E2%80%99s-asia-%E2%80%93-part-i>> [Accessed 29 September 2009].

³³ Mel Gurtov, ‘American Crusades: Unilateralism, Past and Present’, in Mel Gurtov and Peter Van Ness (eds), *Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from the Asia-Pacific* (Oxon: Routledge Curzon, 2005), p. 17.

³⁴ Timothy J. Linch and Robert S. Singh, *After Bush: The Case for Continuity in American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 251.

³⁵ Harsh V. Pant, ‘New Configuration of Obama's Asia: With New Concern Emerging, the Thrill is Gone from Indo-US Relations’.

³⁶ United States Department of State, ‘U.S.—India Joint Statement’, 20 July 2009, <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/july/126230.htm>> and United States Department of State, ‘Remarks With Indian Minister of External Affairs S.M. Krishna’, Hyderabad, New Delhi, 20 July 2009, <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126259.htm>> [Accessed 7 October 2009].

³⁷ Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, ‘America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy’, *Brookings Review*, vol. 21 (Fall 2000), pp. 2-6.

³⁸ BBC, ‘BBC World Service Poll: Global Views of USA Improve’, 2 April 2008, <http://www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbcnctryview08/> [Accessed 9 October 2009].

emptive” war in Iraq in 2003, US popularity in the Muslim majority country, Indonesia, dropped considerably to 13 percent compare to 61 percent a year before.³⁹

Obama’s efforts to rehabilitate this aspect of the US image in Asia marks a key point of departure from the policies of his predecessor. These efforts are most apparent in the Administration’s efforts to improve US relationships with countries in Southeast Asia, primarily Indonesia.

Indonesia was amongst the first countries in Asia visited by Secretary Clinton. This visit signalled that the United States recognised Indonesia’s strategic importance as “one of Asia’s rising states”.⁴⁰ Indonesia is a founding member of ASEAN and has considerable influence in the region. Moreover, Indonesia is leading the way as a model of democracy for the Muslim world.⁴¹ The relationship between the United States and Indonesia is likely to become much stronger in the near future when both states agree to pursue such common interests such as environmental protection, climate change, trade and investment, democracy, health, education, counterterrorism, and regional security issues.⁴² The two countries are scheduled to announce this “comprehensive partnership” in the near future or at least when Obama reschedules his visit to Indonesia in June 2010. Even though both governments will be bound through such a partnership, it would be premature to conclude that Indonesia will become another US ally in the region. However, Indonesia’s ‘support’ to the US continuing role in the region will help the United States secure its strategic primacy.

Turning to the wider Southeast Asian region, the United States has deepen its relationship with the region by signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in July 2009 when Clinton attended the ARF Ministerial Meeting. Major powers in the region such as China, Japan, South Korea, India and Russia are already bound by the treaty’s provisions that uphold the principle of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference. Adopting the TAC helps build trust between the United States and countries in the region. It is a milestone for both the United States and for Southeast Asian states because all previous administrations—both Republican and Democrat—have resisted commitment to this treaty since it was enacted in 1976.⁴³

³⁹ Pew Global Attitude Project, ‘Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World’, 23 July 2009, <<http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=264>> [Accessed 8 October 2009].

⁴⁰ Percival Bronson, ‘Clinton Prelude: What Next With Southeast Asia?’, *PacNet*, no. 16 (Honolulu: Pacific Forum CSIS, 2009), <<http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/pac0916.pdf>> [Accessed 29 September 2009].

⁴¹ Ann Marie Murphy, ‘A New Era in U.S.-Indonesia Relations’, *PacNet*, no. 16A, 16 March 2009, <<http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/pac0916a.pdf>> [Accessed 29 September 2009].

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Cossa, ‘Continuity and Change: U.S. Asia Policy’.

Clinton's prompt actions have broadened the US-Southeast Asia agenda beyond the Bush administration's emphasis on the war on terror. In the Bush era, countries in Southeast Asia such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines were labelled as the "second front" of the war on terror.⁴⁴ To support his global war on terror, Bush strengthened military relations with major countries in Southeast Asia. The United States and Singapore signed a Strategic Framework Agreement in 2005 that provided access to Singapore's military base. Thailand and the Philippines were granted "major non-NATO allies" status for their participation in the global war on terror, thereby both states have more access to advanced US technology and other military capabilities.⁴⁵ The United States also removed the military embargo on Indonesia to support its counterterrorism measures. Focus on the war on terror has made the United States neglect other fields of cooperation and its participation in the growing array of regional groupings with ASEAN as the driving force.

Obama's second change is to soften the image of US unilateralism fostered by the Bush doctrine. Clinton has emphasised that US foreign policy would be based on "a marriage of principles and pragmatism" and "cooperative engagement", since the United States "cannot solve the problems of the world alone, and the world cannot solve them without America".⁴⁶ When appointing his National Security Team, Obama declared that "our destiny is shared with the world's".⁴⁷ Additionally, Gates has also stated that multilateral cooperation is highly important in complementing the Cold War legacy of "hub and spokes" bilateral cooperation that is insufficient in facing the current challenges and to ensure stability in the region.⁴⁸

Seeking new partnerships and multilateral cooperation in Asia is one of the Obama administration's foreign policy agenda. After inauguration, Obama highlighted the idea of creating a regional organisation that would go "beyond bilateral agreements, occasional summits and ad hoc arrangements" like the SPT.⁴⁹ It is interesting to have such an initiative from the United States, although the form, modalities and types of membership of

⁴⁴ Robert Sutter, 'The Obama Administration and US Policy in Asia', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2009), p. 206.

⁴⁵ Jörn Dosch, 'The US and Southeast Asia', in Mark Beeson (ed.), *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Second Edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 223.

⁴⁶ Hillary Clinton, 'Statement: Senate Foreign Relations Committee Confirmation Hearing', 3 January 2009, <www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/01/13/raw-data-hillary-clintons-statementsenate-confirmation-hearing/> [Accessed 25 September 2009].

⁴⁷ Council on Foreign Relations, 'Obama's Announcement of National Security Team', 1 December 2008, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/17875/obamas_announcement_of_national_security_team.html> [Accessed 28 September 2009].

⁴⁸ Gates, 'America's Security Role in the Asia Pacific'.

⁴⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, 'Obama-Biden Foreign Policy Agenda, January 2009', 21 January 2009, <www.cfr.org/publication/18307/obamabiden_foreign_policy_agenda_january_2009.html> [Accessed 30 September 2009].

the proposed organisation are still unclear. Establishing a new organisation can be seen as creating more burdens and overlapping functions with the already established multilateral cooperation in the region.

While the US Congress has yet to ratify the TAC, its signature by Secretary Clinton and her commitment to US participation in the annual ASEAN Regional Forum meeting—which the Bush administration considered a “talk shop”⁵⁰—constitute the most tangible US commitment to multilateralism in Asia to date. US cooperation with ASEAN states during the Bush era was mostly conducted in the ASEAN+1 mechanism or in the course of APEC Summits, with reluctance to commit to a binding agreement with the region. While continuing Bush’s policy, Obama is trying to consolidate US influence in Southeast Asian countries by organising the first ASEAN-US Leaders Meeting in November 2009, assigning a US Ambassador for ASEAN Affairs, and declaring his intention to open a US Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta.⁵¹ The signing of the TAC by the United States has also created an opportunity to deepen its involvement within the Asian multilateralism. It can seek to become a member of the East Asia Summit (EAS) where the ten ASEAN member states, Japan, China, South Korea, Australia, India and New Zealand interact. By increasing its role in the region, the United States can help “nurturing the forum’s development into a more full-fledged peace and security framework in the future”.⁵²

That said, Obama’s adjustment of US policy towards Asia is more about style than substance. The core US objective is still the same: preserving US strategic primacy and eventually preventing China outweighing US influence in the region. According to Washington, “the US primacy is [the only] viable way of maintaining peace and stability, and achieving America’s true long-term objectives in Asia”.⁵³ Gates once stated that the United States will maintain assertiveness to “protect our allies and our interests” as “an indispensable power”.⁵⁴ Long before taking office, Obama has signalled the significance of maintaining US superiority. He frequently stressed the importance of restoring the US leadership, not only through military capabilities but also the “use [of] all elements of American power to keep [the United States] safe, prosperous, and free”.⁵⁵ It was then translated by

⁵⁰ Diana K. Mauzy and Brian L. Job, ‘US Policy in Southeast Asia: Limited Re-engagement after Years of Benign Neglect’, *Asian Survey*, vol. 47, no. 4 (2007), p. 631.

⁵¹ USAID, ‘1st ASEAN-U.S. Leaders’ Meeting Joint Statement: Enhanced Partnership for Enduring Peace and Prosperity’, Singapore, 15 November 2009, <<http://asean-us-partnership.org/uploads/asean-us-leaders-meeting-joint-statement.pdf>> [Accessed 22 February 2010].

⁵² Yoichi Funabashi, ‘Keeping Up With Asia: America and the New Balance of Power’, *Foreign Affairs*, 87, no. 5 (September-October 2008).

⁵³ Hugh White, ‘Why War in Asia Remains Thinkable’, *Survival*, vol. 50, no. 6 (2008), p. 99.

⁵⁴ Gates, ‘America’s Security Role in the Asia Pacific’.

⁵⁵ Barack Obama, ‘Renewing American Leadership’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 4 (July/August 2007).

Clinton into the concept of “smart power”, defined as “the full range of tools at our disposal: diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural”.⁵⁶

The shift of Obama’s foreign policy in Asia is likely to be part of orchestrating US hard and soft power—smart power—to uphold US primacy in the region. Indonesia and wider Southeast Asian region as well as regional multilateralism are important to attain this goal. Nurturing the relationship with Indonesia and other countries in Southeast Asia is important for the United States to hedge China’s influence, maintain US military presence and secure sea lanes of communication, especially in the Strait of Malacca.⁵⁷

Conclusion

This article argues that US foreign policy towards Asia under the Obama administration has exhibited more continuity than change. The Obama administration’s closer relations with Southeast Asia and greater commitment towards regional multilateralism are worth noting, even though they do not mark any fundamental change in US priorities to enhance its primacy and preserve its uncontested power against China’s growing power rather than a genuine willingness to be part of the region. With this realist perspective of the US relationship with Asia in mind, what measures might the Obama administration take in order to foster an enduring relationship with Asia?

This article concludes with the following suggestions: First, the United States needs to be consistent with its commitment to respect sovereignty and avoid intervention and hegemonic behaviour in the region. Second, Obama should pursue dialogues with Japan and China in a more balanced manner. Exclusivity between the United States and China will make Japan feel alienated. On the other hand, solidifying the alliance with Japan in a way that touches upon the Taiwan issue or relates to the development of regional missile defence can be seen by China as an effort to contain it. A trilateral relationship at least, if not broader cooperation, seems the most promising way. This kind of mechanism might also contribute to avoiding US ‘exclusion’ from the region, noting Japan’s improving relationship with China under Hatoyama. Fourth, the Obama Administration should treat India as a partner in South Asia rather than putting it second to Pakistan. (The Obama administration needs to avoid tilting in favour of Pakistan if it is to avoid Indian resentment that could upset the US effort to foster India as a counterbalance to China). Fifth, there should be no exception to the principle of non-proliferation in the region. If it accepts North Korea as a nuclear state, the United States might set a precedent for other countries to acquire nuclear weapons. The United States should also maintain the SPT as the main forum in dealing with North Korea. Lastly, the Obama

⁵⁶ Clinton, ‘Statement: Senate Foreign Relations Committee Confirmation Hearing’.

⁵⁷ Jörn Dosch, ‘The US and Southeast Asia’, p. 223.

administration should show its commitment to Asian multilateralism by seeking to join the EAS and solving the differences with the region in trade area or 'American values' such as democracy and human rights through dialogue rather than punitive measures.

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