



## President Obama's Asia Overdrive

The Forthcoming APEC Summit Is Part of a Wider Strategy



SOURCE: AP/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

Members of the ASEAN 10 and President Barack Obama stand for a group photo in 2009 during Obama's trip to Singapore to become the first U.S. president ever to attend a meeting with all 10 leaders of the nations that comprise the Association of South East Asian Nations.

By **Nina Hachigian** | November 9, 2011

When Asia's leaders gather in Honolulu next week for the annual Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, Americans will get a glimpse of the Obama administration's hyperactive Asia agenda. While America has always been a Pacific nation, the Obama administration is now beginning to match the world's most populous and economically dynamic region with America's own brand of energy and leadership.

Before President Barack Obama alights on the tarmac in Honolulu, he will have prepared the way to lead anew in Asia. Among a number of significant "firsts" for our nation in the region are:

- President Obama in 2009 became the first U.S. president ever to attend a meeting with all 10 leaders of the nations that comprise the Association of South East Asian Nations.
- The United States in 2010 became the first non-ASEAN country to establish a dedicated Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta.
- Hillary Clinton was the first secretary of state in a generation to make Asia the destination of her first foreign trip.
- Secretary Clinton also launched the "Lower Mekong Initiative," a first-of-its-kind agreement between Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and the United States to enhance cooperation in the areas of water and forest management, education, and health.

Now, President Obama will arrive in Honolulu to, among other things, attempt to get APEC nations to agree to lower tariffs on renewable energy products. He will also continue to negotiate the so-called Trans-Pacific Partnership, an Obama administration initiative with eight Asian nations, with the objective of shaping a broad-based regional trade pact that would include Australia,

Brunei, Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam. Look for announcements of Japanese participation and a framework for the TPP agreement to be announced alongside the APEC summit.

After the APEC summit, President Obama will travel to Bali and attend the East Asia Summit, a fairly new 18-nation security forum—becoming the first U.S. president to attend this annual meeting.

All this activity is especially dramatic following eight years of low-key engagement where Asians griped about missed meetings and America's strategic attention was focused almost exclusively in the Middle East. But most importantly, there is a well-thought out strategy for re-engagement—a strategy based on renewing long-time allies, engaging seriously newly emerging powers with an eye on preserving stability in the Pacific, while building stronger economic ties to boost American trade, job creation, and long-term economic prosperity at home.

Our stalwart ally Japan was rocked by this year's devastating earthquake and tsunami, and America is assisting in its recovery. Our alliance remains strong, and Japan continues to be an increasingly active U.S. partner in global affairs.

Relations with South Korea are better than they have ever been. The U.S. Congress just passed a historic free trade agreement, opening the South Korean market for a wealth of American goods. Twice in two years the Obama administration (over Chinese objections) deployed the USS George Washington to the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan to conduct exercises with South Korea in response to North Korean aggression. Last month, President Obama welcomed President Lee Myung-bak for a state visit, the first in 10 years by a South Korean president.

President Obama will visit Australia next week to announce a deepened military cooperation pact—building once again on a long-standing alliance. This follows on Secretary of State Clinton's signing last year of the [Wellington Declaration](#), a roadmap for deepening and expanding the bilateral relationship between the United States and New Zealand.

The Obama administration also is engaging more closely with emerging powers.

The administration in 2010 launched the U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue, which has broadened and deepened relations with New Delhi to include issues from cybersecurity and terrorism to negotiations over a bilateral investment treaty and energy cooperation. Obama also launched the U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership, including a series of agreements that will help defense and trade relations. The administration is also working carefully behind the scenes with Myanmar's new leadership to urge liberalization there.

All of this brings us to China. The flurry of Asian activity makes sense in its own right to further U.S. economic, cultural, and strategic interests, but it is also a component of U.S. policy toward China. The Obama administration's China policy involves increasing America's ability to compete with China, working with China where fruitful, and pushing back when China's actions cross the line. While the U.S.-China relationship is never easy, the administration has avoided major crises and managed to sell Taiwan the largest arm sales packages in any two-year period over the past 30 years without a major breach of relations with Beijing.

Indeed, where cooperation is possible, it is underway. A joint clean energy research center with China is now open, more U.S. Food and Drug Administration officials are based in China to monitor the safety of food and drugs coming to the U.S. market. What's more, the Obama administration has had some significant success working with Beijing on the nuclear activities of North Korea and Iran, though it has followed a one step forward, two steps back pattern.

The U.S. needs to be engaged in Asia to ensure that China's rise contributes to stability and prosperity in the region. In 2010, for example, when China made a series of aggressive moves related to the South China Sea, Secretary of State Clinton joined with her counterparts from Southeast Asia, including countries close to China such as Vietnam in what has been called a "showdown," to make clear their desire for a peaceful, multilateral approach to the conflicting territorial claims there. China backed off its more forward actions and most strident rhetoric.

Similarly, the United States is creating incentives for China to conform to international law and standards. That's why the Obama administration is negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership—a trade pact with high standards to join. The idea is build consensus in the region about a coherent set of regulations that might push China in a helpful direction. TPP rules, for example, are likely to

prohibit state-owned enterprises from getting government **subsidies** not available to privately owned companies, an issue on which Washington has been pushing Beijing hard, with only slow progress to show for it.

These sorts of initiatives are not part of a strategy of “containment” of China, which is not possible or desirable. No Asian country would ever sign up to an anti-China alliance—each, in fact, wants to strengthen its relationship with Beijing. But at the same time, they want America to stick close by. Even if containment were possible, America benefits more from a strong, prosperous China than a weak and resentful one.

Can America afford all this Asian engagement? We have to and we will. The coming years will demand strategic choices. The next time you hear someone complaining about U.S. troops leaving Iraq, remind them that the United States is now investing more wisely and more constructively in the most important region of the world.

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