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Obama's America: Why it is likely to endure in Asia

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Two key underlying themes have predicated the discourses on Barack Obama's visit to Asia. First, the US has weakened. Second, Asia has changed substantially. But contrary to conclusions of "irrevocable decline", America still has an enduring role in Asia.

America's 'decline', Asia's 'confidence'

THOSE WHO argue that the United States is in decline point to some compelling empirical evidence: a struggling economy, a discredited model of economic and social planning, and, of course, the apparent growth of China's power.

While these changes are beyond doubt, the implications are, however, debatable. An increasingly ubiquitous implication has been that Obama's visit instantiates the irrevocably diminishing position of the US in Asia. This is seen, it is argued, in the visit's accent on seeking growth and markets *from* Asia, an explicit willingness to accommodate the interests of China rather than contain it, and its difficulty in rebuilding troubled relations with allies like Japan.

Despite the evidence that appeals to the logic of "irrevocable decline", American power is likely to endure. Here, I refer not purely to America's alliances and security guarantees to a host of Asian nations. A more plausible explanation for American power resides in an understanding of its position of being the *Tertius* in Asia.

The US as the *Tertius* in Asia

Writing in the early 20th century, the sociologist Georg Simmel elaborated on the *Tertius Gaudens* (literally, 'the third who enjoys'). Simmel argued that the *Tertius* (the 'third element, party or person') acquires a position of power by virtue of its position within the group. The *Tertius* enjoys deep relations with each of the units, but the other units themselves don't share a similar depth of association. The thin bonds between the units is not necessarily a result of hostility (thought it often is); it arises from a lack of trust, a 'mutual strangeness' or even a 'general differentiation'. Power, thus,

arises from the advantageous position the *Tertius* occupies in a structured pattern of relations; in short, power is *relational*.

Transposing this concept to Asian international politics demonstrates how the US has enjoyed the advantages of being a *Tertius* since the end of the Second World War. Disputes rooted in war, historical animosities, post-colonial state building, and specific territorial claims have bred mistrust among East Asian states. At the same time, these states have developed strong relations with the US through enmeshment in post-War economic institutions or through security relationships, partly to counter security dilemmas in their own neighbourhoods. ‘Hub and spokes’, thus, not only describes America’s relationship with the region in military and strategic terms, it also serves a metaphor for the nature of its *relational* power in the region.

The *Tertius* in the Context of Obama’s Visit

While Obama may have visited the region in a position of seeming weakness, the politics of the *Tertius* were not far from sight.

In Southeast Asia, Obama’s visit and explicit gestures of commitment were welcomed by states that had hitherto actively articulated a discourse on American ‘neglect’ and had repeatedly questioned whether the *Tertius* was adequately committed to its unique position. Even though Southeast Asian states pursued a lucrative policy of engagement with China, at the same time, they repeatedly called the US to be engaged to counter China; ‘charm offensive’ and ‘tight embrace’ of the region.

Obama’s crucial diplomatic gestures during his stop in Singapore were a reaffirmation of the politics of the *Tertius*: in meeting ASEAN leaders, the US has asserted its interest in the region, has pragmatically chosen not to hold its relations with Southeast Asia hostage to its policy on Myanmar, and has enabled Southeast Asian states to leverage their relations with the *Tertius* as they simultaneously deal with China.

Japan is the most crucial test for the *Tertius*. Two key moves illustrate Japan’s ongoing reassessment of its alliance with the US.— the end of its refueling mission in support of allied forces in Afghanistan and a reconsideration of the 2006 Agreement on US military bases in Okinawa. However, it remains unclear if these measures represent anything substantive or are perhaps an attempt at operationalising the mandate of ‘change’ that had swept the Hatoyama government to power. Japan’s decision to pledge five billion yen for Afghanistan, and its increasingly consistent reiterations on the centrality of the US-Japan alliance reveal a policy that may not secure any substantive autonomy for Japan outside of its alliance.

That America’s enjoyment of its *Tertius* position is also a product of the interests of other states is most clearly demonstrated by the recent experience of regionalism in East Asia. Simmels noted that the position of the *Tertius* disappears when the other elements become a unit or the object of dispute is resolved. In some respects, the attempts at regional identity building, especially exclusive East Asian identities that excluded the US, were attempts at forging such unity.

East Asia’s Inherent Faultlines

Yet, the failure of the ASEAN Plus Three to neatly evolve into the East Asia Summit -because of anxieties over growing Chinese leadership, and Japan and Australia’s more recent proposals for an Asian community that seek a formal role for the US - discloses how any such conjoining of units remains deeply implausible.

Most importantly, the power of the *Tertius* depends less on the quantity of its power and more on its decisive position within the group. The power of the Vatican during the European state struggles

through the Middle Ages, and of small parties in coalition politics are illustrative of the nature of such power. By implication, then, America's *Tertius* position in Asia can endure regardless of the recession or a relative decline in its material power.

Obama's nine-day visit may not have accomplished substantive deals or goal-driven agreements, but it has effectively reaffirmed and strengthened America's prospects of staying as the *Tertius* in Asia.

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