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US Presence in Asia Pacific: Messages from Obama's East Asia Tour

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Synopsis

President Barack Obama's tour of East Asia over the past week highlighted three issues regarding US presence in the region. Expectations of the US rebalance towards Asia need to be calibrated.

Commentary

US PRESIDENT Barack Obama completed a four-nation tour of East Asia the past week that took him to Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines. It was a trip designed to reinforce and revitalise alliances and partnerships, reaffirm US commitment to the Asia Pacific and forge stronger economic ties with regional countries.

Widely seen as a test of the current US administration's rebalancing policy, Obama's Asia trip occurred amid tensions among Northeast Asian states, concerns in Southeast Asia over China's rise and the implications for the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Three messages can be gleaned from Obama's East Asia tour.

US security role remains dominant

Firstly, the US role in the Asia Pacific remains primarily in security issues. Although the rebalance is meant to encompass economic, cultural, and security interests, it is the latter that Asia Pacific countries seem to be most concerned about. Indeed, while there was no breakthrough in talks for the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), regional countries received reassurance from Obama about US commitment to their security.

To his Northeast Asian allies, Obama reiterated that the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands were covered by the US-Japan mutual security treaty. He also agreed to reconsider the 2015 timeline for the transfer of wartime operational control to South Korea of its own military forces in the face of the threat from North Korea. In Southeast Asia, a defence pact allowing for the rotational deployment of US troops, aircraft and ships in the Philippines was concluded.

The concern among Asia Pacific countries about US commitment to regional security, amid perceived Chinese assertiveness, is hardly surprising given that the United States has been the main security guarantor in the region for the past six decades. On the other hand, China continues to be the economic powerhouse of Asia and is the top trading partner of several Asia Pacific countries.

Even as regional countries continue to depend on the US for security, their economic ties with China will undoubtedly expand and deepen. The region benefits from positive relations with both the US and China. In this regard, regional countries need to be aware of how their actions could be perceived by either major power, in the pursuit of their security or economic interests.

One country's stability is another's instability

Secondly, while all stakeholders in the region speak of maintaining peace and stability, there is no consensus on how to achieve this goal. The security dilemma is evident. Japan views the inclusion of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the US-Japan security treaty as a US commitment to regional peace and stability. China is likely to view it as destabilising. Similarly, while the US and the Philippines view their new defence pact as an initiative that will strengthen regional security, the perspective from China is different. Chinese state news agency Xinhua carried a commentary arguing that the intention of the Aquino administration was "to confront China with US backing" and the pact could "intensify regional tensions".

The San Francisco system of US bilateral alliances in the region is viewed by China as an arrangement that reeks of Cold War dynamics. Yet, it has been acknowledged that the US presence in the Asia Pacific has to some extent provided regional countries with public goods that have helped to ensure their security and stability. For example, Washington is seen as an important actor in preventing a potential remilitarisation of Japan. The official response of the Chinese foreign ministry to the US-Philippine defence agreement has also avoided criticising the Americans, instead highlighting Washington's statements that it has no intention of containing China.

The Sunnylands Summit between Obama and President Xi Jinping last year highlighted the potential for the US and China to work together on common interests. Both sides also agreed on the importance of a positive Sino-US relationship. The Summit provided a platform for communication and mutual understanding. Likewise, for the region to truly achieve peace and stability, there will eventually need to be agreement on exactly what this entails and how to realise it. In short, communication is key.

Global superpower with multi-dimensional obligations

Finally, Obama's Asia trip clearly shows that the US is a global actor, with both domestic and global obligations. Last year, Obama cancelled a trip to Southeast Asia, including attendance at the APEC Summit and East Asia Summit, due to a US government shutdown. Earlier in 2010, he had also postponed trips to Indonesia and Australia because of domestic crises.

Coupled with ongoing events in Ukraine and the Middle East, concerns have been raised over the sustainability of US commitment to the Asia Pacific region. Even during the joint press conferences with his Asian hosts, for example, questions were raised regarding US policy on Ukraine and the Middle East peace effort. The reality is that the US is a global actor, a superpower that is expected to take on responsibilities far beyond its shores. Given resource limitations, this is likely to affect the extent of its commitment to the Asia Pacific.

Expectations about the US rebalance need to be calibrated. Even before the announcement of the rebalance strategy, half of US naval assets were already deployed in Asia, with troops in Japan and South Korea. At the very least, Washington's allies and partners can be reassured from Obama's trip that despite its other obligations elsewhere, it still intends to uphold its alliances and partnerships in the region.

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