

# WebMemo



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## Follow-Through on Obama's Successful Asia Swing Critical

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Unlike his predecessors, President Barack Obama came into office with a head of positive steam on China, focused on the need for Chinese partnership in addressing common global challenges, such as economic recovery, the environment, and nuclear proliferation. Disappointed in these areas and challenged by Chinese military modernization and aggressiveness in international sea lanes, the President's recent swing through the Pacific completes a turn that is much more in keeping with regional realities. For that reason, it is more than an election-cycle conversion. It requires the right follow-through, however, to make it effective.

**Recovery from First-Year Mistakes.** The deference to China that President Obama paid in his first trip there in 2009 rang alarms in the region.

In New Delhi, officials were shocked by a U.S.–China Joint Statement encouraging Chinese involvement in India's South Asian neighborhood. Taipei worried openly about a passage in the statement that could be read by the Chinese as acceding to their claim on Taiwan. And given an opportunity at a town hall-style event in Shanghai to reiterate America's legal obligation to Taiwan's security, the President shied away from a direct question on arms sales.

These missteps, paved by the President's refusal to meet with the Dalai Lama and an earlier statement from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton priori-

tizing U.S. bond sales over human rights, fueled the regional suspicions of power shift already heightened by America's economic problems.

The President began to shift course in 2010. On a visit that was marketed as a visit to democracies—India, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea—the President pledged support for India's membership in several major nonproliferation groups, a key to integrating India into a stable architecture of regional and international organizations. And although the Obama Administration, like its predecessor, has refused to make available to Taiwan the fighter aircraft it needs, President Obama did make good on the second half of a \$13 billion Taiwan arms package negotiated by the Bush Administration.

**Recent Strides.** The broader impression of power shift, however, lagged—until last week's full diplomatic press. With the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Hawaii and official presidential visits to Australia and Indonesia, as well as Secretary Clinton's visits to treaty allies in the Philippines and Thailand, the Administration is finally articulating a compelling response to the

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China challenge. The flurry of activity registered accomplishments in several areas critical to American national interests:

- **Transpacific Partnership on Trade and Investment.** At APEC, expectations for progress on the nine-nation Transpacific Partnership (TPP) were very low. The most expected was agreement on “broad outlines” of an agreement. And the parties did, indeed, announce agreement on the basics. It was, however, Japan’s stated intention to join the negotiations that became the big news of the Summit. With Japan’s participation, the TPP, a “gold standard” FTA encompassing economies worth more than \$22 trillion, is a real global trade game changer, with the U.S. at the center.
- **Maritime security and freedom of navigation.** In Bali, Indonesia, President Obama became the first American President to attend the East Asian Summit (EAS)—a forum established in 2005 and now composed of the 10 member countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States. Telegraphed well in advance and to the chagrin of the Chinese, Obama, along with all but two other leaders, dispensed with deference and raised concerns about freedom of navigation and conflicting claims in the South China Sea. The two issues have been inextricably linked—by no less than the Chinese themselves. The Chinese respond to each incident precipitated by their own interference in navigation by claiming “indisputable sovereignty over the islands of the South China Sea and their adjacent waters.”
- **U.S.–Australia partnership.** The new commitment to a sustained U.S. military presence in Australia reassures Canberra that the alliance is as relevant as ever to its security and the security of the Pacific. It is a proactive American move tied to the ongoing global force posture review in which the Australians have been so deeply involved. It is not—and Administration officials have been clear about this—contingency planning for failure to carry out the planned realignment of U.S. forces in Japan. Neither is it a retreat from China’s well-publicized development of

capabilities aimed at American bases. The U.S. Department of Defense is certainly developing more direct ways of dealing with that threat.

- **Red lines in the Philippines.** Secretary of State Clinton made the boldest statement of the nine-day diplomatic push. In Manila Bay, from the deck of a U.S. Navy guided missile destroyer, the *USS Fitzgerald*, she signed the “Manila Declaration.” The declaration is a symbol and reiteration of the U.S. treaty commitment to the Philippines. Later, referencing the success of Filipino fighter Manny Pacquiao, she put a fine point on the practical meaning of the Mutual Defense Treaty, stating, “The United States will always be in the corner of the Philippines and we will stand and fight with you.” The Chinese often have a hard time understanding democratic diplomacy—perhaps misreading the perennial debates in the Philippine Senate and protests of a vigorous but tiny anti-American left. If they misread this latest demonstration of resolve, however, they have only themselves—and timorous friends too “diplomatic” to explain it to them—to blame.

**Time for Follow-Through.** There are no two ways about it: This trip was a success in terms of projecting American interests in the Asia–Pacific region. Now it is important to follow through on several key issues.

- **Mind the defense budget.** The President was right to carry through with his responsibilities in the Pacific despite the status of the budget debate in Washington. But now that he is back, he faces a massive problem with the defense budget. The American presence he emphasized on his visit is not sustainable in the event of a trillion-dollar cut in defense spending. Given the scope of America’s global commitments, “pivoting” to Asia will not square the circle. He has only one option: work with Republicans in Congress to reverse the impact of the cuts triggered by failure of the deficit “super committee.” His threat to veto any such effort undermines the very Asia policy he and his Administration are so vigorously enunciating.
- **Continue to physically press the issue of freedom of navigation.** It is the U.S. Navy that ensures the American—and otherwise prevailing internation-

al—interpretation of freedom of the seas. At any given time, it is engaged in necessary exercises, military survey activities, and intelligence gathering in waters seaward of China's 12-mile territorial limit. It cannot accede to Chinese demands to dial back operations without setting a precedent that will never be overturned. Senate ratification of The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) will do nothing to preserve these rights and in fact would be detrimental to their exercise.

- **Get the Philippines what it needs.** The Philippines finally has the political leadership and sense of urgency to make military modernization a priority. Even as the U.S. works with the country on comprehensive reform, there are interim measures the Administration can take to give the Philippines the wherewithal to patrol and police its shores and claims in the Spratlys. Secretary Clinton's announcement of a second refurbished, refitted Coast Guard cutter for the Philippines was a welcome surprise. The Philippines has a modest request for a third and is willing to pay for it. The Administration should fulfill that request as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup>
- **Accommodate Japanese involvement in the Transpacific Partnership, and move negotiations aggressively.** The bar for participation in the TPP is high, and the Japanese must clear it. They must put all sectors and issues on the table. The U.S. should make sure its Japanese allies understand

this. At the same time, however, the Administration should make clear to Congress and its negotiating partners that it wants Japan in the TPP. Negotiators meet next in early December. They should agree to an aggressive negotiating schedule that gets them to full agreement by November 2013. An election cycle is no excuse to let the negotiations lag.

- **Close the deal with Taiwan.** No one outside the Administration, in Washington or Asia, believes its refusal to make available new fighter aircraft for Taiwan is driven by anything but objections from China. The need is simply too glaring, and the Administration's talking point—that it made the decision in the best interest of Taiwan's defense—strains credibility. It should immediately process Taiwan's request for 66 new F-16C/Ds.

**Reversing the Presidential Trend.** It has become rote analysis that American Presidents come into office hard on China and reverse over time. The Obama Administration has turned that on its head. The election cycle cannot account for the extensive groundwork required for this trip's success. It was a product of Clinton's extensive diplomacy over the past three years, the global force posture review, the TPP negotiations, and other behind-the-scenes work with friends and allies. Now that the Administration is developing a real strategic response to the China challenge, however, there is much work to be done.

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1. Renato de Castro and Walter Lohman, "U.S.–Philippines Partnership in the Cause of Maritime Defense," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2593, August 8, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/08/us-philippines-partnership-in-the-cause-of-maritime-defense>.