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Kerry's First Visit to Asia: Where Is the Pivot?

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While testifying before Congress regarding his nomination to be Secretary of State, then-Senator John Kerry indicated that he was uncomfortable with the Administration's "pivot to Asia" and indicated that, in his view, this was neither necessary nor wise.

Whether then-Senator Kerry was enunciating a new position is unclear, as Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter has emphasized that sequestration will not affect the rebalance. Kerry's first visit to Asia could have provided much-needed clarification on this vital issue; instead, it likely only further muddies the waters.

Appended onto the end of his second visits to the Middle East and Europe, Secretary of State John Kerry will be spending only one day apiece in Seoul, Beijing, and Tokyo—three of America's most important trade partners, two of its most important allies, and the world's second most important economy.

In light of the ongoing tensions on the Korean Peninsula, with each day revealing a yet more strident Pyongyang engaging in an ever-escalating series of moves, it is likely that Secretary Kerry's brief inaugural visit will be dominated by North Korea. But this glosses over the reality that Asia is

far more than the nuclear-armed Hermit Kingdom, with a variety of issues that demand joint action with America's allies, friends, and counterparts.

A Full Plate. There are, for example, several economic issues that are outstanding, beginning with the state of the ongoing Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations. This is an American-led effort at creating a region-wide free trade zone, which disturbs China. Beijing has been pushing a series of both bilateral and multilateral free trade discussions, including a trilateral with Japan and South Korea, as well as a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which is seen as a direct counter to the TPP. The TPP requires substantial high-level support, both in time and in high-level attention, to become a reality.

Similarly, there are a number of security issues, aside from North Korea, that directly affect American interests. One of the most important is the ongoing territorial dispute between Beijing and Tokyo over the Senkaku islands. These uninhabited islands were, until the North Korean crisis, the most likely flashpoint for a conflict as Chinese and Japanese government vessels jockeyed and shadowed each other in support of their respective claims. The ongoing crisis has seen both sides deploy air assets.

In addition, there is growing concern about Chinese behavior in the South China Sea. Not only has China been increasing pressure on the Philippines and Vietnam over their respective claims, but the Chinese recently deployed a naval task force to waters just off Malaysia, underscoring their claims to James Shoal in a message to Kuala Lumpur as well. The deployment of Chinese

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naval combatants marks a significant escalation in Chinese pressure, as past shows of force have been by civilian law enforcement vessels.

The release of the Mandiant report on Chinese cyber-hacking highlights yet another major area of concern. The report for the first time directly attributed Chinese hacking activities to a specific unit of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Equally worrisome, it indicated that Chinese cyber-espionage is targeted not only at traditional military and intelligence functions (i.e., spying) but also at commercial entities to benefit Chinese corporations.

The issue of Chinese computer network intrusions therefore is both a national security concern and an economic concern that requires a consistent messaging, conducted persistently, to signal to Beijing the seriousness with which it is viewed in Washington.

What Kerry Needs to Do.

- **Provide a framework.** As the saying goes, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." On this first visit to Asia, Secretary Kerry's every word and action will be carefully assessed by America's friends and enemies. It would be unfortunate, at best, not to take advantage of this opportunity to lay out the Obama Administration's plans for Asia in the coming four years. Whether it is termed a pivot, a rebalancing, or simply a reassessment, this is the chance for Secretary Kerry and President Obama to make clear America's continued economic, diplomatic, and military commitment to the region.
- **Send a consistent message.** The U.S. has a range of interests in Asia that involve economic as well as security concerns, touching upon just about every nation in both Northeast and Southeast Asia. Secretary Kerry should make clear, in meetings and any public remarks, that the U.S. remains faithful to its commitment to regional security and regional free trade.
- **Get the rest of his team in place.** The new head of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs

within the State Department has yet to be named. This position was extremely influential during Hillary Clinton's tenure as Secretary of State and was at the heart of a very energetic and varied diplomatic strategy. Today, Secretary Kerry is operating without the full range of expertise and strategic advice necessary to support him in responding to the complex and developing situation. The Assistant Secretary and his or her deputies are the people who are also essential in crafting a government response, as they are part of the interagency process that coordinates and reconciles various departments' approaches to these issues. Any kind of military or financial effort, for example, requires suitable people from the State Department to work with their counterparts from the Department of Defense and the Department of the Treasury. Just as important, given the recent changes in government in Seoul and Beijing (and even Tokyo), the trans-Pacific relationships that are essential for coordinating international efforts cannot be developed without the relevant personnel in place.

More Than Putting Out Fires. Given the importance of the region and the myriad of issues confronting the region and the United States, one would have expected the Secretary of State to have devoted more time to his first visit. Because of his tepid stance toward the pivot and because he has filled so few of the supporting positions at the State Department, there is no evidence of an overarching strategic goal or template guiding this visit or his Asia policy in general.

Nonetheless, on this first visit, it is important that Secretary Kerry do more than simply operate as a fireman, hoping to quench the fire on the Korean Peninsula. This effort should be part of a larger strategy of reassuring American friends and allies and deterring potential adversaries.

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