



Obama's Visit to East Asia: Reinvigorating the Rebalancing Strategy?

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The US President, Barack Obama made his much-awaited trip to the 'East' from April 23 to 29, 2014. His itinerary, rescheduled and revised to include Japan, Malaysia, South Korea and The Philippines, has been a matter of media and scholarly attention worldwide. The visit primarily aimed at allaying the concerns about the sustainability of American Rebalancing strategy towards the Asia Pacific.¹ Additionally, the visit was to make up for Obama's cancelled trip to Southeast Asia in October 2013, where he was to participate in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and East Asia Summit (EAS) meetings. However, the visit was cut-short owing to a domestic standoff that led to shutdown in Washington, D.C. The cancellation of his October 2013 trip fuelled scepticism about the sustainability of the U.S. Rebalancing strategy amongst its allies and partners in East Asia. Nevertheless, Obama's recent visit has helped instil confidence among the allies and partners of U.S. regarding its leadership in the Asia Pacific.

In fact, in the Joint Press Conference alongside Obama, Japan's Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe reiterated, "the United States is moving forward with its policy of pivoting to the Asia Pacific. These are contributing to peace and stability in the region"². If nothing more, the statement exhibits the prospects for the US Rebalancing in the region. Additionally, the visit was a huge boost for a region hankering for clear signs of Washington's commitment.³ Takeaways of Obama's East Asia visit include:

- a) The Philippines: Signing of a defence pact with Manila; paving way for the re-stationing of the US troops in the Southeast Asian nation. Thus giving clear signals to China that the US is committed to its long-time ally;
- b) Japan: Sending clear signals from Tokyo by reaffirming that US's security commitment applies to all the territory administered by Japan including the Senkakus;
- c) South Korea: President Obama's reiteration from Seoul that US and South Korea "will not hesitate to use our military might to defend our allies"⁴ amid reports that Pyongyang is preparing for fresh nuclear tests.

This was Obama's sixth visit to Asia, fourth visit to South Korea, third visit to Japan and the first visit to Malaysia and the Philippines since he assumed the office as the President in 2009. In the past few years, East Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular, have emerged as the new global geopolitical centres of gravity with a re-shift of politico-diplomatic, military, institutional and economic focus on countries of the region and their intra-regional politics.⁵ This visit was important to the US primarily for two reasons: First; the US is negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)⁶ with Japan, Malaysia and South Korea along with the other ten countries. The TPP, commercial arm of the 'Rebalancing' strategy, has been projected as the 21st century trade pact that will involve friends and allies of the US.⁷ Though the Philippines is currently not a part of the TPP negotiation process, it might be the next in the line to join the TPP. However, sceptics feel that TPP is slowly losing its charm while the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with China and India as its important members, is gathering momentum. Second; the visit took place against the backdrop of escalating tensions in the East Asian Region. On one hand, countries, particularly in the Northeast Asian region, are concerned about the possibility of North Korea developing nuclear weapons and endeavouring to find ways to thwart Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions; on the other hand, Japan and the countries in Southeast Asia are getting apprehensive of an ever-assertive China's maritime ambitions in the East and South China Sea. Being the global super power, bound by the security treaties with countries of the region, the US has a dominant role to play. Countries of the region look up to the US for assuring security amid rising tensions in the region. In that regard, it would be apt to say that Obama covered a wide range of issues during his visit to the four Asian nations. Against this context, this Issue Brief assesses the outcome of Obama's visit to Asia as well as reactions from the region.

Japan

Obama chose Japan as his first stopover to his four-nation Asian tour, which is considered a frontline ally in the U.S. Rebalancing strategy. In the joint statement, issued at the conclusion of his Japan visit, as well as the joint press conference, Obama stated that US's security commitments "extend to all the Japanese territories under the administration of Japan, including the Senkaku Islands."⁸ Though various officials in the US administration had made the similar statements in the past, Obama became the first US President to make such a statement on Japanese soil. This boosted Japan's confidence in the US's security commitments, especially in the wake of Chinese assertions over the sovereignty of Senkaku Islands (known as Diaoyu in China). However, the US continued to maintain its stance over the sovereignty of the territory contested by Japan and China. Consistent with the US stance, Obama maintained that the US does not take a position over the "final sovereignty" of the islands contested by both Japan and China.⁹ He called on both the countries to "avoid escalating the dispute and find a peaceful solution"¹⁰. More importantly, the joint statement signed by the US and Japan expressed concerns over China's recent actions such as the "uncoordinated declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone" (ADIZ) that have "raised tensions in the East China Sea." Thus, the US and Japan subtly passed the buck to China for the recent escalations of tension in the region. On the contrary, China blames Japan for escalating tensions by nationalising the Senkakus Islands, which is contested by China. Interestingly, without mentioning China, the US-Japan joint statement unequivocally stated that they "oppose any attempt to assert territorial or maritime claims through the use of intimidation, coercion or force."¹¹

The US security commitment to the East Asian region in general and Japan in particular has been "welcomed" and applauded by the domestic constituencies of Japan. But at the same time they are also concerned that the security commitment should not "end with mere words on page."¹² The *Mainichi Japan*, leading Japanese daily, in its editorial questioning USA's failure to prevent Russia's annexation of Ukraine opines:

We are also forced to wonder if Obama can respond effectively to China's power plays and North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons programs... Could the Obama administration be relied upon to step in should China use the unspoken threat of brute force to unilaterally expand its territory, as Russia has done in Crimea? That is the question making not just Japan but the countries of Southeast Asia nervous."¹³

The Asahi Shimbun, on the other hand, suggested Abe to mend ties with China and South Korea to ensure stability of the Asia-Pacific region. In its editorial, the left leaning daily states:

“No matter how passionately Abe rhapsodizes about the bond of security alliance between Japan and the United States, the fact remains that there can be no stability in the Asia-Pacific region as long as there is a deep gulf of mistrust between Japan and China. Neighbouring nations also want to see the three major powers of Japan, the United States and China maintain stable relations among them.”¹⁴

Similarly, *The Japan Times* advises the Abe administration not to get carried away by Obama’s statements on Japanese security. It states:

“It would obviously be unwise for Japan to count solely on that statement -which Obama himself even appeared to be playing down as he said the position was nothing new and merely repeating what other US officials said earlier -to stabilise its relations with countries in the region.”¹⁵

The daily suggests the Abe government “to take concrete actions of its own to improve Japan’s ties with China, as well as with South Korea.”

Another item on Obama’s agenda list during this visit was to arrive at an accord with Japan over the TPP, which is considered the ‘economic centrepiece’ of his Rebalancing strategy towards Asia Pacific. However, the Obama-Abe talks failed to bridge perception gaps between Japan and the US over eliminating import tariff on US produced agricultural products including rice, beef and pork, sugar, barley and dairy products.¹⁶ Japan has been imposing heavy tariffs on imports of these products to safeguard its farmers’ interests that are an influential political lobby within the country. The TPP on the other hand, aims at achieving high-level trade and investment liberalisation including elimination of import duties in the economically vibrant Asia Pacific region. Other 10 nations across the Pacific Ocean, who are negotiating the TPP, also want that the two major economies- Japan and the US, which together account for around 80 per cent of combined GDP in the proposed economic block, reach consensus on the broader framework. Obama was able to convince Japan to agree that the time has come to take “bold steps” to “complete a high-standard,

ambitious, comprehensive Trans Pacific Partnership agreement”¹⁷ They “identified a path forward” and agreed that “there is still much work to be done”¹⁸ to seal a pact.

Malaysia

Kuala Lumpur was the third stop in Obama’s four Asian nation’s tour. The highlight of the visit was that Obama was the first US President to visit Malaysia in the past fifty years. The last American president to visit Kuala Lumpur was Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966. There were no high-level exchanges between these two in past 16 years. The visit resulted into two sides agreeing to upgrade bilateral military ties and expand the scope of their trade relations.

In so far as the Malaysian response to the US Rebalancing towards Asia is concerned, “Cautious Optimism” most aptly explains its position.¹⁹ Put simply, over these years Malaysia’s approach has evolved from deep-seated suspicion to a cautious desire for cooperation with the US.²⁰ The biggest question for Malaysia that continues to linger on is: how to manage its relations with the US while balancing relations with China. While Malaysia’s relations with the US are mostly under the framework of cooperation now, Malaysia is likely to keep its cordial relations with China intact due to its own security compulsions and constraints. Moreover, it will continue to downplay regional anxieties about China’s military build-up.²¹ For a long time it was a missing link in Washington’s Asia Pacific strategy. However, a subtle shift in its attitude towards China could be noticed last year following China’s patrol around the Zhingmu Reef in March 2013.²² This prompted Malaysia to announce that a new naval base would be built in the eastern city of Bintulu, closer to the Zhingmu Reef.²³ Malaysia has also stepped up cooperation with Philippines and Vietnam over the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea. The Chinese observers believe that sensing Malaysia’s increasing apprehension vis-à-vis China’s increasing military power and assertions in the South China Sea, the US is attempting to “beef up its military presence there.”²⁴ From the American perspective, the three-day-long trip of Obama is indicative of the fact that the US desires to make Malaysia a proactive member of its Rebalancing strategy. What remains to be seen is how Malaysia contributes to the US Rebalancing strategy.

As regards the TPP, both the US and Malaysia could not reach a basic accord though it was high on agenda of both the nations during the talks. Malaysia and the US have had divergent views

in the TPP negotiations on issues such as intellectual property rights and reform of state owned enterprises. Dominated by the Malaysian government, these enterprises remain a major source of government's revenue and patronage. Given this context, the cautious attitude adopted by Malaysian government towards the TPP is understandable.

The Philippines

Obama concluded his East Asia visit by visiting Manila on April 28. The Philippines, which is embroiled in a long-drawn-out maritime dispute with China in the South China Sea, has always welcomed the US presence in the region. Manila does not display this behaviour just because it is a non-NATO ally of the US. There is another reason to it. It desires to internationalise the South China Sea issue in order to counter China's assertive behaviour by taking preventive measures on the 'China threat'.

Issue of critical importance for both Washington and Manila is Beijing's unwilling stance towards resolving its maritime dispute with Philippines Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei. Undoubtedly, one of the biggest contributions of Obama's visit to the Philippines was stepping-up of the defence cooperation between the two countries. During Obama's Manila visit, the Philippines' Defence Secretary, Voltaire Gazmin and the US Ambassador Philip Goldberg signed a ten-year defence pact entitled "Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement" (EDCA). Obama termed the agreement as "an important new chapter in the relationship" between the two countries.²⁵ The pact allows the US to increase its military presence in the Philippines. In a joint press conference with his Philippine counterpart, Obama highlighted that the defence pact would allow the two countries to "work together to build the Philippines' defense capabilities and to work with other nations to promote regional stability, such as the South China Sea."²⁶ He said that the US commitment to defend Philippines is "ironclad" adding, "the US will keep that commitment because allies will never stand alone."²⁷ The defence pact was an extension of the Mutual Defence Treaty that was signed between the US and the Philippines in 1951. Till 1992, the US had military bases in the Philippines. But at the end of the Cold War and as a result of increasing opposition of US bases by the people of Philippines, US pulled out all its troops and vacated the bases. With China's increasing naval activities, including spat between China and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal, Manila has once gain walked in under the US security umbrella. Obama,

however, downplayed the concerns that the mechanism is aimed at countering China. He stated in Manila, “our goal is not to counter China. Our goal is not to contain China.”²⁸

The US is leaving no stone unturned to reassure its allies about its commitment towards the region. The recent 10-day joint military exercise in the Philippines is a testimony to that. On May 5, approximately 5,500 troops from the US and the Philippines conducted a joint military exercise in the Philippines. The Stated aim of the exercise was to focus on maritime security and disaster response, while avoiding the idea of linking the war games with Manila’s concerns over China.²⁹ Ostensibly, Manila has been trying to modernise its military and strengthen its military capabilities with the help of the US. However, as Aileen S.P. Baviera argues, “Manila, however, must remain cautious and not take Washington's support for granted when it comes to possible confrontation with China. Few in Manila doubt that US-China cooperation on a wide range of bilateral, regional and global concerns remains very important to the US. In addition, internal considerations for Washington -- among them budget constraints, political division, and an increasingly isolationist public sentiment -- continue to cast doubts on the sustainability of the US rebalance to Asia.”³⁰

Nevertheless, there is every reason to believe that Washington is not shying away from supporting Manila. Reinforcement of the defence engagement with the Philippines and the 2013 US Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operation in the typhoon Haiyan-hit Philippines substantiated the American efforts for its commitments towards the region. Arguably, the inked defence pact has the potential to act as a credible minimum deterrence against China. However, what remains to be seen is whether Obama, who is a proponent of freedom of navigation in the international waters, will come to the rescue of the Philippines in an event of war with China in the South China Sea.

South Korea

In South Korea, the focus of Obama’s visit was to strengthen security cooperation. In the joint press conference with his South Korean counterpart Park Geun-hye, Obama stated, “the Republic of Korea is one of our strongest allies in the world.”³¹ The US and South Korea agreed, “to improve the mutual-operation of the existing missile defense system while modernising the Korea-US alliance.”³² He arrived in Seoul amid reports that the reclusive regime in North Korea is preparing

to conduct fourth nuclear test. Obama assured South Korea that the US will take all efforts to denuclearise the North. The US - South Korea joint statement stated that the two allies are still committed to seeking “the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation of North Korea in a peaceful manner.”³³ It also added that in case North Korea makes more nuclear or ballistic missile provocation, the US and South Korea would present “a strong, forceful alliance to prepare for any eventuality.”³⁴ A section of domestic constituencies in South Korea, however, remain unimpressed with the talks of North Korean denuclearisation. Citing the reports that suggest North Korea may test another nuclear device, *The Korea Times* in its editorial states, “President Obama’s lack of eagerness to solve North Korea’s nuclear issue is deplorable but not entirely incomprehensible, as South Koreans see it.”³⁵ It further adds, “Washington is finding it more tempting to focus on making Iran abandon its nuclear ambitions, before Tehran conducts a nuclear test, too... the US has its own strategic priorities, which a far smaller ally such as South Korea cannot alter.”³⁶ Analysing Obama’s visit, South Korea’s *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper in its editorial states, “the US cannot exert leadership in Asia only with words.”³⁷

Reactions from China

China has been expressing concerns about USA’s increasing military footprints in the East Asian region. However, this time its reaction was sharp: China reacted angrily about Diaoyu (known as Senkaku in Japan) Islands’ inclusion under the US security commitments. In a press briefing, the Chinese official said that China “firmly opposes the inclusion of the Diaoyu Island into the US-Japan security treaty.” It further added:

“.....the so called US-Japan security treaty is the product of the Cold War era. It should not be cited to target third party, let alone to undermine China’s territorial sovereignty. No matter what others may say or do, the solid fact that the Diaoyu Islands are integral parts of China’s territory cannot be changed, nor will our government’s and people’s determination and resolve to safeguard territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interest be shaken.”³⁸

Chinese media also took note of Obama’s exclusive interview to the Japanese daily *Yomiuri Shimbun*, in which he stated that USA’s engagement with China “does not and will not be at the expense of Japan or any other ally.”³⁹ Obama also stated in the interview that he expects Japan’s Self Defense Force to do more within the framework of the alliance. Reacting to these statements, a Chinese commentator opines, “the US is easing limits on Japan so that it can play a bigger role in

constraining China, especially military roles.”⁴⁰ The Chinese observers also took exception of the US-Japan joint statement mentioning China’s ADIZ as a cause for raising tensions in the East China Sea. A Chinese observer noted, “Every country has the right to establish an ADIZ - indeed it was the US itself which started the whole idea, and the East and South China Sea disputes were provoked by Japan and the Philippines.”⁴¹ He added, “the US should be held responsible for any fall out for its conniving with these two countries and obscuring the distinction between right and wrong.”⁴² Regarding the defence cooperation signed between Washington and Manila during the visit, a Chinese commentator observed that the pact will “embolden Manila in dealing with Beijing” adding that “a more assertive or even reckless Manila would stoke regional tensions and in turn upset Obama’s policy of rebalancing.”⁴³

Clearly, Obama’s visit has made Chinese foreign policy mandarins anxious of the US intentions in the region. China is perceptive enough to understand that the steps taken by the Philippines and Vietnam vis-à-vis China, factor the US into the ongoing power play in the region.

Conclusion

Obama’s East Asia visit may be assessed as a ‘qualified success’. The US administration was successful in instilling confidence amongst its allies, as Obama was very forthright in conveying the hosts that the US will fulfil its security commitment and will never leave them alone. This has been one of his common statements during his press briefings alongside his counterparts in Malaysia, South Korea and the Philippines. However, a section of the domestic constituencies in East Asia, particularly in Japan and South Korea, have termed such statements as rhetorical. Apprehensions linger as to whether Obama administration can respond effectively to China’s power plays and North Korea’s missile and nuclear weapons programs. Obama’s administration’s week-kneed response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea has emboldened such doubts.

As regards the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), there were no major breakthroughs in Obama’s talks with the host nations during his visit. It was expected that Japan and Malaysia, which are negotiating the trade deal, would soften their stance and agree to sign the TPP. However, Obama failed to nudge them beyond a point. This is indicative of the fact that while countries of the

region may agree to provide the US with the military bases and might play the role of frontline states in Rebalancing, they are hesitant to become part of the TPP- the commercial arm of the US Rebalancing strategy towards Asia, in its present form. Clearly, given the state of present negotiations, each side is working to safeguard its own interests. The latter part of the Rebalancing strategy will succeed only if the US administration agrees to address concerns of domestic constituencies of the East Asian countries and agrees to give them concessions under the proposed TPP.

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Endnotes:

¹ Tom Donilon, former US's Security Advisor to Obama administration defines rebalance as follows:

The rebalance is a comprehensive effort incorporating all elements of US national power. It entails strengthening alliance and partnership, building an economic architecture that can sustain Asia's growing prosperity, supporting democratic reforms and maintaining productive relations with China. Tom Donilon. "A Pivotal Time for the US and Asia," *The Washington Post* republished in *The Japan News*, April 24, 2014. <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0001227159> (Accessed April 25, 2014).

² Joint Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/24/joint-press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-abe-japan>. (Accessed April 25, 2014).

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⁶ For definition and details about the Trans Pacific Partnership see Rahul Mishra. "The US Rebalancing Strategy: Responses from Southeast Asia", in S. D. Muni (ed.) *Asian Strategic Review 2014* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2014), pp.163-167.

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