

First and Foremost: Twelve Months of the Obama Administration's Policy in Asia

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The number of Asia-related firsts during President Barack Obama's first year in office is quite remarkable. Hillary Clinton's first overseas trip as the new Secretary of State was to Asia in February when she visited Tokyo, Jakarta, Seoul and Beijing. During her visit to Jakarta she "paid the first-ever visit to ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] headquarters."¹ The first visitor President Obama greeted at the White House was the Japanese Prime Minister² and, in Singapore last month, the first US-ASEAN Leader's Meeting was held at which a US President met all ten ASEAN leaders collectively for the first time.³ Most recently, of course, the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, made the first "full-fledged state visit".⁴ Notable also was the fact that the US signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC) before this year's ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Phuket, Thailand.⁵

These firsts were not accidental. They were clearly planned and intended to have a symbolic value. With regard to Clinton's trip to Asia, Bader observed that: "This hasn't been done for 50 years This was meant to be a signal".⁶ Whilst Hillary Clinton herself noted in advance of her departure that: "I believe it demonstrates clearly that our new Administration wants to focus a lot of time and energy in working with Asian partners and all the nations in the Pacific region because we know that so much of our future depends upon our relationships there". Furthermore, she also acknowledged that "there has been a general feeling that perhaps we didn't pay an appropriate amount of attention to Asia over the last years being very preoccupied with other parts of the world, so I wanted to start at the very beginning demonstrating our commitment there."⁷

In a sense, Clinton's observation gets to the heart of the problem as far as America's policy in Asia is concerned. As the character Leo Solomon said in the 1995 film, *The American*

President, 'politics is perception'. The perception of some in the US and many in the region (particularly South East Asia) is that in the recent past the US has been disengaged and uncommitted or, to put it another way, 'missing in action'.

Some analysts have gone so far as to argue that this isn't just a recent phenomenon. In their abstract, Diane Mauzy and Brian Job nicely encapsulate the nature of US policy towards South East Asia over the three decades since the end of the Vietnam War. "American foreign policy in Southeast Asia from 1975 to the present can be characterized as exhibiting varying degrees of benign neglect, with episodic attention to perceived security threats." The latest of these threats, Islamist terrorism, however, has led to a renewed, albeit rather narrow, focus.⁸ The phrase "benign neglect" might also be attached to US foreign policy toward South Asia for much of the Cold War period although our Indian hosts might dispute the 'benign' bit given the deployment of the USS Enterprise carrier battle group to the Bay of Bengal in the latter stages of the war with Pakistan in 1971 or the provision of extensive military aid to Pakistan in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Certainly, though, the US attached a low priority to the South Asian region for the majority of the period.

Even those who are supportive of the Bush administration's Asia policy, of which more in a moment, are cognisant of the very real perceptual problem for the United States. Michael J. Green, who served on the National Security Council from 2001 to 2005, recognises that in respect of America's involvement in the East Asian region's multilateralism, the problem was "one of perceptions": Condoleeza Rice's absence from the ARF meetings in 2005 and 2007 indicating that she (and the US) was "not interested in Asia".⁹ Indeed, for Green the real critique of Bush's Asia policy "is one of process rather than content – that is that inconsistent application of high-level attention to Asia."¹⁰ Robert Sutter also notes the problem of the "episodic high-level attention and often offensive unilateral attitudes" which many in South East Asia think has been displayed by Washington.¹¹

Overall, however, Green and Sutter contend that the Bush administration's policy in Asia was largely successful. For example, whilst Bush's policy on North Korea was seen as a failure by some (for Pempel it was the most obvious failure), Green argues that ultimately one of the major successes for Bush in Asia was the setting up of the Six Party Talks framework for dealing with the North Korean problem.¹² In a similar vein, Sutter, in the course of mounting a robust defence of US leadership in Asia, contends that Obama has actually "inherited a US

position in Asia buttressed by generally effective Bush administration interaction with Asia's powers."¹³ Motivated by the need to prosecute the global war on terror, which, of course, has also generated friction at times with states in South East Asia, America has "broadened and intensified" its military and security co-operation with a number of South East Asian states, particularly Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand.¹⁴ Alliance relationships too with Japan, South Korea and Australia have all been strengthened.¹⁵

Indo-US relations were a notable highlight of Bush's Asia policy and reflected a pattern of improvement evident from the beginning of the post-Cold War period. The basis for an improved relationship was almost immediately created by India's support during the first Gulf war when it provided refuelling stops for American aircraft en route to the Persian Gulf. For the US, its post-Cold War policy of attaining a favourable pattern of regional stability through the development of 'co-operative engagement' with like-minded regional states meant that India could play an important role in this in the context of South Asia. A formalised process of defence co-operation was begun in 1995 including joint military exercises, intelligence sharing and discussion on strategic objectives. There was also a perception in the US that India could play a wider global role and thus the desire to further improve ties was increased. References to the fact that India was now seen as an 'emerging great power' obviated the problems associated with status recognition which had so often affected ties during the Cold War.

Although India's nuclear tests in 1998 clearly went against the continued US commitment to non-proliferation – and led to the suspension of some defence co-operation and the imposition of sanctions – ultimately they had surprisingly little impact on the relationship. President Clinton's visit in March 2000 effectively signalled American acceptance of the reality of India's nuclear status and heralded a move towards increased economic and security co-operation. Sanctions were eventually dropped by the Bush administration in October 2001.

Indo-US relations improved considerably during George W. Bush's presidency. In June 2005, a 10 year defence co-operation agreement was signed which will see co-operation on weapons production and missile defence (among other things) and during President Bush's visit to India in March 2006, the two states signed the landmark civil nuclear technology agreement. American officials have openly stated that India is a 'singularly important'

foreign policy priority and that the development of relations with India is one of America's most important recent strategic initiatives. Only a few months before the sixtieth anniversary of Partition, a US State Department official hailed ties with India as being the strongest since 1947.¹⁶

Notwithstanding the friction generated by issues such as nuclear proliferation, the military takeover in October 1999 and Pakistan's support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, in general there was a steady improvement in the bilateral relationship between the US and Pakistan in the period up to 2001. All too aware of Pakistan's weakness as a state, it was evident that America sought to maintain the bilateral relationship in order to forestall Pakistan's collapse.

As so often before, Pakistan became of critical importance as a result of the changed circumstances brought about by the events of September 11 and the onset of the 'war on terror'. Indeed, Pakistan's co-operation was regarded as essential in the efforts to capture Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders and in the continuing efforts to combat a resurgent Taliban. Pakistan's vital role is such that the US was ultimately prepared to overlook the problems of nuclear proliferation posed by the case of the man behind Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme – A. Q. Khan – and in 2004 Pakistan was granted major non-NATO ally status.

This was a designation with which India was unhappy and there has been a general Indian wariness about the degree of military co-operation between the US and Pakistan under Bush; despite its own markedly improved relationship with America. Indeed, the Bush administration faced a continuing difficulty in reconciling its need for Pakistan's assistance with Afghanistan with its long-term goal of developing a strategic partnership with India. In a sense, of course, this isn't a new problem. For much of the Cold War America had to try to balance the demands of both India and Pakistan with its own wider strategic interests.

For Green and Sutter, and others of like mind, the Bush administration's Asia policy laid a firm foundation for Obama. What was required, therefore, was not wholesale change but minor adjustment, or fine-tuning.¹⁷ On the other hand, for Pempel and his supporters Obama needed clearly to set a different course and put in some effort to recover the United States's

position (especially in East Asia).¹⁸ The reality of what is required probably lies somewhere between these two positions.

Senior officials with responsibility for Asia in the Obama administration recognise the importance of continuing with the “strong pattern of close consultation with ... partners in the Six-Party Talks” and that in respect of relations with US friends and allies people “should not expect sudden alterations in longstanding patterns”.¹⁹ However, it is also acknowledged that there is a need to do more (and be seen to do more). As Secretary of State Clinton said in her pre-departure speech, she intended to “deliver a message about America’s desire for more rigorous and persistent commitment and engagement” with Asia.²⁰

This more dynamic approach has certainly been evident in South East Asia which has received a “new emphasis” under Obama.²¹ Indeed, the Obama administration’s “demonstration of greater interest in and flexibility towards relations with southeast Asia suggests that enhanced activism, involvement and flexibility in the region may represent the most significant change in US policy in Asia”.²² Some of those firsts I outlined at the beginning are indicative of this and Obama has also showed flexibility with regard to Burma (Myanmar) and how it affects, or rather will now not be allowed to affect, relations with ASEAN.²³ This level of activism and engagement can be expected to continue with full US participation in those regional multilateral fora of which it is a member and in terms of an expanded framework of co-operation with ASEAN.²⁴ There is no clear indication yet, though, of what approach the US will take on the East Asia Summit (EAS) although by signing the TAC it has cleared one important obstacle to membership. [NB In a comment that was not picked up by the media, in a speech during his visit to Tokyo, Obama clearly stated that the US was now looking for a ‘formal’ association/relationship with the EAS]

Increased US activism, engagement and participation in East Asia has undoubtedly been motivated by the perception that the US has, to a degree, lost out to China in image terms (if not necessarily in any real practical sense). Generally speaking, however, and certainly in stark contrast to previous administrations’ early years in office, there has been a “smooth transition” in the bilateral relationship.²⁵ Bader notes that the relationship “is sound” and that Obama has established a strategic and economic dialogue chaired by Secretary of State Clinton and Treasury Secretary Geithner which “has been an unprecedented forum for dialogue on the key strategic and economic issues”. Military to military relations have also

been restored.²⁶ Considerable co-operation over North Korea has been apparent too. Friction remains, however, and Obama's visit to China last month was not regarded as an unadulterated success with disagreement apparent over economic issues and Iran's nuclear programme.²⁷

Much of the friction between the US and China results from the latent military competition which appears to exist and sometimes takes shape in the South China Sea with China disputing US interpretations of legitimate behaviour by US Navy vessels in China's Exclusive Economic Zone and the shadowing of US carrier battle groups by submarines belonging to the People's Liberation Army Navy. It will be interesting to note what language the upcoming 2010 US Quadrennial Defence Review will use to describe the challenge posed by China.²⁸

Concern about Chinese competition will mean that the US will continue to seek to strengthen the alliance relationships it has, particularly with Japan and South Korea. These relationships and others in the region are also seen as useful in furthering US interests elsewhere. Bader contends that the US has clearly "gotten some significant benefits" including increased contributions to efforts in Afghanistan from a range of states including Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand and in the Gulf of Aden from Australia, Japan, Singapore and South Korea.²⁹

South Asia (and for the US this includes Afghanistan), as we know, has been identified as a high priority by the Obama administration. President Obama "has made clear that he views the international effort in Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single theatre of immense strategic importance to security – not only of the United States – but of the world."³⁰ Pakistan has certainly been highlighted as being central to the attainment of success in Afghanistan as well as being a strategic priority for the US in its own right. Only last month the results of a long-strategy review on Pakistan saw President Obama offer it an "expanded strategic partnership, including additional military and economic cooperation".³¹ With respect to India, Robert Blake Jr. notes, both Obama and Clinton have made oft-repeated statements of "their clear commitment to strengthen [the] partnership with India."³² There seemed to be a perception in the new US administration that perhaps more than mere rhetoric was required with Clinton observing during her visit that the bilateral relationship was "overdue for an upgrade".³³

One of the arguments put forward to explain the Bush administration's unprecedented success in having good relations with India and Pakistan at the same time, was that it had pursued what has been termed a 'dehyphenated' approach. In other words, India and Pakistan were treated "on their own merit and in separate boxes."³⁴ Obama, however, seems to be intent on a more joined-up strategy in South Asia effectively seeing Afghanistan, Pakistan and India as a whole. This was implicit in Obama's offer to Pakistan of an enhanced partnership, with his letter to President Asif Ali Zardari indicating that the offer included "an effort to help reduce tensions between Pakistan and India".³⁵ As C. Raja Mohan contends, for Obama "success in Afghanistan depends on facing the problems in Pakistan. These in turn depend upon ending Pakistan's insecurities vis-a-vis India, especially on Kashmir."³⁶ India neither welcomes being seen in the context of the Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy nor US offers to mediate between it and Pakistan. Indeed, even before he had taken office Obama's indication that he would appoint a special envoy to South Asia to perform such a role was promptly rejected by India's External Affairs Minister.³⁷ It has been suggested by some analysts, therefore, that "ties between India and the US are [now] on a downward trajectory and cannot in the short-term at least – have the kind of sparkle that was seen during the Bush era."³⁸

It has been suggested that US policy towards Asia moves in a pattern of historical cycles and that, therefore, "one might well anticipate increasing US disengagement from the region".³⁹ Although it may be first and foremost now Asia may not be so for the duration of the Obama administration. In addition to the latent competition with China, the situation in Afghanistan, and the episodic crises generated by North Korea, all of which will continue to require Washington's attention, it has been widely recognised (with words to this effect emanating from many of the recent summits) that the US now accepts that it needs to co-operate with Asian states (particularly China and India) to meet a range of global challenges including climate change. It seems highly unlikely, therefore, that the US will lose interest in Asia so quickly since what happens in the region has profound implications for US global interests. For many Asian states, as Robert Sutter argues, America remains indispensable for their security and prosperity and so it is very much in their interests for the US to remain engaged and committed.

Notes

¹ Jeffrey Bader, National Security Council Senior Director for Asian Affairs, FIC Briefing, Foreign Press Center, New York, September 23 2009, <http://fpc.state.gov/129590.htm> (accessed 11 November 2009).

² *Ibid.* Although it was President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo of the Philippines who became the first Asian leader to have a summit at the White House. *Channelnewsasia*, ‘Obama backs Philippines peace push’ 31 July 2009, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/print/445908/1/.html (accessed 31 July 2009).

³ *Channelnewsasia*, ‘Obama says US enjoys deep historical ties with SE Asia’, 15 November 2009, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/print/1018417/1/.html> (accessed 20 November 2009). It had been intended that the first such leaders’ meeting would be held in 2007 but this was eventually postponed by Obama’s predecessor: a postponement which drew much adverse comment in the region.

⁴ *Channelnewsasia*, ‘Indian PM offers to work with Obama’, 24 November 2009, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/print/1020219/1/.html (accessed 1 December 2009).

⁵ *Channelnewsasia*, ‘Washington to ink Southeast Asia pact with eye on China’, 21 July 2009, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/print/443840/1/.html (accessed 24 July 2009). A US willingness to sign the TAC had been signalled by Obama before coming to office and Clinton indicated during her February trip that the US had begun the process to accede to the Treaty. *Channelnewsasia*, ‘Hillary Clinton sees new role for Indonesia in US “smart power”’, 18 February 2009, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/print/409907/1/.html (accessed 20 February 2009).

⁶ Bader, *op.cit.*

⁷ Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, Remarks at the Asia Society, New York, February 13 2009, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/02/117333.htm> (accessed 11 November 2009).

⁸ Diane K. Mauzy and Brian L. Job, “US Policy in Southeast Asia: Limited Re-engagement after Years of Benign Neglect”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. XLVII, No. 4, July/August 2007, p. 622.

⁹ Michael J. Green, “The United States and Asia after Bush”, *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 21, No. 5, December 2008, p. 591. Green’s article is a rejoinder to that by T. J. Pempel in the same issue. Pempel contends that foreign policy under Bush “deviated sharply from the path taken by earlier administrations ... and worsened America’s position across much of East Asia”. T. J. Pempel, “How Bush bungled Asia: militarism, economic indifference and unilateralism have weakened the United States across Asia”, *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 21, No. 5, December 2008, pp. 547-48.

¹⁰ Green, *op. cit.*, p.592

¹¹ Robert Sutter, “The Obama Administration and US Policy in Asia”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 31, No. 2, August 2009, p.205.

¹² Green, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹³ Sutter, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁵ Nick Bisley argues that the changes to the US-Japan alliance which have occurred are “central to the reorganisation of American’s regional role and its relationship to American global strategy.” Nick Bisley, “Securing the ‘Anchor of Regional Stability’? The Transformation of the US-Japan Alliance and East Asian Security”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 30, No. 1, April 2008, p. 95.

¹⁶ *Channelnewsasia*, ‘Military cooperation key to US-India relations: US diplomat’, 30 April 2007, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/print/273335/1/.html (accessed 4 May 2007).

¹⁷ Green, for example, suggests that the Obama administration needs to address Bush’s “tactical failings”, whilst Sutter recognises that in its initial approach towards Asia the Obama administration has sought to correct “some generally secondary shortcomings in the Bush administration’s efforts in the region.” Green, *op. cit.*, p. 585 and Sutter, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

¹⁸ The perception in South East Asia especially was that since the Asian financial crises – when for Mauzy and Job US relations with the region “reached their nadir” – America’s position had steadily been eroded with China gaining at its expense. Mauzy and Job, *op.cit.*, pp. 627-28.

¹⁹ Bader, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Clinton, *op. cit.*

²¹ Bader, *op. cit.*

²² Sutter, *op. cit.*, p. 212. Otherwise, unless distracted by a major crisis in North Korea, Obama generally appears to be “inclined to adhere fairly closely to pragmatic and generally constructive US policy approaches to key Asia issues followed in the later years of the Bush administration” as far as Sutter is concerned. *Ibid.*

²³ *Channelnewsasia*, ‘Myanmar will no longer dictate ASEAN ties: White House’, 11 November 2009, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/print/1017098/1/.html (accessed 13 November 2009)

²⁴ At the first ASEAN-US Leaders’ Meeting it was agreed that an ASEAN-US Eminent Persons Group would be established to facilitate increased ASEAN-US cooperation. *Channelnewsasia*, ‘ASEAN, US to set up Eminent Persons Group to enhance cooperation’, 15 November 2009, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/print/1018408/1/.html> (accessed 20 November 2009).

²⁵ Bader, *op. cit.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Channelnewsasia*, ‘US, China stress cooperation on world issues, broach divides’, 17 November 2009, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/print/1018790/1/.html (accessed 20 November 2009).

²⁸ As Paul Buchanan observes, the 2006 QDR clearly identified China as the power most likely to engage in military competition with the US and as a consequence the US has begun to shift its “military-strategic emphasis away from the Atlantic to the Pacific theatre of operation.” Examples of this shift cited include reversing the 60/40 ratio of Atlantic/Pacific submarine deployments; increasing the number of carrier battle groups in the Pacific from five to six as of 2010 (with one of these to be based at Guam for the first time); and the fact that the US Pacific Command is “now the primary government authority in the region, overshadowing the State Department.” Paul Buchanan, “Securing the Outer Perimeter: The US Response to Chinese Expansionism in the Southern Pacific”, *Gauntlet*, Number 1, October 2009, p. 15.

²⁹ Bader, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Robert O. Blake, Jr., Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, speech to School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC, September 9, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/remarks/128753.htm> (accessed 11 November 2009).

³¹ *Channelnewsasia*, ‘US offers Pakistan expanded strategic partnership’, 30 November 2009, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/print/1021492/1/.html (accessed 1 December 2009).

³² Blake, *op. cit.*

³³ *Ibid.* One of the tangible demonstrations of this commitment was the launching of a new wide-ranging ‘Strategic Dialogue’ by the Secretary of State and the Indian External Affairs Minister. This dialogue has five pillars, including: strategic cooperation; science; technology; health and education; and, significantly, energy and climate change. *Ibid.*

³⁴ C. Raja Mohan, “How Obama Can Get South Asia Right”, *The Washington Quarterly*, April 2009, p. 175.

³⁵ ‘US offers Pakistan expanded strategic partnership’.

³⁶ Raja Mohan, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 176. The fact that when Richard Holbrooke was appointed as special envoy his remit did not include India and Kashmir seemed to be a victory for India on this point. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

³⁸ Ranjit Devraj, ‘India-US: Thorny Times Ahead Despite Nuclear Deal’, *Inter Press Service*, May 29, 2009, <http://www.globalissues.org/news/2009/05/29/1656> (accessed 29 November 2009).

³⁹ Mauzy and Job, *op. cit.*, p.641.