



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 58 | April 26, 2010

The New Guam Doctrine

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The new Guam doctrine will mark a significant stepping-stone in the creation of Asia's concert of powers. This ranks as a "brave" prediction, because we do not yet have an Asian concert, and Barack Obama has not yet set foot on Guam to unveil a new doctrine. Both events, though, are approaching.

Asia may not have its concert of powers, but it is certainly having a conversation about a concert. Obama's willingness to join that conversation gives it important impetus. If Obama had not tarried in Washington to deliver the health centerpiece of his first presidential term, we would by now have the new Guam doctrine on display. But for Obamacare, the president would have made his Asian tour in March—Guam, Indonesia, and Australia. That trip is rescheduled for June.

The Guam stop-over will underline the point that the United States is currently spending billions on the island as an assertion of its continuing role as Asia's military guarantor. A new Guam doctrine will be blessed when Obama makes his Guam touchdown. The message is aimed at Japan, as well as China. The nuances will be minutely examined across Asia, as well as in Canberra.

This new doctrine can combine the traditional U.S. role as Asia's military guarantor with Obama's own world view. The beauty of what Obama will offer is that it will have a multilateral dimension, built on the military framework of the U.S. bilateral alliance system in Asia. A simple summary of the alliance and multilateral dimensions of the Obama doctrine would be: We're in Asia to stay, but we're ready to talk about new ways of running the neighborhood.

A new Guam doctrine resonates in Asia—amongst allies and non-allies alike—because Richard Nixon's original version had such an impact. Heading for the Vietnam exit door, Nixon used a stop-over press conference in Guam on July 25, 1969 to float a thought bubble about U.S. allies needing to take care of themselves. In dealing with non-nuclear threats, Nixon said, the United States would "look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for defense."

The rough translation of that at the time in Asia and Australia went like this: We're getting out of Vietnam. Good luck, everybody. For future defense, a D.I.Y. kit will be handy.

Sitting back in Washington, Kissinger later wrote of his "amazement" that what had been private White House musings had suddenly been unveiled in an unscripted, impromptu pronouncement on Guam. The off-the-cuff announcement meant there had been no briefing, consultation, or forewarning for allies.

The strategic shift, via press conference, caused all sorts of frissons across the region, not least in Australia. It did not equal the magnitude of the Nixon-goes-to-China shock, but

Graeme Dobell, Canberra
Correspondent for *The Interpreter*, explains that "This new doctrine can combine the traditional U.S. role as Asia's military guarantor with Obama's own world view. The beauty of what Obama will offer is that it will have a multilateral dimension, built on the military framework of the U.S. bilateral alliance system in Asia."



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it certainly made an impression. Indeed, it was the reaction of allies, as much as Nixon’s words, that turned the Guam press conference into the Guam doctrine.

After Guam, Australia was on notice that its strategy of forward defense in Asia and reliance on the great and powerful ally did not amount to a defense policy. As the U.S. exit from Vietnam gathered pace, the Guam doctrine grew in significance.

Every Australian Defense White Paper since 1976 has been, in part, a post-Guam document. Much of the eternal argument that ricochets around the Australian defense community is a continuation of that argument about what the Guam doctrine means. How much weight for the alliance versus spending on self-reliance? Defend the continent or help the neighborhood? Is it a regional capability or an expeditionary?

So a new Obama version of the Guam doctrine carries plenty of historical weight. Compared to Nixon, though, Obama’s doctrine will have a strikingly different context and import. Nixon’s Guam message was about withdrawal. Obama’s Guam message will be about staying—militarily, economically, diplomatically.

The doctrine to be expressed by Obama’s Guam touchdown can be viewed as an affirmation of the U.S. commitment to its permanent forward deployment in Asia, or more deeply as an expression of the U.S. ability to act as an Asian power. Stopping in Guam is, plain and simple, a nod to the Defense Department.

Obama’s touchdown in Guam will acknowledge the significance of a work in progress—the creation of a new U.S. military superbase. The affirmation of the U.S. commitment to its role as an Asian power has been a standard couple of paragraphs in most post-Cold War speeches in the region, by U.S. presidents and State and Defense secretaries. Guam puts fresh dollars behind those words. The new superbase is a military statement of intent expressed in concrete.

Obama inherits a major spending program on Guam. The superbase is coming into existence because of decisions made under George W. Bush. Obama has the chance to say what it means for U.S. policy in Asia.

What Obama can do is define the meaning of a new Guam doctrine in ways that reach beyond the military dimension. The Obama version of the Guam doctrine can be about conversation, as well as concrete. The conversation is about creating an Asian security system where Asian powers have the ultimate say about how the structure is built and operated.

It is possible to talk about a new Guam/Obama doctrine in Asia because this young president pays attention to the basics—playing to his strengths and U.S. assets—in ways that chime with Asian needs. Call this the charm and chime strategy. Under Obama, the U.S. can maintain and reinvigorate its traditional military role in Asia, yet also take a full part in the concert conversation. Talk about charm and chime. Previous concerts of power have been created and run by the great powers. Asia’s concert conversation, such as it is, is led by the middle powers.

Obama took a lot of criticism in his first year as president for being ready to talk and listen. In Asia, that makes him a natural player. Around here, the construction of a concert of powers is still at the talking and listening stage. To repeat the point: we have a conversation of powers, not yet a concert. And the United States is an essential part of that conversation.

A version of this article was published in The Interpreter on April 14, 2010.

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