

Obama's Summit Absence Needs to be put in Perspective

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Not even the sharpest media spin can spare the United States from criticism making the rounds in East Asia over President Barack Obama's inability to show up for the ASEAN-led summit season earlier this month. The contrast could not be clearer. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang stand out as China's tag team at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Leaders Meeting in Bali and later the East Asia Summit in Brunei, which chairs ASEAN this year. Yet the US-China rivalry for influence and competing interests in Southeast Asia is nuanced and not zero-sum. It is a mistake to read too much into Obama's absence this time.

Timing and expectations are partly culpable for the criticisms that have been leveled at the Obama administration. In the first year of his first term, Obama had raised many hopes and anticipation in Asia by declaring himself America's "first Pacific president" in view of his Asia-Pacific upbringing. With adept representation by former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Obama later put his deeds where his rhetoric had been, coming up with America's much-touted "pivot" to Asia, also known as a strategy of "rebalance."

It was a welcome move for many in Asia who were skeptical of China's rise. The rebalance strategy reassured US partners and allies that Beijing would not be able to dominate their neighborhood at will. The US went on to secure and expand strategic partnerships with Southeast Asian countries from its former foe in Hanoi to newer friends in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore, underpinned by tried and tested treaty allies in Bangkok, Manila, Tokyo, and Seoul farther afield. For a while, China's rise looked fenced in by a ring of US friends and allies. Beijing may have felt that the US rebalance was really a ruse for a new era of containment.

But now in the first year of Obama's second term, the pendulum has swung back. The US is preoccupied with its domestic polarization and tightening fiscal constraints and distracted by emerging global instabilities and challenges in the Middle East and elsewhere. Its government shutdown and potential debt default show that the US has to get its fiscal house in order and free itself from being hijacked by minority partisan columns in its legislature. These isolationism-leaning fringe columns, as symbolized by the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party, do not augur well for US credibility and commitment abroad.

In addition, the post-Arab Spring crises from Cairo and Damascus to the sticky wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and Iran's new charm and Israel's fear of US neglect will keep the policy elites in Washington's beltway corridors fixated away from Asia.

At the same time, China's new leadership in Xi and Li reinforces the sense of the US being outmaneuvered. Under Xi, Beijing has displayed more flexibility vis-a-vis ASEAN claimant countries, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, over tensions and conflicting territorial claims in the South China Sea. The Chinese have capitalized on the 10th anniversary of ASEAN-China relations this year to ensure it becomes the single most important trade and investment partner of ASEAN.

When all the huff and puff of the summits subsides, it will be clear that Southeast Asia is not about all China and no US or all US and no China. It is about some of both in a moving balance that sometimes will appear elusive and multidirectional. The US is not going away, and China is not going to dominate ASEAN. US diplomats most likely will work harder to compensate for Obama's absence.

Unlike the George W. Bush administration, which was notorious for deliberately missing key ASEAN-led meetings, Obama has been very willing, but just unable, to attend ASEAN's summits this year. He could have cancelled his trip as soon as the US government shutdown was announced but waited several days until the departure window was completely closed.

ASEAN will remain bifurcated between development and security, constrained by its geography. For prosperity, ASEAN economies will need China more than ever. China is now the main locomotive for growth and development in the entire East Asia region, the primary anchor of the economies represented in the East Asia Summit.

Yet, on peace and stability, the US role will still be needed as a counterbalance.

If the US were to move its capital to its west coast, perhaps San Francisco, then this strategic calculus would change crucially, whereby the US could truly and for all time be a bona fide Pacific superpower. But Washington being three time zones away toward the Atlantic, the US thus sometimes becomes a Pacific superpower, other times a policeman and enforcer elsewhere and all over the place. While it no longer fits President Obama's earlier "all-in" metaphor for the Asia Pacific, the US is still substantially in.

Yet the near-term fallout from Obama's absence should not be underestimated. The ASEAN states must now see their planned community under codified rules and provisions of the ASEAN Charter as an imperative. ASEAN will have to rely more on itself to maintain its centrality and neutrality and to

focus on its development and connectivity as a 10-member grouping, irrespective of Chinese and US maneuvers in the near future.

Beijing would be smart not to overplay and exploit Obama's absence. Already Obama's cancelled visits to Manila and Kuala Lumpur in addition to Bali and Brunei on the one hand, and Xi's and Li's full-court press in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam on the other, featuring the Chinese leaders' unprecedented parliamentary addresses in Indonesia and Thailand, have fanned alarmist flames over China's ostensible regional dominance.

The new Chinese leadership duo appears poised and sophisticated. To reside in a neighborhood that would be good for them, Chinese leaders need to be measured and judicious. They would want all ASEAN but they also need some US to keep the environment conducive to peace and prosperity for themselves.

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