

The US Looks Good as Obama Heads to Malaysia
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President Barack Obama is scheduled to visit Malaysia in April as part of a trip that will also include Japan, the Philippines and South Korea. In Kuala Lumpur's case, it is a trip almost certain to be overshadowed, and justifiably so, by the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 somewhere in the Indian Ocean.

That isn't to say Obama shouldn't hold his nose when he comes to Kuala Lumpur. This is a country that observes the forms of democracy but in practice ignores them. The ruling coalition, dominated by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), has maintained itself in power since independence in 1957 through gerrymandering and suppression of the opposition, most recently through a trumped-up verdict in a sodomy appeal against opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, ironically just a few hours before MH370 disappeared.

It may be that sensitivity over the airline tragedy and the constant drumbeat of criticism hurled against Kuala Lumpur in recent weeks will cause Obama to avoid denouncing the government of Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak over its treatment of Anwar and other undemocratic practices, despite calls to do so. In the long run, that could be a wise decision on Washington's part regardless of how one feels about UMNO's heavy-handed ways.

On a regional and international level, the disappearance of the plane, and the widely differing reactions by the American and Chinese governments, are likely to play a wider role in the President's efforts to "pivot" American diplomacy and military strategy to Asia, strengthening the impression that the US remains the pre-eminent technological and military power in the Pacific.

Angered over Malaysia's fumbling of the search effort, China appears to have shot itself in the foot through unrelenting bluster and criticism, demonstrating Beijing's continuing inability to get the tone right in the region. It wants its neighbors to go along with its claim of hegemony over the South China Sea, but it doesn't even know how to talk to them. The US has been quietly helpful, something the Malaysians likely appreciate and which could serve to nudge Kuala Lumpur away from recent flirtations with China.

Washington has long known and been privately critical of various abuses, such as the unsolved 2006 murder of the Mongolian translator and party girl Altantuya Shaariibuu and the continuing legal acrobatics concerning Anwar. But it also wants Malaysia in its camp. The 2010 release of the Wikileaks cables were critical but also showed US diplomats describing Malaysia as a moderate Muslim state and a bulwark in Southeast

Asia. Given the Obama administration's ambitions in Asia, the president is expected to make a gesture toward Anwar's predicament, but Washington has more to gain by reluctantly going along at this point.

By contrast, China, which has no interest in democratic niceties, is having little soft power success close to home. It has already alienated the Philippines by trying to grab various shoals on the basis of its “nine-dash line” map of the South China Sea. In Hong Kong, the public – beyond certain oligarchs and conservatives – remains stubbornly averse to mainland domination. The same can be said for Taiwan, where suspicion of Beijing remains high.

[In Taiwan last weekend](#), hundreds of thousands of people joined a student protest against a trade bill, turning the affair into a wider protest against a Chinese invasion of its press, politics and business community. In Hong Kong, there has been rising irritation over what is felt to be Chinese intrusion into politics, failure to abide by promises of greater democracy and bulldozing of the press.

In the case of the missing airliner, the US, either by accident or on purpose, has quietly stepped into the gap, much as the US Seventh Fleet did in the wake of the widespread destruction in the central Philippines caused by Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda in November; at the time, the Chinese response to the disaster was late and overshadowed by the efforts of half a dozen other countries.

Washington's policy, announced in 2012, of a pivot or “rebalancing” of its diplomatic and military policy toward Asia, has largely stumbled. In particular, Obama, tied up with a Congressional budget crisis, skipped important regional meetings last August while Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang scored diplomatic triumphs in five Southeast Asian countries. The disasters, tragic as they may be, have helped the US regain the initiative.

According to a source with close connections to the government, Malaysia was first reluctant to ask the Americans for help in dealing with the missing Boeing 777-200, which vanished with 239 passengers and crew, refusing offers of assistance from the US.

But in succeeding days, superior American air technology, combined with the fact that the airplane had been manufactured in the US, began to assert itself. The Federal Aviation Administration, the National Transportation Safety Board, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other US agencies accustomed to dealing with air disasters offered quiet help behind the scenes.

In the meantime, the Chinese, with 152 of their countrymen aboard the plane, first blustered, demanding stepped up efforts to find it. Then they announced that a Chinese satellite had found what was thought to be the wreckage of the plane – in the wrong ocean. The Chinese have recouped, sending a flotilla into the Indian Ocean to aid in the search – which is now being coordinated by the Australians. Chinese planes are searching the area.

Beijing has alienated the Malaysians by neglecting to constrain angry relatives of those aboard the aircraft. Crowds broke through police lines protecting the Malaysian embassy,

demanding that the Malaysian ambassador kneel before them. One group presented the embassy with a statement that the families would regard Malaysia as “murderers” if it was discovered that the government was at fault in any aspect of the search, according to news services.

In the meantime, sources in Malaysia say, the Americans have played a crucial low-key role, advising on the search. An FBI team analyzed the flight simulator found in the home of Captain Zaharie Ahmad Shah, ending speculation that the device might have contained data that could have been a dry run for taking the plane off course. A P-8A Poseidon, the most advanced plane looking for the wreckage, is supplied by the US Navy. P3 Orion search planes in the service of various countries were made in the US. A US Navy “ping finder” is aboard an Australian vessel, the Ocean Shield, working the search zone.

In this instance, the Americans seem to have played their cards right. Staying relatively unseen and allowing superior technology and sophistication to do the talking for them.

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