

A New American Leadership in Asia-Pacific
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The US must reinforce its ties to regional allies and partners, so as to strengthen its position in the region

Heading into the 2012 US presidential election, President Barack Obama and his opponent, former Gov. Mitt Romney, have so far remained light on details on America's objectives in the global community post-election. This election has so far been dominated understandably by discussions on getting America back on track towards economic recovery.

Still, the noticeable absence of a true foreign policy discussion on the campaign trail (although opportunities may arise during the presidential and vice presidential debates) is disheartening. Although the United States' pivot towards Asia-Pacific is not a secret, the reasons why are left unknown to the American public, who are left to guess.

The rise of China and the Asia-Pacific is taken as a given, and its importance to the future of US prosperity is perhaps reason enough for an American presence. However, far from rising peacefully, a series of territorial disputes have cast doubt on the security and stability of the region. Refusing to take sides in these disputes, the question then is what exactly are the US's goals in the area? What are its objectives?

These are questions that must be debated in a public forum, not simply to remain accountable to the electorate but to inform its regional partners and allies. True Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's tour of Asia earlier this year was to accomplish the latter, but there is always more to do.

Difficulties Ahead

Vietnam and the Philippines have looked towards the United States to balance against Chinese assertiveness. It is no secret that these two countries, the latter an ally, would like to see the US insert itself into the South China Sea disputes so as to bring about a favorable resolution.

Still, Vietnam and the Philippines, among others, remain wary of President Obama's insistence of American neutrality in the South China Sea disputes. If China were to take aggressive action against either country—and remember that the Philippines holds a mutual defense treaty with the US—how would the US respond?

This wariness has also the unintended but understandable effect of reducing American credibility in the region. Vietnam has pressed for the US to lift its ban on arms sale to the country, but has been reminded again and again that it must first improve its human rights, among other concerns. This is not an unreasonable request; however, for what reason does Vietnam have to honor US demands? It can and has already purchased armaments from other nations (for example, submarines from Russia).

Nevertheless, America's hesitation to commit is not without reason, for territorial disputes are not exclusively the domain of Southeast Asian nations but include the Pacific as a whole. North of the South China Sea, Japan and South Korea have butted heads over the Takeshima/Dokdo islands, in addition to the long-running Senkaku/Diaoyu islands disputes between Japan and China.

These territorial disputes are not a simple matter of choosing sides. The Takeshima/Dokdo disputes present a worst case scenario for Washington, in which it

cannot support claims of either ally. Moreover, the US cannot approach each dispute as mutually exclusive to one another. By choosing a side, the US would establish a precedent that would limit its ability to negotiate a peaceful resolution for other territorial disputes in the area.

What the US should do, what it could do, and what it would do is up in the air. Yet, it is these questions that America's leaders must first answer for itself before it can seriously commit in the Pacific and elsewhere in the world.

Idealism must be tempered by realism. Opportunities will be balanced by challenges. What the US can achieve in the Pacific will be determined by its willingness.

An Internationalist Approach

The United States must reevaluate its place on the world stage. It remains a mighty force to be reckoned with, but it can no longer intervene in foreign disputes without a clear strategy. It can no longer fund open-ended operations. Moreover, it can no longer act alone.

Multilateralism over unilateralism, engagement over containment, and the rule of law over rule of might—these are the principles that American foreign policy should endeavor to adopt.

Libya is perhaps a more recent example of an American-led multilateral approach to conflict resolution; however, perhaps the Persian Gulf War (the first Iraq War) would serve as a better example. Armed with a UN Security Council resolution when diplomacy failed, the US and its allies swiftly ousted the Iraqi army from Kuwait. Not all international disputes will prove to be as black and white, but it is evidence enough that an internationalist approach can succeed.

The US should seek to engage the issue rather than contain or avoid it. The disputes in the South China Sea and associated complications make this difficult for the US, which has only so far expressed its desire to see a peaceful resolution and respect for the high seas. Still, it will be difficult to take seriously America's pivot if it will not engage one of the most pressing matters at hand in the region. On this, American leadership is required if it is to remain relevant or have any effect in Asia-Pacific, carrying the banner of international law and order.

A New International Forum

Although the effectiveness of the United Nations can be debated, the spirit upon which it was founded cannot; and it is this spirit that the United States must uphold.

It may be necessary for a similar organization to be established in Asia-Pacific for the same reason the UN was founded: to prevent conflict. The current territorial disputes are reason enough for an international body of Asian nations to be established. One can, of course, point to APEC or ASEAN as examples of this; however, suffice it to say, neither body has the binding power necessary to prevent conflict.

A new forum should address and rectify these issues, formed around a common defense policy. Said group would be similar to the UN Security Council minus the permanent members, capable of enacting sanctions when necessary. This organization would be able to do what APEC and ASEAN cannot, which is to protect and enforce international law.

American leadership in this capacity may not be a nation that necessarily leads from the front on the battlefield, but a nation that can negotiate and facilitate peaceful resolutions. What the US hopes to achieve in Asia-Pacific must first be determined by its

leaders. What is clear is that American leadership can still prove valuable if it can adapt to changing circumstances.

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