

The US Rebalance Off-Balance: Missing the Party in Asia

Written by Rosemary Foot

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ROSEMARY FOOT, NOV 13 2013

"We are disappointed.... I think the [APEC] summit will go on, there is a long-term plan. (But) without Obama, you can imagine how disappointed we are. We could hardly imagine he wouldn't come." (Indonesian Information Minister, Bali, Reuters, 4 October 2013).

"While, politically, we understand the reason for the president's decision, of course it is disappointing for all those involved... Not just those in diplomatic circles, but for a small country to host the president of the United States is a source of excitement, particularly someone of Obama's celebrity." (Brunei Foreign Ministry Official, Straits Times, 4 October 2013)

In April 2013, Joseph Yun, then the US Acting Assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific, addressed a Senate Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the US policy of "rebalance" towards Asia. He argued that this rebalancing, originally introduced by the Obama administration in 2011 as the "pivot", reflected the "profound recognition that the future prosperity and security of our nation will be defined by events and developments in the region". Yun went on to explain how the US commitment towards the Asia-Pacific can best be demonstrated, noting that while security and defence-related cooperation is important, US "allies and partners... also tell us that, as we deepen our military engagement, we should continue also to emphasize the diplomatic, development, economic, and people-to-people engagement in order to demonstrate our longer-term commitment to our rebalance strategy." (Yun Testimony, Washington DC, 25 April 2013).

President Obama's intended visit to the region in early October 2013 was supposed to be a key plank in demonstrating that commitment. Obama was to have attended the East Asia Summit in Brunei, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Conference held in host-country Indonesia – a country that because of its influence in ASEAN, the G20 and the Organization of Islamic Conference, deserves sustained attention. In Kuala Lumpur, Obama would have attended the Global Entrepreneurship Summit. More importantly still, it would have been the first time that a sitting US president has visited Malaysia since 1966. Obama was also due to be in the Philippines in order both to demonstrate that the US remains a loyal ally when there is a perceived increased threat from China, but probably also to give the message that Manila needs to stay in step with its ASEAN neighbours on the South China Sea dispute and not surprise them with diplomatic positions that leave them nonplussed and that would likely exacerbate the issue.

On the economic front, while the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations were hardly going to be wrapped up during the limited period devoted to their discussion in Brunei, nevertheless, a strong presidential statement sensitive to the concerns of the negotiating parties would have been helpful. Obama could also have stressed to his audience that he would be putting his shoulder behind steps that would lead to a more rapid conclusion to the deal. A strong multilateral statement of support in Bali for successful completion would have put pressure on the US Congress to give the President the fast-track trade promotion authority he would prefer to have for the final stages of the bargaining process.

The US President would have also had discussions with the Japanese and South Korean leaderships, at a time

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when relations between Tokyo and Seoul have degenerated into an unproductive cycle of mutual hostility. This hostility between America's major allies in Northeast Asia prevents the further development of US policies designed to respond to China's military advancement. It also undercuts the assumptions that all three countries are able to stay in step on policy towards North Korea, the primary immediate threat to the security of both Asian states. In sum, there were many reasons for the US President to be in Asia, and his absence only served to resurrect an underlying fear that the administration is not in a position, either politically or materially, to make good on its commitments to the region.

The cancellation of the Obama visit matters too, above all, because of the larger issue relating to the slow evolution of the security order in the Asia-Pacific. The United States has benefitted for several decades from the perception in large parts of the region that it has acted as a benign hegemon that has no territorial ambitions and can act as a stabilizing force allowing the serious business of economic development to continue without distraction (Goh, 2008). But more than this, the two statements quoted at the start of this article suggest that the United States still occupies a unique leadership role, and that there remains a belief that the success of many regional multilateral agendas requires the presence of a US President. In this instance, moreover, it is not just any US President, but one who had made much of his "Pacific" roots, who had lived for a time in Indonesia, and had promised in a dramatic way that the US was "back" in Asia, and meant to stay. The disappointment at Obama's absence is felt far more keenly because of the promise associated with his personal history.

Washington also benefits from continuing uncertainty about China's intentions. This is one reason why China for many years after 1997 emphasized through its regional diplomacy and rhetoric that its resurgence represented an opportunity rather than a threat to Asian states (Deng, 2006). Regional states naturally want productive relations with Beijing as the dominant country in their midst, and one that has become so important to their economic well-being. They repeat loudly and often that they do not wish to be put in a position where they have to choose between the United States and China were their strategic rivalry to tip over into conflict. That kind of polarization would inevitably decrease the policy options of other states in the Asia-Pacific and would underline the competitive rather than cooperative elements in the US-China relationship (Shambaugh, 2013). While in Bali for the APEC meeting, President Xi Jinping announced policies of direct relevance to his hosts and to the wider region, including a commitment to create an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank that will help connect the region together. In 2014, China will host APEC and will undoubtedly push to make this proposal a concrete reality (Armstrong, East Asia Forum, 6th October 2013). Significantly, Xi became the first foreign leader to address Indonesia's Parliament. Beijing has also offered a \$US15billion currency swap agreement to Jakarta, and promised significant increases in trade with Malaysia.

Nevertheless, while Beijing's leaders championed and further promoted their economic ties with regional countries during the October summit period, they still find it difficult to reassure neighbours that their economic largesse will not be used as a source of leverage for political ends. Neighbours also doubt that they are willing to modify sovereignty claims in the East and South China seas to a degree that will calm tensions and avoid conflict. China's provision of economic public goods is hugely welcome and important, but public goods in the security field are vital too. These could encompass the establishment of real and constraining confidence-building measures, and the development of defence doctrines and military procurement policies that better reflect the cooperative security ideas inherent in what China referred to as its "New Security Concept" first introduced in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Gill, 2005).

However, while all of this uncertainty and suspicion with respect to China represents fertile soil for a continuing US hegemonic position in the Asia-Pacific, perceptions of the US ability to sustain a long term presence matter. And as Joseph Yun suggested, diplomatic engagement at presidential levels also really matters. Over the longer term, the Asia-Pacific security order suggests a much closer correspondence in power and influence between China and the United States. Far better for all if this convergence is reasonably lengthy, allowing time for the major protagonists and their Asia-Pacific neighbours to find mechanisms to manage rivalry and conflicts of interest. The events this October suggest for some in Asia that the convergence is coming faster than they would like.

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About the author:

Rosemary Foot, Professor of International Relations and John Swire Senior Research Fellow in the International Relations of East Asia, St Antony's College, University of Oxford. Her most recent publications include (with Andrew Walter) *China, the United States, and Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and (edited) *China Across the Divide: the domestic and global in politics and society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).