



Pogo was Right! by Ralph A. Cossa

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Memo to Congressional Republicans: Remember Ronald Reagan's "shining city on a hill"? You just turned the lights off.

Memo to President Obama: remember your "pivot" to Asia? Its credibility is fading even faster than Congressional approval ratings.

While Democrats and Republicans are playing their "inside the beltway" game of chicken and power politics, no one seems to be concerned about the real damage they are doing to America's image abroad, to our "soft power" – the attractiveness of America's ideals, values, and political system. We need to stop focusing on who is "winning" – Obama vs. the Republicans, the White House vs. the Congress, etc. – and talk instead about who is losing: everyone, and especially America's image in the rest of the world.

No, this is not going to be another article about how America's dysfunction is helping Beijing to overshadow the US in Asia and elsewhere. The newspapers are full of such warnings and they are largely right but grossly oversimplified and focused on the wrong problem. No one in Asia wakes up in the morning wishing that their government would treat them more like China treats its citizens. No one in even a quasi-democracy longs for a politburo to tell them what to think or do. Few are lining up to move their families to China in search of a better life (unless your idea of a better life includes increased risk of respiratory illness).

But few look to the US as the model anymore either. America's role as a global leader is also being tarnished, perhaps irreparably. While this may not stop us from arrogantly preaching to the rest of the world, it is already stopping the rest of the world from listening to us. Even our most polished diplomats have trouble trying to persuade other nations that they should be more like us, that the US system is still worth emulating. Those who try are met with derisive laughter. They will look elsewhere for their models, thank you very much!

The president and the Congress have joined together to diminish US credibility abroad. When the president has to cancel his participation in two important meetings in Asia – the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting and the East Asia Summit (EAS) – because we can't get our act together at home, it reinforces the image of US decline. This fact should be enough to make Washington think twice, regardless of whether China or anyone else benefits.

One of the centerpieces of the pivot is America's pursuit of a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), aimed at becoming the "gold standard" for trade agreements in Asia and elsewhere. Does anyone still believe President Obama could get any trade deal through this Congress?

The administration has tried mightily, but with limited success, to persuade others that the pivot is multi-dimensional, containing strong economic and political as well as military aspects. President Obama's failure to show up at the region's two main political and economic gatherings, however, will serve to reinforce the opposite message.

When the secretary of Defense shows up in Korea with an entourage filled with four-star military officers and then is joined by the secretary of State in Japan for consultative talks and the first questions they receive question the US commitment to the region, you know the message is not being received or believed.

Asians (among others) once sought and eagerly followed American leadership. They still would, if they believed that Washington was capable of leading. But how can we lead others when we can't even manage ourselves?

When I was young, we had a famous cartoon character named Pogo. His most famous saying was "we have met the enemy and he is us." Once again, Washington – Democrats and Republicans, the administration and the Congress – are proving Pogo was right.

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