

A Spring of Opportunity for the United States' "Pacific President" by Ernest Z. Bower

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During a November 2009 trip to Tokyo, President Barack Obama underlined his intent to lead the United States to new levels of engagement in the Asia Pacific and harkened back to his upbringing in Indonesia and Hawaii, calling himself the United States' "first Pacific president." As he approaches the spring of 2014, Obama must decide if he will fulfill this legacy.

It is not only the president's place in history that is on the line, but the United States' national security and economic future. The geopolitical calculus clearly defines the need for the United States to be comprehensively invested in Asia. But the country is stuck in an anachronistic and self-absorbed political atmosphere, where politicians view words such as "trade," "Asia," and "foreign policy" as negatives that should be avoided. A paradigm shift in U.S. thinking is needed.

The United States needs to recognize that the country's jobs, safety, and future are inextricably tied to Asia. The outdated Cold War mindset and myopia choking cogent policymaking in Washington must be overcome. The only way for President Obama to live up to his self-described goal to make the United States a leader in the Asia Pacific is for him to tell Americans the truth, shift the political rhetoric, and lead.

The president holds all the necessary levers to drive this overdue shift, but he needs to act now, not wait until after November's mid-term elections to set a course that will anchor U.S. interests in Asia.

The context for the change in thinking has been established. The United States has declared its "pivot" to Asia, now branded as a "rebalancing." The U.S. military has been forthright and relatively efficient in implementing its updated posture in the Indo-Pacific region. Those steps are evident and clear. Now it is necessary to bring trade and people-to-people ties to the table.

This historic window will not remain open for long. Most of Asia wants and needs the United States to substantially deepen its engagement across the region. China is the motivating factor behind this strong pull for U.S. engagement. Asian friends and allies want to know that the United States' new focus on the region is sustainable. In this context, words matter. Keen Asian analysts, friends, and competitors are looking for the establishment of a political foundation in the United States that clearly defines U.S. interests in economic

growth, security, innovation, and cooperation on global issues in Asia.

President Obama can take several steps, starting in the next few months, to accomplish his goals:

1. **Talk to Americans about Asia.** Before making his April visit to South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, and the Philippines, the president should begin talking about the importance of Asia to U.S. citizens. And he should do it in U.S. cities like Akron, Des Moines, and Oakland, where economic growth is an existential issue.

2. **Spend political capital on Trade Promotion Authority.** The United States' partners in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations will not believe Washington is ready to close the trade deal unless the president and senior White House staff knock heads on Capitol Hill to get [Trade Promotion Authority](#). Without it, there is no clear path to ratification of the TPP in Congress. The U.S. economy will wither over time unless the country can help drive economic integration and compete in Asia. The TPP is imperfect, but economically and geostrategically essential to U.S. national interests. First, the president must work on getting Democratic leaders in Congress aligned with the White House. Second, he must reach out to a pro-trade Republican like Senator Rob Portman to make the case.

3. **Deploy Susan Rice to Asia.** Neither Americans nor Asians believe National Security Advisor [Susan Rice](#) has developed a real sense of what is at stake in the Asia Pacific. She has not visited the region since assuming her new job, and her [Asia speech at Georgetown University](#) in November did not convince either those wanting to believe or the skeptics that she was developing a good feel for regional issues and personalities. She should travel to Asia to advance the president's April and November trips, meet and engage key leaders, and position herself to be the key adviser on a real turn to the region.

4. **Make the Asia trip in April count.** The planned out-of-cycle trip to Asia in April is a smart move that will kick into high gear a year of diplomacy meant to send a strong message about U.S. commitment. This year will include two presidential trips to Asia (in April and November), Secretary of State John Kerry's fifth and sixth trips to the region (last week to South Korea, China, and Indonesia, and in July for the ASEAN Regional Forum in Myanmar), Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel's hosting of the ASEAN defense ministers in Honolulu in April, and Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker's mission with U.S. CEOs to four ASEAN countries before the end of summer. While in Asia, the president should remember the following:

- a. *The United States' force posture needs roots in the Philippines.* Many observers expect that President Obama will

be able to announce the completion of an agreement for greater rotational access to the Philippines for the U.S. military. But any Philippine presidential candidate in 2016 will face the atavistic urge to find fault with that agreement. To ensure any deal has deep and sustainable roots in the Philippines, the United States should expand its investment in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief work and in maritime security operations, the importance of which were proved by the post-Typhoon Haiyan relief effort and China's occupation of Scarborough Shoal. The president should also ensure that likely Philippine presidential candidates, especially Vice President Jejomar Binay, are on stage with him and President Benigno Aquino if he announces an agreement.

b. The theme of strengthening ASEAN needs to be developed and supported. While in Malaysia, Obama should advance the theme of a strong ASEAN. This was most recently advanced by John Kerry last week during his visit to the ASEAN Secretariat to meet Secretary-General Le Luong Minh. The president should talk about the need to strengthen ASEAN, both through its members' own investments in the institution and through support from the United States and other partners such as Australia, Japan, Korea, and the European Union.

5. **Partner with the private sector.** The most powerful chords of U.S. engagement across the Indo-Pacific region outside the security sphere have been through the private sector, including both companies and nonprofit organizations. Other nations do not have the level of private-sector development or international engagement that the United States does. If the U.S. government added a wide definition of private investment to its narrative of U.S. involvement in Asia, no other country could contest the comprehensiveness of its involvement. The White House should use this strength and the president should bring U.S. corporate leaders with him to Malaysia, stand tall with private humanitarian groups in the Philippines, and embrace the role of U.S.-based nongovernmental institutions involved in the region.

While critics of the administration suggest that the rebalance to Asia is losing steam and being sacrificed to domestic political realities, they can and should be confounded by a proactive shift toward the region led by President Obama during this spring of opportunity.

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