

Of Symbols and Substance by Elina Noor

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A few days before President Barack Obama was to travel to the region to underscore his Asia pivot, it turned out that United States domestic policy needed to be rebalanced more urgently.

That Obama had to cancel first his visits to Malaysia and the Philippines, then his whole Asia trip, is disappointing but not completely unexpected. The current partial US government shutdown is only the latest manifestation of the political intractability that has plagued his administration since his first term.

Cynics point to the fact that Obama twice before cancelled trips to Asia in 2010 – once, to ensure passage of his healthcare bill and another, to attend to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

Even if he decided to press on with his visit to Malaysia this time, a cursory stop would have achieved little substantively and been symbolic at best. What a symbol it would have been, though, for a sitting US president – and America's "first Pacific president," at that – to return to Malaysia for a visit after nearly half a century. Was this, however, such a missed opportunity for US commitment and leadership in the region and specifically, for enhanced US-Malaysia ties?

To be sure, US statecraft at this time has not been helped by the fact that while Obama decided to stay in Washington, Chinese President Xi Jinping was making his own rounds in Southeast Asia ahead of the APEC meeting in Bali. As a result of Xi's visit to Malaysia, Putrajaya and Beijing have now agreed to elevate bilateral ties to a "comprehensive strategic partnership," the focus of which will be to deepen already expanding trade and increase nascent cooperation in defense and security matters.

Further, Obama arguably missed his chance not only to push the Trans-Pacific Partnership as the US' regional trade policy at the highest level but also take on board first-hand ground sentiment on the issue here.

That said, US-Malaysia relations will remain unperturbed by Obama's trip cancellation for three reasons.

First bilateral ties between the United States and Malaysia are grounded not just in political affinity or dollars but in secure foundations of no less than blood, sweat, and toil. Far from hyperbole, US and Malaysian militaries have carried out joint training and exercises for over four decades and

counting. Oct. 3 recently marked the 20th anniversary of when that kinship was tested in Mogadishu where Malaysian soldiers risked their lives to help rescue the 70 trapped US rangers shot down in their Black Hawk helicopters. Nine of our soldiers were injured, one made the ultimate sacrifice.

Second, Obama's absence paves the way for the first-time visits of three US Cabinet secretaries – Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker, and Trade Representative Michael Froman. The visits by Pritzker and Froman will be timely given where TPP negotiations are (or not) at this juncture while Kerry, distracted by events in the Middle East and often seen as having a greater interest in that region, is overdue for a visit to Malaysia.

Finally, but no less significantly, whether Obama turns up relative to Xi or whether Malaysia has a formal partnership with one or the other does not bear upon the quality of our overall relations with the United States and China. Malaysia's ties with these major powers are far from binary. To view them in mutually exclusive terms would be a simplistic reduction of what in reality are rich, cross-cutting, and commonly reinforcing interests between and among all three in a messy noodle bowl of regional economic and security frameworks.

Obama may have had to cancel his visit this time but he has also committed to making the trip here before the end of his term. What we should do is make a note of it – perhaps with a considered shrug – then move on. Institution building carries on despite one missed visit. Keep calm and carry on.

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