



The changing state of US-Asia ties By Simon Tay

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US President Barack Obama's decision to postpone his visit to Indonesia and Australia last week was understandable. The health-care bill, a center-piece in his legislative agenda, was at a critical juncture and domestic priorities trump international visits. Moreover, the president had visited Asia less than six months ago and has rescheduled for June, not so far off.

Yet while the postponement will be accepted – including by the Indonesians, who had looked forward to welcoming Obama to the land where he spent part of his youth – it is neither insignificant nor without consequence. This goes beyond the symbolism of the Chinese premier deciding to visit Indonesia before Obama arrives in June. It points to deeper questions about America's future in Asia. And it also touches upon the different visions of the regional architecture that have been put forward by Australia, Japan, and ASEAN.

Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has proposed an Asia-Pacific Community while Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama has spoken of an East Asian Community. In the meantime, ASEAN leaders have emphasized the group's centrality and would prefer to develop existing regional structures instead of creating new ones. Some in ASEAN propose expanding the East Asian Summit, where ASEAN hosts the leaders of China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. Singapore Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong recently suggested bringing in the US and Russia, to make what might be called an ASEAN+8. Details have yet to be given. But this is more than just a question of acronyms and numerals.

Asia may propose, but much will depend on US attitudes. Its willingness to engage Asia cannot be taken for granted. The postponement of Obama's visit to Indonesia is another sign of how the mood is changing in the US.

The Obama administration began with considerable ambitions in Asia. It showed its commitment in the first ASEAN-US summit, with the president personally declaring himself the first Pacific President. But at the end of last year, when Obama journeyed to Singapore for the APEC leaders meeting, he was pilloried at home. Concurrently, frustration about joblessness grew and the president's approval ratings fell. The US economy remains fragile now and domestic issues continue to take precedence over international ones.

The consequence may well be a drift in America's relations with East Asia. Consider trade: when President

Obama attended the APEC leaders meeting, he won kudos for showing interest in the Trans-Pacific Partnership. But the truth is that a number of free trade agreements that the US has already negotiated – with South Korea, for instance – remain mired in Congress, unratified.

When US attention does turn to Asia, its agenda can be worrying. It is now filled with complaints about China, including its undervalued currency. This signals a growing belief among Americans that trade with Asia is not always to their benefit. Given this mood, it is possible the US will either be largely absent from Asia, or engage with it acrimoniously.

In the past, Asians would have sought to accommodate US demands. Not so now. China for one sees no need to bend to US pressure. Even Japan is openly debating the value of US military bases in the country. Asians are growing more confident and self-assertive, and not without justification.

But Asian triumphalism must be avoided. So too must the belief that Asians can go it alone, without the US. There are security threats and rivalries in the region that continue to require US involvement. Moreover, the US is still by far the largest economy, and a critical market for Asia.

Instead of simply waiting for Obama, Asians should seek to engage the US in new and more sustainable ways. One forum can be APEC. But it is focused on economics and its membership goes beyond just Asia and the US.

Another forum can be the summit that Obama began with ASEAN. This is important as a complement to the active ties that ASEAN has with China, Japan, India, and other key players.

Another initiative by Asians may be useful. Hence the various proposals. While these differ, some key principles can be aligned. First, any new arrangement should aim to ensure a regular dialogue among strategic partners, especially the US. However, we must accept that these dialogues cannot occur too often. The political reality is that while the US continues to be important to Asia, its leadership may not always be present.

Second, any new arrangement cannot be seen as trumping intra-Asian frameworks, in which ASEAN has been central. No major power, including the US, can be allowed to dominate these arrangements. Third, any new arrangement should be inclusive and based on principles of equality. Asia cannot be run by a small directorate of major powers. Medium- and small-sized states must be included.

The Australian, Japanese and various ASEAN proposals will be debated. Whatever emerges, one hopes it will embody these principles – to the benefit of all those who wish Asia to continue to engage the US and vice versa.