

You Can't Go Home Again: Third Strike for Obama's Indonesia Visit by Ernie Bower

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The prophetic novelist Thomas Wolfe said, "you can't go home again," and apparently he was right. In the wee hours of Friday morning, presidential spokesman Robert Gibbs delivered the verdict on the third attempt for President Obama to visit Indonesia, a country where he grew up and a relationship his administration hopes to enhance in a transformative manner along the lines the Bush administration changed the paradigm with India.

Gibbs explained that with the Gulf of Mexico still in crisis, the president could not follow through on his planned visit to Indonesia and one of the US's five treaty allies in Asia, Australia. This is the third time -- the proverbial third strike -- that the president has postponed his trip.

This decision belies a narrative the Obama administration had tried to write that it was going to get Asia right and engage the region at the highest levels to advance US interests in a serious and sustained manner. It would reverse the woeful attendance record of the Bush administration for showing up for the major events in Asia, and understood that "being there" was more than half the battle for reversing perceptions of US disengagement. That storyline has now lost credibility.

The decision will also send tremors of uncertainty through Southeast Asia. Indonesia is the largest country in ASEAN and it is well known that President Obama has a close personal interest in this anchor nation. If he can't show up there after three attempts, how likely is it that the US is serious about sustaining its involvement in the region at a political level? At a time when the region has serious questions about how far they want to go with China's charm offensive, the apparent lack of US focus will make the region's leaders feel anxious and unbalanced. If not corrected in the near term, it may also send them thinking about strategic alternatives which could influence thinking about regional structures. Is the United States really ready to be part of the East Asia Summit? What if the president of the US doesn't show for summit meetings?

To his credit, the president made the call early, phoned President Yudhoyono and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and explained the urgency of the situation in the Gulf. Both leaders have said they understand and there are plans to meet on the sidelines of the upcoming G20 meeting in Toronto, Canada later this month. But the damage is done.

The factor that must be addressed to prevent this situation from becoming endemic is that leaders -- like President Obama -- must have the courage to explain to Americans why traveling to countries like Indonesia -- the fourth largest nation in the world -- and Australia -- a treaty ally and critical friend --

is as important to our country's economy and national security as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf and that he needs to follow through on plans to develop ties with these countries while he manages the Gulf situation using technology and his team.

A creative writer like Wolfe would be hard pressed to come up with a plot in which a British oil company not only fouls the world renowned Gulf oyster but also derails a significant element of US foreign policy in Asia. Truth, once again, outperforms fiction.

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