



Asia-US Bond Remains Strong

by Tommy Koh

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Professor Simon Tay has written an important new book on the future of US relations with Asia – “Asia Alone: The Dangerous Post-Crisis Divide from America.” He makes the following points:

- The United States is a declining power;
- Asia is a rising power;
- The US will to engage with Asia is waning;
- US influence in Asia is declining;
- Asian regionalism is getting stronger;
- Asia can and will be more ready to take its own path.

I will discuss each of these points.

First, is the US a declining power? I can understand why Tay believes so. He wrote his book last year, while he was the Bernard Schwartz Fellow at the Asia Society in New York. He witnessed the collapse on Wall Street and the fall of US corporate icons. He left the US in recession, with a double-digit unemployment rate and astronomical fiscal deficits. He was concerned about the rising tide of economic nationalism in the United States.

It is, however, a mistake to count Americans out. If its history provides any guide, the US will bounce back from this adversity as it had from all its previous adversities.

My optimism about US prospects is based on a number of its strengths: its ability to attract and retain talent; the excellence of its top universities and research institutions; its culture of innovation and creativity; and its mix of cultural diversity and intellectual freedom. I therefore do not regard the US as a declining power.

Second, is Asia a rising power? Asia is a huge and heterogeneous continent. Some countries and regions of Asia, such as China, India, South Korea, and ASEAN, are rising rapidly. Japan is stagnating at a high plateau. However, we should never forget that Asia is also home to the largest number of poor people in the world. And even in the case of the two rising giants, China and India, their social divisions are great and getting worse.

Asia may be getting richer, but we should be humble and acknowledge our many shortcomings. For example, nearly 500 million Asians do not have access to safe drinking water and 1.9 billion Asians do not have access to basic sanitation. It will be a long time before we can match the West in terms of

economic, military, intellectual, cultural, diplomatic, and moral power.

Third, is US influence in the world and in Asia declining? Tay agrees with *Newsweek* editor Fareed Zakaria’s thesis that we already live in a post-American world. I do not agree.

The US may no longer be a hegemon, but it is the indisputable leader of the world. There is no country or combination of countries that can match its power. The convening power of the US was on full display in April when President Barack Obama invited 48 of the world’s leaders to a nuclear summit – and 47 of them attended.

The only country that can help to bring peace to the Middle East is the US. The Doha Round of trade negotiations cannot be successfully concluded until the US is ready to make a deal with its negotiating partners. In the Asia-Pacific, the US plays an indispensable role in maintaining the region’s peace and security. Contrary to Zakaria’s view, I would argue that we still live in an American world.

Fourth, is the US will to engage with Asia on the wane? I do not think so. I would give President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton a distinction for getting the administration’s Asia policy right.

Soon after taking office, Clinton said that the US was back in Asia. Her first foreign trip as secretary of State was to Asia – and, significantly, included a visit to Indonesia and the ASEAN Secretariat. During his first year in office, Obama visited four Asian countries: Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and China. Declaring himself America’s first “Pacific President”, he attended the APEC Summit in Singapore and held a historic first summit with all 10 ASEAN leaders.

The US has signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. It hosted the second negotiating meeting of the Trans Pacific Partnership, which consists of eight APEC economies – namely, Australia, Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, and the US. Obama recently urged the Congress to ratify the US-South Korea Free Trade Agreement.

My conclusion is that the Obama administration’s No. 1 foreign policy priority is Asia.

Fifth, is Asian regionalism getting stronger? Will Asia exclude the US from its regional architecture, and take its own path?

I agree that Asian regionalism is getting stronger. ASEAN, ASEAN+3, and the East Asia Summit are growing from strength to strength. For obvious reasons, the US cannot join ASEAN or ASEAN+3. However, the important question of whether ASEAN would invite the US (and Russia) to join an expanded East Asia Summit – or a new configuration,

dubbed ASEAN+8 – will be discussed at the ASEAN Summit in Hanoi this month.

My conclusion is that all the countries in Asia, including China, view the US as a stakeholder in Asia's peace and prosperity. No one in Asia is seeking to exclude the US from the region.

Tay is right when he says that there is now a strong sense of Asian regionalism. We see this in ASEAN's new ambitions to be governed by a Charter and to transform itself from an association into a community. At the same time, Asia is aware that it has more convergent than divergent interests with the US.

This is why I am confident that Asian leaders will be wise enough to nurture both Asian regionalism and Asia's trans-Pacific ties with the US. I am, therefore, confident that the US and Asia will be together and not apart in this century.

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