

Obama intensifies “pivot” to Asia

Peter Symonds
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The Obama administration has immediately made clear that its so-called pivot to Asia—an aggressive diplomatic offensive and military build-up against China—will continue and intensify in its next term.

Just two days after the US election, the White House announced on Thursday that the re-elected president’s first international trip would be to South East Asia on November 17-20. President Obama will visit Burma (also known as Myanmar) and Thailand, and take part in the East Asian Summit to be held in Cambodia under the auspices of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Obama’s trip to Burma, the first ever by a sitting US president, is aimed at consolidating American strategic and economic ties with a country that was still being denounced as a pariah state a year ago. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Burma last December and signalled the resumption of full diplomatic relations and the easing of economic sanctions.

The US and international media abruptly shifted gear, giving extensive coverage to the “budding democracy” in Burma and the country’s “reforming president” Thein Sein, a retired general. Changes to the regime have been largely cosmetic: the military remains firmly in charge of the government, the state bureaucracy and the parliament. The US and the junta have relied on opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, now a member of parliament, to sell this charade as a democracy.

Washington’s chief concern has been to undermine longstanding ties between the Burmese military and China. The Burmese regime signalled a shift in September 2011 when it cancelled a multi-billion-dollar Chinese dam project. That decision indicated that it wanted to lessen its dependence on China and seek closer US ties and Western investment in order to address the country’s economic stagnation.

Obama’s visit is aimed at consolidating relations that have developed rapidly on all levels over the past year.

Following changes to Burma’s investment laws, major US corporations, including General Electric, Coca Cola, MasterCard and Visa, are setting up operations. Last month, a top US military delegation visited the country to explore closer ties.

In today’s *Australian*, foreign editor Greg Sheridan, who has close ties to the American foreign policy establishment, enthused that Obama’s visit was “a huge move because it offers a better future for the people of Myanmar. It also significantly reduces Chinese diplomatic and strategic influence in its previously most dependent and pliant client in South East Asia.”

Obama’s visits to Thailand and Cambodia are no less significant. Sheridan continued: “The President’s visit to Thailand shores up a US alliance. The Thais are somewhat torn between US and Chinese influence. This is one country where Obama’s personal popularity can have a measurable geo-strategic influence.”

While in Cambodia to attend the East Asia Summit, Obama will no doubt continue US efforts to undercut that country’s strong ties to China as well. The Obama administration launched the Lower Mekong Initiative in 2010, which includes Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, but not China, as a means of exploiting differences over water use and Chinese-sponsored dam building on the river.

Washington has already used territorial disputes in the South China Sea to drive a wedge between China and ASEAN members, especially Vietnam and the Philippines. The US demand for multilateral talks and a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea has directly cut across China’s efforts to reach bilateral agreements with its neighbours. By encouraging Manila to take a tougher stance, the US generated a dangerous standoff this year between the Philippines and China over the disputed Scarborough Shoal.

Obama’s “pivot” has escalated tensions throughout

Asia, raising the danger of conflict and war. Currently, the US and Japanese militaries are engaged in major war games, involving at least 47,000 military personnel, even as a confrontation continues between Tokyo and Beijing over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. The Japanese government's provocative decision to "nationalise" the rocky outcrops by buying them from their private Japanese owners led to widespread anti-Japanese protests in China.

The joint military exercises are taking place as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) holds its 18th Congress to carry out a once-in-a-decade change in the top leadership. The only concession made by the US and Japan to Chinese sensitivities was to shelve a military drill that pointedly focussed on practicing an amphibious assault to retake "an occupied island." As the Kyodo news agency noted, it was "widely perceived that they had in mind the Senkaku Islands."

Yesterday, Japan's defence minister, Satoshi Morimoto, announced that he wanted to revise the guidelines governing military cooperation with the US. Japan last changed the guidelines in 1997, using tensions with North Korea as the pretext for allowing Japanese forces to support the US military in conflicts in the region—including, potentially, a war with China over Taiwan.

In proposing a further revision, Morimoto stated: "The situation in Asia is not limited to the Korean Peninsula, but there is also the problem of China's increasing maritime activities." Japan's latest annual defence report specifically identifies China and its naval capacities as a threat.

The Obama administration has encouraged Japan to take a stronger stance, including over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. While claiming to take a neutral position in the territorial dispute, US Secretary of State Clinton and other top officials have declared that the US would come to the military aid of Japan in any clash with China over the islands.

The Obama administration's latest activities in South East Asia and North East Asia have not produced a public response by Chinese leaders at the CCP congress. In his opening address on Thursday, President Hu Jintao stressed that China would continue a foreign policy of "peaceful development," while defending the country's national interests. For the past

decade, the Chinese leadership under Hu has sought to avoid conflict, especially with the US, while forging close economic ties in Asia and around the world.

Obama's "rebalance" to Asia has fuelled criticism within the regime, especially in the military, that Hu's policy has allowed the US to rapidly gain the upper hand. While the Chinese leadership is determined to put on a show of unity at the congress, the debate over how to respond to the Obama "pivot" is undoubtedly continuing behind the scenes.



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