

Regional tensions to rise after Obama's no-show in Asia

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President Barack Obama's absence from key Asian summits this week, due to the ongoing government shutdown in Washington, was a palpable sign of American decline that will only compound regional instability.

Over the past four years, Obama has responded to China's economic rise with an aggressive diplomatic and military push back against China—the “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia. Coming on top of the postponed attack on Syria, in the face of overwhelming public opposition, Obama's cancelled trip disconcerted US allies and raised questions throughout Asian ruling circles about Washington's ability to meet its economic and strategic commitments.

The repeated reassurances of Washington's unshakable commitment to the “rebalance” to Asia, issued by Secretary of State John Kerry, Obama's stand-in at this week's summits, all rang hollow. With the government in Washington in shutdown and threatened default, the obvious question was: can the US pay for the “pivot”?

Financial Times commentator Philip Stephens noted the evident disarray of US foreign policy: “These are not the best times for American power and prestige. Mr Obama's contortions over Syria and his willingness to talk to Iran have left traditional Arab allies seething... His absence [in Asia] and the fiscal farce playing out in Washington can scarcely inspire confidence as to the administration's much-vaunted ‘pivot to Asia’. Presence matters in this part of the world, and Mr Obama left the stage to Chinese President Xi Jinping.”

Speaking to the *Economist*, a senior Asian politician succinctly summed up Obama's no-show at the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) talks as “stark raving mad.” The article commented: “It was

hard not to see this week as an episode in a long-running drama of relative American decline in the Asia-Pacific region as China rises. While Mr Obama was trapped in Washington... Xi Jinping was at both summits, and took in Malaysia and Indonesia.”

Xi and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang were not merely present at ASEAN and APEC, but dispensed economic largesse that was designed to sway governments amid a marked slowdown in growth throughout the region. Xi announced economic deals in Malaysia and Indonesia worth tens of billions of dollars, the formation of an Asian infrastructure bank, and foreshadowed a near trebling of Chinese trade with ASEAN countries to \$1 trillion by 2020.

In a thinly veiled reference to US attempts to stoke up maritime disputes involving China and its neighbours, Li warned the East Asian Summit: “Without peace and stability, any [economic] development is out of the question.”

The evident US-China tensions at the two summits only heightens the dilemma facing governments throughout the region, which are heavily dependent on China economically, but in most cases rely on the US militarily. No one wants to fall foul of Washington, as the Obama administration has ratcheted up tensions with China and inflamed potential regional flash points such as the Korean peninsula and disputes in the South China and East China Seas.

The deepening global economic slump has only intensified the rivalry. Various indices highlight the underlying dynamic—China's trade with ASEAN countries has surged over the past two decades, from \$8 billion in 1991 to \$400 billion in 2012, while US trade has grown far more slowly. As a result, the US share of East Asian trade has declined over the past decade from 19.5 to 9.5 percent, while China's share has grown

from 10 to 20 percent. Obama’s aggressive push for a Trans-Pacific Partnership—a trade bloc framed to advance American interests at China’s expense—is a desperate attempt to reverse this trend and reassert US economic dominance.

However, the Obama administration’s chief weapon in prosecuting the “pivot to Asia” has been American military might. Over the past two decades, US imperialism has waged one war after another—especially in the energy-rich Middle East—as a means of undermining its Asian and European rivals and offsetting its historic decline. Obama’s rebalance to Asia involves a massive restructuring and build-up of American forces throughout the Indo-Pacific to back its diplomatic provocations with military clout and to prepare for war with China.

At the Asian summits this week, Kerry’s response to the Chinese “charm offensive” and economic handouts was to once again stir up disputes in the South China Sea between China and its South East Asian neighbours. A bizarre, but nevertheless revealing, remark by a senior State Department official during a briefing en route to the ASEAN summit in Brunei, foreshadowed Kerry’s belligerence on the issue. “The United States and ASEAN are now in violent agreement,” he declared, “on the principles of freedom of navigation and negotiated settlements to the territorial disputes.”

The term “violent agreement”, which the official reaffirmed when questioned, can only have one meaning—Washington’s determination to use force or the threat of force to reinforce its demands against China. For the US, “freedom of navigation” signifies free access to key strategic waterways for its warships. US dominance in the South China Sea, an area immediately adjacent to the Chinese mainland, is critical to the Pentagon’s war strategy against China, which includes a naval blockade to starve Chinese industry of energy and raw materials.

Even more chilling were the talks involving US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel in South Korea and Kerry and Hagel in Japan last week. Both meetings focussed on the restructuring of American, Korean, and Japanese military forces in preparation for a “pre-emptive war” in North East Asia. An extensive joint statement issued by Kerry, Hagel and their Japanese counterparts outlined a massive build-up of

sophisticated US military hardware in Japan, including long-range drones and surveillance aircraft, anti-ballistic missile systems, and stealth fighters. While nominally directed against the North Korean “threat”, these deployments are part of US preparations for war against China.

Whether sooner or later, the response of US imperialism to its setbacks in the Middle East and Asia will be redoubled provocations and threats, and the launching of reckless new military interventions to undermine its rivals.



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