

# America's Asian Ambitions

Under Obama, multilateralism is still instrumental

Josef Braml | **The Obama administration's overtures to Asia have been unmistakable. Does this leave the United States' old ally Europe out of the equation? Not necessarily, argues German analyst Josef Braml. But Europe's best offer may be to help foot the bill for a global NATO.**

In Tokyo in November 2009, Hawaii-born President Barack Obama introduced himself as the “first Pacific President.” In July 2009 in Bangkok, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made it clear that the United States will participate in shaping the future of the Asian region with her statement “America is back!” With its turn toward Asia, the United States is not only responding to its new threat perception and economic dependency, it is also aiming to redistribute its “burden of global responsibility.” On the one side, traditional allies in Europe will be animated to up their contribution. On the other, Washington will urge democracies in Asia to do their part to further a liberal world order. To this end, multilateral organizations such as the U.N. and NATO will be reformed. And Washington intends to make use of institutions in Asia, for example APEC and ASEAN, to further its own conception of order in the region.

From an American perspective,

Europe has receded into the far distance since the Cold War's end. Apart from the lucrative transatlantic economic relations, the old continent is no longer strategically relevant and is only of interest when Europeans are in a position to contribute to the resolution of problems in other world regions. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, American security experts see rising Asian powers, above all China and India, as the future strategic challenge. While Secretary of State Clinton intends to “strengthen the alliances that have stood the test of time,” thinking of the “NATO partners,” her strategic focus is on the “allies in Asia.” The alliance with Japan, “based on shared values and mutual interests,” is “a cornerstone of American policy in Asia,” designed to maintain peace and prosperity in the Asia Pacific region. Furthermore, the economic and political partnership with India, “the world's most populous democracy” and “a

nation with growing influence in the world,” is to be deepened.<sup>1</sup>

These two blocs, the European and the Asian, could be linked to one another. The blueprints of the new director of policy planning in the U.S. State Department demonstrate this. According to Anne Marie Slaughter, NATO should cement partnerships with liberal democracies in Asia. Such a globalized NATO would be one of many multilateral forums, both formal and informal, that would contribute to the creation of a new networked liberal world order.<sup>2</sup>

From a purely security-centered perspective, China should see itself as excluded, in the worst case, as an anti-pole, as these efforts are designed to

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bring about an understanding between the so-called “liberal democracies.” However, the Western

states, above all the United States, are dependent on the financial power of China, just as their economic and trade policies are tightly interwoven with the Asian giant.

### Interdependence with China

China finances U.S. national debt. Without Beijing’s support, the credit-financed stabilization of the U.S. banking and finance system and the stimulation of the U.S. economy would not have been possible. The relationship is of a symbiotic nature, as China’s well-being is dependent on Amer-

ican spending power. The export-oriented Chinese economy hinges on credit-financed consumer behavior in the United States.

Still, economically expanding China has emerged as a further rival for scarce fossil energy resources, both for resources in the Middle East and the “hot spots,” regions in West Africa or Central Asia. Observers of this “petropolitics” contest have already identified an “axis of oil,” whereby Russia, China, and possibly Iran operate “as a counterweight to American hegemony,” challenging the U.S. oil supply and strategic interests.<sup>3</sup>

Russia’s and China’s pragmatic engagement has opened up new economic and military options for Middle Eastern and African countries—including those opposed to American interests. China and Russia, in pursuit of their own economic interests, have undermined the efforts of the United States in the U.N. Security Council to impose tangible sanctions against the Iranian regime in order to deter it from producing nuclear weapons.

Russia and China also share a strategic interest in pushing the United States out of Central Asia, or at least limiting U.S. influence. Since 2003 Moscow has tried to reestablish its predominance in the region, among other things, by working together with autocratic regimes—at the expense of American interests and democratization efforts. China is also intent on preventing its encirclement by American military bases established in the

<sup>1</sup> Statement of the designated Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, January 13, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Forging a World of Liberty Under Law,” *The Princeton Project Papers*, September 2006, pp.27-28.

<sup>3</sup> Flynt Leverett and Pierre Noel, “The New Axis of Oil,” *National Interest*, Summer 2006, pp. 62-70.

course of the “global war on terror.”

China’s regional and global engagement is proceeding apace with soaring arms expenditures. In March 2009 China announced that it was raising its military budget to the equivalent of 70 billion dollars, 15 percent more than the previous year. Accordingly, the Chinese defense budget has now experienced a percentage increase in the double digit range for 21 years in succession.<sup>4</sup> In its annual report on China’s military power, the Pentagon made it clear that the speed and extent of military modernization in China has increased over recent years.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, U.S. strategists see the U.S. regional security guarantee (especially with respect to Taiwan) threatened in the long term.

### Engagement with Japan and India

Japan, whose security is guaranteed by America’s nuclear shield and 53,000 U.S. soldiers,<sup>6</sup> has been observing these changes closely, especially in China and North Korea. In an effort to dispel any uncertainty, Obama underlined the special significance of U.S.-Japanese relations as the “cornerstone of security in East Asia.”<sup>7</sup>

In their initial meetings, the new leaders in Tokyo and Washington reaffirmed the key elements of the “2 + 2” talks. They call for an expansion of the alliance and a more active

role for Japan in guaranteeing global security. By taking on more responsibility for its own security, as well as making financial contributions to international stability missions, the new Japanese government aims to reduce basic costs for the American security guarantee. This includes a planned reduction

in American troops, especially at the problematic air force base in

Okinawa. Not least a result of its economic troubles, Tokyo also intends to renegotiate the costs of the American forces on its turf.

The new Japanese government affirmed its entitlement to negotiate with the United States on an equal footing and to pursue independent foreign policy initiatives in the region. The U.S. response to this varies. American security experts were concerned with Tokyo’s diplomatic efforts to form an “East Asian Community” including China and South Korea, which would have excluded the United States. In contrast, the United States endorses Japan’s understanding with India. Relations between the two economic powers are not troubled by difficult history with each other, and they share common regional economic and security interests with the United States.

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For the United States, India is of vital security and economic interest.

<sup>4</sup> Er Shan, NPC Spokesman Li Zhaoxing: “China’s Military Spending Will Increase This Year,” Hong Kong Zhongguo Tongxun She, March 4, 2009 (English translation), quoted in: Kerry Dumbaugh, *China-U.S. Relations*, CRS Report, Washington DC, July 10, 2009, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2009,” Annual Report to Congress, Washington, DC, March 25, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, with respect to the North Korea issue, the new U.S. government under Obama encouraged Japan to improve relations with South Korea, where the United States has stationed around 30,000 troops to protect it from possible aggression from the north.

<sup>7</sup> Barack Obama, quoted in Glenn Kessler, “Japan Premier Cautious on N. Korea,” *Washington Post*, February 25, 2009.

vital interest. Despite its economic problems, the country holds important potential for American investors and exporters. In particular, Washington sees economic and security-relevant potential in the energy field.

With the 2006 signing of the agreement on the civil use of nuclear energy, the United States de facto recognized India as a nuclear power. But New Delhi will have to pay a high price for the diplomatic upgrade: abandoning henceforth its autonomous and independent foreign policy and positioning itself as a “strategic partner” of the United States as a counterweight to China in the Asia Pacific region.

It remains to be seen, however, in which form India will attempt to balance its Western-oriented security and energy ambitions with its economic dependency on the people’s republic. The United States, whose

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financial vulnerability has become all the more visible, will also be wary of further provok-

ing the chief financier, China. Furthermore, it is Obama’s and Hu Jintao’s joint statement from November 2009 in Beijing, in which China was accorded an important role as mediator in South Asia (among others, between India and Pakistan), that has provoked indignation and uncertainty in New Delhi as to whether America under its new leadership is going to honor the energy and security pact with India.

As a precaution, India is looking

for more friends in the region. In October 2008, New Delhi signed a bilateral security agreement with Japan. The accord was formulated along the lines of a similar arrangement that Tokyo had already signed with Australia. This “value based diplomacy” in the Pacific region is, without doubt, in the interests of America, which for its part is intent on forging an “alliance of democracies” in order to counter China’s rise in Asia. In 2007, together with the United States, Japan, Australia, and Singapore, India participated in a multinational naval exercise in the strategically important Strait of Malacca.<sup>8</sup> These ad hoc military relations have not been institutionalized. However, such an alliance, which in the eyes of a number of observers already exists in the form of a “global NATO,” could assist America in consolidating its presence in Asia and sharing the costs of its global engagement with like-minded states.

New Delhi has supported the United States with infrastructure development and police training in Afghanistan. In return, India receives U.S. military aid in excess of that provided to Pakistan. While trying to ease relations between the arch rivals, Washington has employed a number of means, including mediation efforts by intelligence services. An easing of tensions between India and Pakistan would also be in the United States’ interest. This would enable Pakistan to free its border troops, locked into an interstate conflict with India, and deploy them in the war against terror: against asymmetrical threats from non-state actors that terrorize the Paki-

<sup>8</sup> The Strait of Malacca is a vital shipping lane between the Indian and the Pacific Ocean, linking major Asian economies such as India, China, Japan and South Korea.

Image only available in print

stani state from within and threaten to hasten its dissolution.

### **Afghanistan's Regional Dimensions**

In the eyes of America, the war in Afghanistan has long since become a regional issue. The Obama administration is also attempting to secure the involvement of Russia and China as self-interested parties, so called “stakeholders,” in order to stabilize Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The understanding with Russia required for tackling central issues, such as the stabilization of Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as preventing Iran from acquiring the nuclear military option, exacts a double toll: firstly, the United States will have to postpone the stationing of components of its missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic for the time being; secondly, it will have to exercise

greater caution in the future when pursuing its NATO enlargement agenda in respect of Georgia and Ukraine.

The meeting of NATO foreign ministers in March 2009 in Brussels began to show initial points of contact. The U.S. Secretary of State, Clinton, vigorously endorsed the resumption of cooperation with Moscow, which, following the Georgian war, had been placed on ice at the insistence of the Bush government. Accordingly, the 26 NATO states also agreed to revitalize the NATO-Russia Council. In Clinton's assessment, it constitutes a “platform for cooperation” on themes that are in the interests of the NATO states, for example “transit to Afghanistan.”<sup>9</sup>

China too, which maintains good relations with Pakistan, is to be integrated into the process of conflict resolution. Together with America, China has a strategic interest in containing

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<sup>9</sup> Declaration by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at a press conference at the NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting in Brussels, Belgium on March 5, 2009.

Islamic extremists, particularly in Pakistan. Bruce Riedel, a former CIA security advisor commissioned by the National Security Advisor James Jones to draw up a comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, painted what he saw as a potential horror scenario back in Oc-

Europe beware: "Multilateral" has always been understood differently in the United States.

tober 2008, namely the possibility that Islamic radicals, following Afghanistan, could contribute to the break-up of another state: Pakistan. Obama then ordered a "strategic review" for Afghanistan, according to which, a "comprehensive" strategy, also encompassing Pakistan, was to be drawn up and military resources deployed on a consolidated basis and in solidarity with its allies.

### A Global NATO

From a U.S. perspective, the Europeans have been putting a strain on the principle of solidarity within NATO for some time. In particular, the limited military capacity of most European alliance partners will contribute to the alliance's further erosion.

Hence, in his memo to the new president, Will Marshall from the Democratic Leadership Council advised Obama to shift NATO from a North American-European pact into a "global alliance of free nations." Integrating democracies such as Japan, Australia, and India into NATO would not only raise the legitimacy of global missions, it would also increase the

alliance's available manpower and financial resources.<sup>10</sup>

This idea, in its basic features inspired by the Clinton government, has long been advocated by Democrats, and, in particular, by experts in the thinktanks with close links to Barack Obama. An "alliance of democracies," which already exists in the eyes of some of its advocates in the form of a "global NATO," could compete with the U.N. or act as an alternative, when, in the future, efficiency and legitimization, as well as sharing the burden, are called for.<sup>11</sup> The most prominent advocate of this idea, Ivo Daalder, was appointed as U.S. Ambassador to NATO.

### Instrumental Multi-Multilateralism

Following the Bush government's solo performances, the United States under Obama intends to return to the righteous path of multilateralism. Whereas the Bush government, especially in its first term, still operated according to the motto "unilateral as far as possible, multilateral when necessary," Obama has announced a reverse logic: "We'll work in a partnership whenever we can, and alone only when we must." The new government does not fear that international alliances and organizations will reduce the power of the United States. Quite the opposite: according to Vice President Joseph Biden, "They help advance our collective security, economic interests and our values."<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, Europeans should be aware that "multilateral" has always

<sup>10</sup> Will Marshall, "Taking NATO Global: Memo to the New President," Washington, D.C.: Democratic Leadership Council, January 15, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> See Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, "An Alliance of Democracies. Our Way or the Highway," *Financial Times*, November 6, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Speech by U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden at the Munich Security Conference, February 7, 2009.



been understood differently in the United States, namely instrumentally. The United Nations and NATO were created in order to assert American interests and enforce its conception of world order, while sharing the burden with the beneficiaries and preventing free riders.

Domestic and fiscal policy pressure in the United States in the course of the financial crisis is likely to generate a heated transatlantic debate on burden sharing. The European allies will soon have the opportunity to demonstrate their “effective” multilateral engagement, whether it be in the form of a greater deployment of troops in Afghanistan with fewer caveats, with a stronger financial commitment to reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan, or economic aid to Pakistan. The U.S. government under Obama will pursue diplomatic efforts to forge Bush’s much-maligned “coalition of the willing” into a coalition of the financially willing.

Should the Europeans prove unwilling or incapable, there would be less rhetorical ammunition against NATO’s “globalization.” However, even without NATO, the United States will attempt to find new ways to ensure that the democracies in Asia, along with the transatlantic allies, fulfill their financial and military obligations for a liberal world order. To strengthen the United States as a Pacific power, U.S. President Obama attended the summit meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) during his visit to Asia in November 2009, where he also had the opportunity to talk with the ten heads of the governments associated with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In addition to the

APEC agenda, dominated by Washington, the intensification of relations between the United States and the ASEAN was also considered.

For America, ASEAN integration is very interesting: there are plans to establish a common free-trade zone and a security, economic, and cultural community by 2015. Since Obama took office, the United States has made increased diplomatic efforts to accede, culminating with Clinton’s signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation on July 22, 2009, one of ASEAN’s main documents. This has paved the way for America’s possible

accession to the East Asia Summit. The new “coalition of the willing” means the U.S. engagement in the region financially willing.

has been welcomed by the ASEAN states, precisely because America’s interests also extend their scope for action, not least against China.

In the future, in the spirit of a competitive multi-multilateralism, various multilateral organizations and institutions will be required to compete for the United States’s attention. Hence, America will be able to select the most suitable instrument for the respective task from a broad range of multilateral service providers, and if required, create new multilateral instruments, in order to secure its interests and enforce its idea of a liberal world order.



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