

President Obama's "Pivot to Asia" Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

When Obama took office in 2008, Asia was not recognized as the powerhouse it had become in the past 25 years. Asia's GDP had tripled, yet the United States has been slow to recognize the ever increasing power Asia has in the global world. Since Obama's inauguration, he has strived to create greater partnership with Asian countries in a trade deal, as he mentioned in his first State of the Union Address: "we will strengthen our trade relations in Asia."

A trade deal is relevant in a multi faceted way. First, it shows that the Obama administration would have taken a brand new step that no administration in the near past has done in strengthening bonds between Asian countries. Second, any country included, or not included, in the deal would have political implications that we will later talk about. Third, it will have economic consequences seen for years to come.

Not everyone thinks a trade deal or even a greater focus on Asia will help the United States. Some believe that a trade deal would be too large a step for the United States to take after it had minimal relations with many of the countries in the area. Many also see other areas of the world, like the forever turbulent Middle East or our close allies in Europe, as areas to focus on more as better time spent. As mentioned before, increased partnership in Asia has been one of Obama's greatest goals since taking office. He has visited India, Myanmar, Indonesia, and China two times, Japan three, and South Korea four times since being elected as President, a great increase compared to that of previous presidents. Why has Obama been visiting and inviting heads of state and prime ministers from these various Asian countries to the U.S.? The answer is simple: to curb China's growing power in the region.

The problem with China's growing power is illustrated in the 2008 financial crisis, which happened because of the economic system used in America. In China, the system was hit far less because of the protection their government installed in their economic system. This led some smaller countries in the region to wonder, "how great is the economic liberalism America advertises?" As a result, Obama developed his pivot to Asia in one way as an advertising campaign to counteract the negative effects shown from the 2008 financial crisis.

The United States has always been involved in Asia, yet neglect was present recently because of the U.S.'s two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead of pouring time and commitment to Asia, the United States had instead poured all that plus billions of dollars to fighting terrorism in the Middle East. Some had seen this as a good payoff, but with Afghanistan settling down and U.S. troops out of Iraq, many see it as a time to realign the concentration in the Middle East back to its prior domain in Asia.

Asia encompasses wide variety of areas, so it is easier to break down them to more homogenous regions.

There is Southeast Asia, which includes the countries of Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia. This region is very close to China (geographically). Because of this, the US recognizes they aren't the only player in the Southeast region. These countries must stay on good terms with China while managing a blossoming relationship with the U.S. Thus, US's actions have to be catering to the SE Asian Countries, but also recognizing and improving relationships with China.

The Northeast Asia region includes Japan, the Koreas, and China. Continuing a prospering relationship with our closest ally in the Eastern Hemisphere, Japan, and also with South Korea, is essential for the U.S. and also with South Korea. Further strengthening political, economic, and diplomatic relationship is an important goal ever since the rapid industrialization and increased openness of China to outsiders in the 1990s but the US needs to be weary of Chinese growth and its

expanding influence in the area as well. The Indian subcontinent is an important region, as it will soon have the highest population on the earth. By strengthening relationships in this area, it can be a key to curbing China's growth of power. The Middle East is technically part of Asia, but when Obama talks about a pivot to Asia, he means that of the other regions discussed. Previously, the US has become too invested in this region, comparatively, and continues to be so with Iran and the lasting effects of the Arab Spring. The United States has had alliances with Australia, Japan, and South Korea stretching back 60 years. These countries are some of the biggest, GDP wise, in the area, and strengthening relationships with each one has always been a foreign policy objective. The alliance with South Korea has strengthened with increased military activities, such as involvement in the Middle-East, the alliance with Japan has strengthened with increased trade and the immediate aid the U.S. gave after the Fukushima incident, and our commitment in Australia has grown with military exercises and sharing of ideals.

Not only has the United States reinforced its agreements with previous allies and developed powers, it is building up connections with rising countries in the region as well. President Obama has met with the President of China, Xi Jinping, numerous times to discuss agreements between the two biggest nations in the World. India has improved its relationship with the US by continuing to be the world's largest democracy and growing its economy by building up industry.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is an integral part of Obama's pivot to Asia. It would be an economic zone free of tariffs and barriers to trade between all countries involved, which include the US, Canada, Mexico, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, Peru, Malaysia, Chile, and Brunei. This deal would provide greater trade for all the countries along with the 800 million people that live in this region that also holds 40% of the globe's GDP. This region is already where 44% of US exports go, and this deal would increase exports to the region. A TPA Fast-track legislation was passed by the Senate and the House of Representatives and later signed by President Obama in late June, signifying that the deal would pass in due time. With the passing of the bill, other countries have shown interest in the deal, including Thailand, Taiwan, and South Korea. What is missing from this deal is China, which would cause severe implications.

Unlike many issues and bills passed through Congress, the TPP Fast track legislation was not based solely on partisan lines. The Senate vote came to be 60-37, with 3 abstentions. 29 Democrats voted against the bill, while 1 abstained. Even though this bill was pushed for by the Obama administration, a majority of Republicans supported it while the majority of Democrats dissented on it.

Democrats dislike the deal for two reasons. First, they believe it would send American jobs, particularly ones that are unionized, to those in cheaper producing countries that are part of the trade deal. As Congressman Mark Pocan, from Wisconsin (Democrat) puts it, "Over the last three decades, in large part because of bad trade deals like NAFTA Americans have worked harder than ever for less. In fact, hundreds of thousands of jobs—factory jobs, middle-class jobs—in states across the country were lost." Second, environmentalists see production of items in developing countries as a major source of pollution, which they see would be encouraged by this trade deal. In response to these criticisms, separate bills have been written to ensure lost jobs due to the deal would be compensated and that the deal would have strict environmental regulations.

Republicans, the majority at least, back the deal as it opens up free trade, known as market liberalization, for the US and other countries involved. This is a big component of the values that many Republicans believe Americans "should" value. It is part of our history as Americans, according to this party. Thus, we need to spread it to the rest of the world is the rational many republicans use to justify the deal. Some republicans, a minority, are against the deal due to the extra power it gives the president. Instead of a foreign agreement being handled by the Senate, it will now

be able to be discussed by the President, which some people see as too much power to the President, like many Tea Partiers. Thus, they vote against the fast track TPP deal.

Asia is a broad area, with over 3 billion people. The cultures are so diverse from one country to another one solution will not fit all. Over the past 25 years, US foreign policy has often overlooked this crucial area. With the TPP deal on the table, this can be a chance to reaffirm commitment in the area, yet it may be done in the wrong way. This is a unique issue that isn't divided on partisan lines, as it should be very interesting to debate.

Questions to Consider

- What is the importance of the Asian continent in foreign policy? Are certain areas more important to focus on than others?
- Is economic, political, or social unification more significant to developing a lasting relationship with Asian countries?
- How can relationships be improved between allies? How can they be improved between past enemies?
- Where is the greatest potential for improvement in the US's current foreign policy in the area?
- Who is hindering the progress for development in the region?
- Should China be seen as an ally or enemy?
- When is a reasonable time for the US to confront unfriendly actions by players in the region if something were to happen?

Sources for Additional Research

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