

US Asia Policy: A New Paradigm?

At Plenary Session Six of the Roundtable the four panelists were **Datuk Ernest Z. Bower**, a Senior Advisor and Director in CSIS, US, **Amb Ma Zhengang**, Chairman of China Arms Control and Disarmament Association and Chairman of CSCAP, China, **Dr Rizal Sukma**, Executive Chairman CSIS Indonesia and **Prof Dato' Dr Zakaria Hj Ahmad**, Senior Vice-President HELP University College and President, Malaysian International Affairs Forum, Malaysia. The session was moderated by Emeritus Professor of the Institute for Strategic and Development, the Philippines **Dr Carolina Hernandez**, Senior Analyst **Veena Loh** report



(From left) Rizal Sukma, Ernest Z. Bower, Carolina Hernandez, Ma Zhengang, Zakaria Hj Ahmad

Datuk Ernest Z. Bower said that the new paradigm is not US foreign policy in Asia but the new paradigm is Asia itself. The Asian region is changing dramatically but the foundation of US foreign policy in the region has been largely consistent, while adapting to the new realities. US foreign policy towards Asia is bipartisan. There is substantial continuity from the Republican regime to the Obama administration. The Obama administration and the Asia team, in the post cold war world, are capable and plugged in, smartly broadening participation in key institutions, supporting and participating in a new international architecture and trying to anticipate

and understand the needs and new directions of the region.

This post cold war era of US dominance has been costly for the US, financially and in terms of the US ability to project its soft power globally. The centre of gravity of world growth has shifted towards Asia and the Americans understand this. While US policy-makers are making the needed changes they have apparently not done a good job communicating the need for these changes to their public.

Bridging the gap between policy and politics is one of the most vital challenges for the US

administration. For instance, it is not enough to set a target to double exports in five years, and to create new jobs; the US Government needs to explain what it will take to reach new goals by engaging Asia. If this had been followed through, Obama is likely to have followed through on his visit to Indonesia on June 13 instead of being diverted to focus his attention on the tragedy of the oil spill.

In terms of continuity, and the importance of treaty alliances in Asia, Japan has been a challenge. While South Korea and Australia have been close to the US, the US relationship with Thailand and Philippines has been more complicated. The US is seriously committed to a strong presence in Asia in terms of investments, military deployments and the provision of public goods such as tsunami aid. There is also a strong commitment towards participating in regional architecture.

The most important economic opportunities and security challenges in the world today are probably in Asia. The three largest economies in the world are also in Asia. Of late, North Korean security issues have required urgent attention.

The US has not had a smooth engagement with Asia. It did not anticipate Hatoyama, and the issues around Okinawa. President Obama's trip to Asia has also not been smooth because the China portion of the trip was criticised. China did not seem to welcome the US plan for partnership.

Indonesia was supposed to be the biggest transformative relationship of the US with an Asian partner but then Obama's trips were cancelled. Another country that the US could have fostered a closer relationship with was Vietnam, but the latter was not ready for the US embrace due to possible leadership changes that it could be going through in its Congress in January 2011. Thailand and Philippines are of real concern as their institutions are being challenged by new democratic pressures.

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The US made some mistakes in Thailand during the Asian Financial Crisis, and it does not want to repeat them. In the post-colonial period, the US supported strong leaders such as Suharto, Marcos, the King of Thailand, Tun Mahathir Mohamed, and Lee Kuan Yew, but these leaders were so strong that they ruled in a paternalistic, top-down, centralised manner and undermined the development of democratic institutions. Thailand is the worst case scenario.



Ernest Z. Bower

Najib and Obama

There is an opportunity for a strong relationship between the US on the one hand and Malaysia and New Zealand on the other. Kurt Campbell, the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, said the meeting between Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Sri Najib Tun Razak and US

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(From left) Carolina Hernandez, Ma Zhengang, Zakaria Hj Ahmad

President Barack Obama was among the best meetings between two leaders that he had witnessed in the last ten years.

The Malaysian Prime Minister expressed support of US efforts in Afghanistan and approved a new law on control of arms exports and activities that facilitate the design, development and production of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, transgressions of which will suffer severe punishment. Malaysia is also supportive of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and is keen on

being part of it. There is also a lot of cooperation and new energy between the US and New Zealand.

On the Obama administration, he said Obama and Tim Geithner grew up in Indonesia and Thailand respectively. They took apart the G8 and created the G-20 which now includes more Asian countries such as China, Indonesia and South Korea, to add to Japan's voice. They recognise that Asia has a very deep and strong talent pool. The US has also brought other Asian players into decision-making institutions that manage global trends.



Ma Zhengang

On the option between the East Asia Summit (EAS) and Asean+8, he said the US is likely to opt for the EAS rather than Asean+8. Americans want to be at the core of Asian regionalism, and to be a part of the EAS, with a very strong Asean. The US is likely to announce its participation in EAS, and to work with Asean to see if it can be strengthened. A strong Asean is vital to the core of regionalism.

Amb Ma Zhengang said the Obama administration made great adjustments in all aspects of American foreign policy and the major shift in policy towards Asia was conveyed in Obama's speech in Tokyo on

Nov 15, 2009. Now that more than six months have passed, it is time to review the Asia policy.

Bush's policy towards Asia versus Obama's

While the Bush administration was often criticised for neglecting Asia, Obama's foreign policy on Asia has been described as US re-engagement in Asia. If a comparison is made between policies advocated by Bush and those by Obama, one will find not only obvious differences but also common fundamentals.

Similarities

The US has never changed its fundamental policy towards Asia. The Bush administration had placed priority on Middle Eastern issues such as the wars in Iran and Afghanistan, strengthened its alliance with Japan, pushed forward deployment of two nuclear issues -- North Korea and Iran -- and gave importance to India, Mongolia and Vietnam. On Aug 7, 2008, Bush delivered in Bangkok a policy speech on Asian affairs, focusing on strengthening alliances with Asia, mentioning Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Thailand and Australia. Bush has also been developing relationships with countries that have common values such as India, Indonesia and Mongolia, and looking for new opportunities for common prosperity.

Differences

Obama places more importance on Asia, and the manner in which he handles Asian affairs emphasises combined or collaborative power with Asian countries. He emphasises new relations with China, India and some emerging countries. Obama also emphasised relations with multinational organisations in the region that the US had disengaged from in recent years.

How much progress has Obama's policy made?

It is hard to say whether great progress has been made in the past six months. In some areas, the policy has not been very successful but, generally,

it is still too early to judge on success or failure. The reasons are as follows:

1. The change in policy is only part of Obama's overall re-adjustment of US global strategy. The new policy in Asia is only one piece on Obama's chessboard for change. No matter how important this piece can be, he must plan his resources. It is impossible for him to devote all his energy or time to relations with Asia.
2. Obama has more urgent issues at hand. He has inherited problems from the previous administration – wars in Afghanistan and Iran, the economic situation, unemployment, and the Medicare programme. He has also had to cope with the recent oil strategy.
3. Observers do not know if a change in policy is a change in the whole mindset. Has the US changed its strategic design or has it just included some new issues with the old ones?

'As America's first Pacific President, I promise you that this Pacific nation will strengthen and sustain our leadership in this vitally important part of the world'

Three aspects should be watched in earnest in the future:

1. How successfully can Obama's overall changes reform domestic and foreign policy ?
2. The Obama administration has yet to formulate a strategy to handle, in a constructive way, the rise of India, China, and



Rizal Sukma

Brazil. It remains to be seen whether the US will change from its traditional mindset and engage these nations as equals, or try to remain a superpower over them.

3. The US global strategic design in the post-global-crisis era. When the US recovers economically, what will be its stance? Will it be content to be an equal and respectful partner in the world? If it tries to regain its position as a world leader, it could pose a problem.

Ma said China has never tried to exclude the US from the region and it is impossible to keep a powerful nation like the US out of the Asia-Pacific. China is hopeful that the US will continue to play a positive role in maintaining peace in the Asia-Pacific area. Meanwhile, China remains open to all suggestions about the US.

Issues:

1. In what form will the US re-engage in multi-organisations in the Asia Pacific region? The US engaging with Asia through 10+8 is a possibility. How will this then work with

existing cooperative mechanisms such as Asean+1, Asean+3 and Asean+6?

2. What kind of role should the US play? Over the past 20 years, Asean has been seen in a role of leadership, and China has not tried to challenge this. Will the US try to change this?
3. Is there an ulterior motive for bringing India into the 10+8? For instance, to offset the development of China? China is building up its military forces, so is India's membership meant to counter-balance China?

Dr Rizal Sukma made similar observations to Ma's, in that the US policy towards Southeast Asia in the past was one of 'benign neglect' or 'indifference.' The promise of re-engagement with Asia was rekindled by President Obama, particularly after his speech in Tokyo declaring, 'As America's first Pacific President, I promise you that this Pacific nation will strengthen and sustain our leadership in this vitally important part of the world.'

Since then, the promise of re-engagement has manifested itself in three important policy areas:

1. US foreign policy places greater recognition on Asean's place. Clinton in a visit to the Asean Secretariat announced that the US would open a mission to Asean, to be based in Jakarta. Obama attended the first US-Asean Summit and reiterated that the US is committed to strengthening its engagement in Southeast Asia, both with individual allies and partners, and with Asean as an institution.
2. The governments of Indonesia and US have agreed to forge a comprehensive partnership that will not only provide a framework for coherent bilateral ties, but will take the cooperation between the two countries to a higher plane.
3. The US administration has reviewed its policy towards Myanmar that was based

solely on sanctions. Deciding that sanctions alone do not work they have begun to engage Myanmar leaders in dialogue, while continuing their policy of sanctions. This change has brought the US closer to Asean's position, as Asean had concluded that a policy based solely on non-interventionist engagement does not work too.

However, it is important to note that the US Southeast Asia policy under Obama does not constitute a significant departure from that under Bush. President Obama shares the same goal with Bush, although they did adopt different approaches. As such a degree of continuation is apparent. For instance, the US Southeast Asia policy under Bush was primarily framed within a US-led war on terror, while Obama took a more comprehensive approach in defining the US relationship with the region. Bush had also taken initiatives to strengthen US engagement with Asean, such as in the appointment of the Asean Secretariat, and the launching of the US-Asean Trade and Investment Framework Agreement.



Zakaria Hj Ahmad

Prospects for deeper US engagement with Southeast Asia lie in the following areas. Being a party to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) opens up the possibility for the US to undertake deeper engagement with Asean, both in the context of US-Asean relations and within the context of the Asean-based multilateral processes in the East Asian region. Greater and more direct US participation in the East Asian community-building process is a distinct possibility. Southeast Asian nations can look forward to increased interaction in the areas of trade, investment and financial cooperation. The US and Asean can also now explore how they can work together to address regional problems of common concern such as Myanmar.

US interests -- strategic, political, and economic -- remain perceptibly and empirically intact

Dr Zakaria Hj Ahmad said the new US President represents a change from the Bush era. Obama is seen as an American President with Asian affinities. Will he or can he understand Asia? Can we expect a new paradigm, or is the US administration fundamentally similar for all presidents? Will the US continue to take the same fundamental positions on Asia?

The new US strategy suggests there are three important elements in terms of the American approach: that is, diplomacy, engagement and economic development.

In Hilary Clinton's words, America's *strategy is about strengthening and applying American leadership to advance our national interests and to solve shared problems. We do this against the backdrop of a changed and always changing global landscape and a difficult inheritance: two*

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wars, a struggling economy, reduced credibility abroad, international institutions buckling under the weight of systemic changes, and so much more.'

Do we see a strong US or a weak one? Does Asia matter or not to the US?

US interests -- strategic, political, and economic -- remain perceptibly and empirically intact. There is a strategic network, bolstered by efforts at cooperative security. There is a continued economic presence, either through investments or through trade and continued political engagement, especially with its allies, in Asia. The US is developing new friendships and starting dialogues with their would-be adversaries. US troops will continue to be stationed in Okinawa, and one can expect continuity in the US-Japanese condominium of strategic interest.

In spite of the two wars, the US has indicated a sense of vigour in its engagement with Asia, punctuated by a real sense of the danger of nuclear proliferation, and the danger posed by an unstable and belligerent North Korea. These are

the fundamentals that the US deals with, and will continue to deal with. It is less clear how much integration will take place between the US and Asia. That integration or interdependence, both in scope and pace, will depend on the centrality of the American role. Asia is not ready to accept Beijing as the top dog in Asia. The question is whether the US will be replaced eventually by another power or whether the US is a tired power in Asia. On the ex-Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's proposal for an Asian Pacific Community, the question has been paraphrased, 'can the US guarantee Pacific Asia will remain a pacific region?'

Integration in Asia may also be seen in terms of the region being multilateral, with an interplay but not necessarily balance of powers among major, medium or minor powers either rising, or riding into the sunset. Obama is certainly not a sunset leader, but is he a sunrise leader of a sunset power? Asia is a sunrise region. Asia and the US will have to deal with the advent of sunrise powers. It is through the sharing of views that countries can resolve such matters much more amicably than was possible in the past.



(From left) Tan Sri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Hj Mohd Yassin, Dato' Dr Mahani Zainal Abidin