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Australia's Gains in Northeast Asia Pave the Way for Obama's Trip

BY HAYLEY CHANNER

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott recently completed a whirlwind tour of Northeast Asia—April 7 through April 14—that can only be described as a resounding success. This is in stark contrast to the many diplomatic blunders that his new Coalition government made at the end of last year. These included souring relations with Indonesia over asylum seeker issues and spying allegations, unnecessarily upsetting South Korea and China by declaring that Japan is Australia's "closest friend in Asia," and criticizing China for unilaterally declaring an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea. Months of planning in the lead up to this visit gave Abbott a much needed window to repair relations in Northeast Asia in only one week.

Hayley Channer, Visiting Scholar at the East-West Center in Washington and Analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), explains that "With Australia's gains in Northeast Asia and perhaps a greater sense of optimism about the contributions of US allies, the atmosphere is ripe for Obama to make additional gains."

The trip began with Japan, moving next to South Korea and ended in China where Abbott met in Beijing with the largest Australian business delegation ever to visit China, and the region for that matter. More than 600 business executives accompanied the prime minister, including some of Australia's richest corporate leaders, in addition to the Minister for Trade and Investment Andrew Robb and all seven of Australia's state premiers. The results for Australia's growing economic engagement with Northeast Asia are considered a success. Abbott signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with South Korea, shook hands with Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo on another FTA, and agreed with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to wrap up a FTA as early as the end of this year.

Trade has long been the key priority of the new government, with Abbott declaring on his election night victory that Australia was "once again open for business." This message was repeated many times throughout his trip. Trade, however, was not the only area where Abbot made gains for Australia.

With all three countries, Australia made valuable headway in bilateral defense and security cooperation. A "framework agreement" was signed with Japan to share military science, technology, and equipment, and further increase military interoperability with a nod towards the United States. The first point under "Security cooperation" of the joint press release stated that Abbott and Abe "reaffirmed the importance of strong US engagement in the Asia-Pacific region" and expressed "strong support for the US rebalance." This new agreement has caused some in Australia to conclude that Australia-Japan defense relations are so close that they now constitute "an alliance in practice, if not in name" and indeed, debate has reemerged in Australia about establishing a formal alliance with Japan.

Security relations with South Korea are somewhat underdeveloped in comparison to those of Japan, but here too Australia made similar advancements. Abbott and South Korean President Park Geun-Hye agreed to share additional military technology and conduct more practical military exercises.

Australia also made headway in security cooperation with China, committing to a series of

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high-level defense exchanges for this year. This visit to China could not have come at a better time considering Australia’s leadership in the search for missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, of which the majority of passengers were Chinese. The fact that Australia continues to work closely with Chinese coast guard ships in the ongoing search effort further enhances prospects for future Australia-China military cooperation. With Australia employing US Navy technology to conduct underwater scans and detect electronic signals, this situation underscores the value of multilateral cooperation in Asia, showcasing the positive ways that the United States, China, and middle powers such as Australia can work collectively. Australia’s competent handling of the search has been well received in China.

Australia’s positive inroads in Northeast Asia should bode well for President Barack Obama as he embarks on his own trip to Asia, which includes visits to Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines. Abbott’s many deliverables from his trip reflect that one of America’s closest allies in the region is committed to deepening its ties both with other US allies and with America’s main strategic competitor, simultaneously reinforcing the US alliance structure and keeping the door open for China to be a constructive security provider.

The new security pacts with Japan and South Korea also provide a gateway for Obama to raise the issue with Tokyo and Seoul of increasing the depth, range and frequency of their security cooperation with other US allies in the region, not to mention with each other. Increasing connections between US allies in Asia has been a key US priority for several years. Obama needs to convince his hosts of the necessity and benefit of investing more in their own security ties with one another. The more successful Obama is at this task, the more security webs will take shape with less dependence upon the United States as the sole security provider in the region.

Obama, just like Abbott, has had some missteps in the lead up to this visit. His absence at two regional summits at the end of last year, inaction after his “red line” was crossed in Syria, and perceived weakness over Ukraine have given the impression that the US rebalance to Asia is all talk, no substance.

The overarching concern is that Obama may not be willing to defend contested territory in Asia, if push were ever to come to shove. In addition, the US president has the difficult task of reassuring nervous allies that the United States is fully committed to its defense treaties and the security of the region, while at the same time not playing into the Beijing narrative that the United States is engaged in a containment policy against it.

Striking this balance is hard to do—getting the balance right usually means that allies are dissatisfied with the level of US support and China bristles over perceived US consolidation of a coalition against it. Some in the United States and across Asia, including in Australia, would like Obama to tilt more to one side, either making it explicit exactly how the United States would support its allies in a conflict with China, or offering to share power with China allowing it greater latitude in the region. Both options are dangerous and have untold risks, which is why the current policy—although dissatisfying to all parties—is the most responsible.

While some US partners in Asia have been critical of the (lack of) rebalance, there can be little doubt that Obama will be welcomed with open arms in each country. With Australia’s gains in Northeast Asia and perhaps a greater sense of optimism about the contributions of US allies, the atmosphere is ripe for Obama to make additional gains.

America’s close and enduring ally Australia has assisted in this endeavor, now it is time to see if Australia’s successes are a precursor to gains for the United States.

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