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US Reengagement in the Asia-Pacific Region: Where Does Taiwan Fit?

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Robert G. Sutter, Visiting Professor at the School of Foreign Service of Georgetown University, notes that despite the Asia-Pacific's open embrace of new US activism in the region to counterbalance recent Chinese aggressiveness, Taiwan "has shown little public interest in any steps toward reengagement with the United States that would compromise its top focus on reassurance and cooperative interaction with China."

The Obama administration's broad and multifaceted diplomatic, security, and other initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region collectively represent the most significant shift in the regional dynamics of recent years. They also augur continued, top-priority attention that Washington will pay to the Asia-Pacific in the future. The significance of these initiatives has been overshadowed to some degree by China's often clumsy treatment of security issues, territorial disputes, maritime navigation rights, and other sensitive issues with its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific. However, China's boorish behavior has ironically had the effect of underlining the importance of the American initiatives. Concerns over China's actions and intentions have prompted regional countries from north to south to welcome and engage with the United States' renewed activism. While governments across the Asia-Pacific position their countries to work positively with rising China in areas of common interests, they are preparing for possible contingencies that involve domineering Chinese assertiveness. A notable exception to this pattern has been Taiwan. It has shown little public interest in any steps toward reengagement with the United States that would compromise its top focus on reassurance and cooperative interaction with China.

The full extent of stronger US engagement ranges across the entire Asia-Pacific region. Recent highlights include US leaders' strong reaffirmation of the security alliance with Japan, as Prime Minister Naoto Kan's new government attempts to regain its footing in the aftermath of what is widely seen as Chinese "bullying" over fishing disputes near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The South Korean government of Lee Myung-bak has further solidified already close relations with the Obama administration. The United States steadily backed its South Korean ally when Seoul sought support in the United Nations and in military exercises in response to North Korea's aggressive sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan*. China, by contrast, impeded South Korea's efforts at the United Nations and opposed US-South Korean exercises in the Yellow Sea.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's intervention at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Hanoi in July 2010 spearheaded a collective effort to defend free navigation and restore stability in the disputed South China Sea. This development followed repeated confrontations resulting from Chinese unilateral military and government coercive actions and demands. The ARF meeting also saw a new US presidential commitment, backed by ASEAN, to participate actively in the East Asian Summit, raising the profile of that regional body and overriding China's preference for an Asia-only regional grouping. Prominent advances in US-Vietnam relations were evident during the August commemoration of the normalization of diplomatic relations that featured exercises with a US aircraft carrier deployed near disputed regions of the South China Sea.



President Obama followed through with a meeting with ASEAN leaders in September 2010, pledging to visit Indonesia, along with India, Japan and South Korea, in November and again in 2011 for the East Asian Summit meeting in Jakarta. Meanwhile, US interaction with small Pacific Island states has been upgraded with annual meetings with the Secretary of State, and New Zealand has seen the most significant breakthrough in its relations with the United States since the rupture of the alliance over twenty years ago.

Taiwan's Position and Implications

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In contrast to the public support found in the capitals of South Korea, Japan, ASEAN, India, and other Asia-Pacific countries for the Obama administration's greater regional activism, Taiwan has maintained a low public profile. Presumably reflecting its interests and priorities, the government of President Ma Ying-jeou continues to devote its attention to advancing positive relations with China. It does not give much mention to relations with the United States or maneuverings by regional governments in the face of new challenges posed by recent Chinese assertiveness. It works to solidify its recent free trade agreement with China, the so-called Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), and endeavors to use the framework to gain China's acquiescence to advance free trade arrangements between Taiwan and other countries in Asia and elsewhere. It highlights positive breakthroughs in its policy of reassurance and engagement with China, notably its recent joint naval rescue exercises with mainland forces. Taiwan's approach led it to side strongly with China regarding territorial disputes with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Taiwan notably confronted Japan by sending coast guard ships to protect Taiwanese fishermen working in the disputed region, although it more mildly reaffirmed territorial claims in line with China's in the South China Sea.

Implications:

The Taiwan government and the US administration maintain close relations. Regular US arms sales and other security ties are complimented by off-again, on-again efforts to advance relations through such proposals as a trade and investment treaty, arrangements for an extradition treaty, and a visa-waiver program. However, Taiwan's top priority since 2008 on reassuring China seems to show that Taiwan is less willing to follow others in the Asia-Pacific in solidifying relations with the United States in a period of Chinese assertiveness.

Many in the United States, Taiwan, and elsewhere welcome Taiwan's policy choices. Taiwan's approach encourages a calmer Taiwan Strait than was the case in President Lee Teng-hui's later years or during the Chen Shui-bian presidency. Some see President Ma Ying-jeou's policies as moving Taiwan further toward understandings with China that will allow for a peaceful resolution of the “Taiwan issue,” thereby ending a longstanding policy problem for the United States and regional stability. On the other hand, Taiwan's recent record suggests that those in the United States and the Asia-Pacific who seek Taiwanese actions aimed at enhancing regional contingency plans to deal with possible domineering Chinese assertiveness are likely to be disappointed. Such contingency plans, popularly known as “hedging,” appear to have a much lower priority in Taipei than in other Asian-Pacific capitals. At present, Taiwan seems to choose to stand with China, outside the “hedge.”

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