

The United States is back in the Asia-Pacific

The United States' Asia policy is undergoing a major shift, in particular its China policy. As Tom Donilon, President Obama's National Security Advisor, pronounced recently, "America is back in the Pacific and will uphold the rules."

President Obama, for the first time, attended the Sixth East Asian Summit in Bali, Indonesia, in November. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the host of the EAS, did not push for Obama's participation. Instead, the U.S. president asked to be invited.

Why did the White House decide to add another eight-day Asia-Pacific trip to the president's already heavy schedule? The answer is: China.

As Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at Singapore National University, summarizes, "Throughout history, the most important geopolitical relationship has been between the world's greatest power -- currently the U.S. -- and the world's greatest emerging power -- currently China. Normally, we should have seen rising geopolitical tensions between the two. Instead, we have witnessed unusual calm. That era, however, is now coming to an end."

"The United States," declared Obama on his Asia-Pacific trip, "has been and always will be a Pacific nation. Let there be no doubt: in the Asia-Pacific in the 21st century, the United States of America is all in. The United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with allies and friends."

The U.S. president is not just talking the talk, but also walking the walk.

Diplomatically, Obama at the Bali Summit directly confronted Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao for Beijing's extensive claims in the South China Sea, putting Wen on the defensive by telling him that "while the U.S. is not a claimant in the South China Sea dispute, we have a powerful stake in maritime security in general and in the resolution of the South China Sea issue specifically -- as a resident Pacific power and as a guarantor of security in the Asia-Pacific region."

Economically, Washington's most recent

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decision to boost up the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is a powerful signal that the United States will not allow China to dominate the regional economic process. The TPP is a multilateral free trade agreement, consisting of Australia, Japan, Singapore, the U.S., Vietnam and other five regional members, and seeks to establish an Asia-Pacific trade bloc with China excluded.

Analysts view a U.S.-sponsored TPP as the beginning of a new pattern of economic relations for the region as well as a clear sign of intent in spreading the U.S. power from the post-1945 strategic underpinning of East Asia to the economic sphere. "The TPP is strategized intentionally to exclude China," Singapore National University's East Asian Institute reports, "the standards pushed for in the TPP -- stricter intellectual property rights, more stringent labor and environmental standards and regulatory discipline of state-owned enterprises -- will make it formidably harder for China to join. The TPP is also regarded as a 'game changer' for setting new rules and for building a new platform that excludes China."

Strategically, the Obama administration has declared the Asia-Pacific region the "top priority" and pledged that planned cuts in the U.S. defense spending will in no way affect America's military presence in Asia. Speaking to the Australian Parliament on Nov. 17, a day after Washington formally revealed 2,500 U.S. marines will be based in northern Australia in 2012, President Obama announced, "Here is what the region must know: As we end today's wars,

I have directed my national security team to make our presence and missions in the Asia-Pacific a top priority. The United States is a Pacific power and we are here to stay."

"The Canberra speech, one of the most significant foreign policy statements of Obama's presidency," says Geoff Dyer of Financial Times, "brought together several important shifts in U.S. strategy that have been taking shape over the past two years and are aimed at addressing the rise of China. These include the winding down of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and increased attention on Southeast Asia and the South China Sea."

Washington is moving quickly on all fronts to restore America's influence in the Asia-Pacific and seeking to play a major role in shaping the future of the region, after a decade-long preoccupation in Iraq and Afghanistan. "For years," as Professor Mahbubani puts it, "China tried to avoid waking up the American 'sleeping tiger.' Now the tiger is stirring. A new great game


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is beginning."

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