

Summary: After eight years of the Bush presidency, when the United States was perceived as disdainful of allies and excessively aggressive toward challengers, U.S. President Barack Obama promised a change in course. This appears to involve closer consultation with partners and greater engagement with adversaries.

But despite Obama's optimistic rhetoric, adhering to these two strategies requires his administration to perform a difficult balancing act. Japan's reconsideration of the contours of its alliance with the United States and India's fearfulness that a U.S. focus on Pakistan and China signals strategic abandonment are indicative of some of the problems that could result. Such episodes are demonstrative of the difficulty of sustaining a strategy of trying to please everyone all of the time; the United States must balance its desire to achieve broader common goals with the reality that all actions have potentially negative consequences for its diplomatic relationships.

Obama's Dilemma: Reassurance or Accommodation?

by Dhruva Jaishankar¹

Campaign rhetoric is usually a poor indicator of a leader's foreign policy, but Barack Obama's was notable for its consistency with two recurring themes. The first, consulting and reassuring allies, was particularly popular with those Americans who for years had to endure complaints and gibes from friends abroad about brash American unilateralism. The second, engaging potential adversaries with the intention of reaching a lasting accommodation, was equally appealing to those influenced by reports of the perceived consequences of American intolerance and insensitivity, particularly in the Middle East.

As a campaign tool, this strategy was clearly effective. The George W. Bush administration was pilloried for its perceived condemnation of longstanding alliance structures and the hostility it had generated toward the United States through its indifference to diverse opinions and values. Bush's resolute statement in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 that "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" and his call in 2002 for a "coalition of the willing" to disarm Saddam Hussein were widely ridiculed. Contempt of both allies and adversaries were also notable features in popular caricatures of neoconservatives. Obama's rhetoric during the campaign promised relief from years of willful American alienation of the rest of the world, never mind that polls and foreign policy elites consistently revealed that this

applied predominantly to Western Europe and the broader Middle East.

Few would doubt that both reassurance and accommodation are, within certain boundaries, good. However, pursuing them in combination with one another, as the current administration appears intent on doing, becomes a tricky balancing act, offering something like the diplomatic equivalent of the security dilemma. Similar problems bedeviling American relations with Japan, India, and its NATO allies—many of which came to the fore during Obama's trip last week to Asia—suggest that this delicate balance will be difficult to sustain by his administration over the long term.

Japan—Obama's first stop in Asia—has emerged as a concern after years of excellent relations with Washington. Following the landslide electoral victory of the Democratic Party of Japan, Tokyo has dropped credible hints about recasting the traditional relationship with the United States, which for half a century has provided a foundation for its regional strategic calculations. The basis for this reassessment appears to be, in large part, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama's appeasement of his socialist allies, but that does not render talk of a "more equal alliance with the United States" and "the creation of an East Asian community" minus the United States any less a concern to Washington. It required a rather public

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berating by Defense Secretary Robert Gates to impress upon Tokyo the seriousness of any deviation from the traditional contours of the alliance, prompting a senior State Department official to tell *The Washington Post* that “the hardest thing right now is not China, it’s Japan.” That Japan requires now to be roped into alliance mechanisms with Washington naturally bodes ill for the regional balance, so the fact that Obama came back from Tokyo empty handed, specifically on the issue of U.S. basing in Okinawa, is particularly worrisome.

India may not be a formal American ally, but it presents the U.S. leadership with almost the opposite problem. The reorientation of India’s foreign policy over the past two decades and American requirements for a like-minded and stable partner in its region have helped forge an increasingly valuable and compatible partnership. Today, the Indian leadership is worried that Obama’s focus on convincing Pakistan’s leaders to pursue militants along its western frontier overlooks the continued presence in Pakistan of militant outfits intent on attacking India, and puts pressure on India to come to a half-baked solution to the Kashmir dispute. Moreover, Indian leaders fear that Obama’s emphasis on domestic priorities would necessitate certain strategic accommodations with China, to the detriment of the Washington’s still-evolving relationship with New Delhi. In very different ways, strategies meant to accommodate Pakistan and China threaten to jeopardize the United States’ increasingly healthy relations with India, and all of its accompanying benefits. That Obama’s Asian itinerary excluded India is offset only by his invitation to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to visit Washington this week, but it has not helped dispel the notion of India being downgraded by his administration. In fact, a reference in Obama’s joint statement with Chinese president Hu Jintao to working together “to promote peace, stability, and development” between India and Pakistan has only reinforced the view in New Delhi that the administration sees India as a subcontinental power, rather than a potential peer competitor to China.

Japan’s waywardness and India’s worries of abandonment are not unusual cases. U.S. engagement with Iran causes trepidation in Israel, while moves to reassure Israel generate insecurity and hostility towards the United States in Tehran. The “reset” of American relations with Moscow, which included a decision not to deploy radars and missile interceptors in Poland and the Czech Republic, came at the expense of relations with states on Russia’s periphery that retain concerns about its influence in the region. Meanwhile, mounting challenges associated with coordinating the U.S.- and NATO-led strategy in Afghanistan have exposed the limited utility of Obama’s promised consultation with traditional allies. Speaking in Berlin as a presidential candidate, Obama called on the United States and

Europe to work together more closely on a litany of common challenges, including defeating the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Yet almost a year into his administration, several long-standing allies appear unwilling to provide sufficient resources in an optimal manner so as to further Western objectives, the continuing threat posed to them by terrorists based in Afghanistan notwithstanding.

In none of these regional predicaments need there necessarily be a clear choice between reassurance and accommodation—both can be considered worthwhile mechanisms to further the national interest—but that does not obscure evident problems that may nevertheless result. It is true that countries such as India have largely escaped this dilemma by blurring the distinctions between allies and adversaries, and are therefore at freedom to enjoy reasonably favorable relations with such diverse actors as the United States, Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. However, this is a luxury that the United States—as the predominant global power—cannot always afford. Trying to please all parties will necessitate increasingly risky diplomatic acrobatics. Worse, it could end up pleasing no one at all.

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