

3Qs: America's first 'Pacific President'

December 3 2012, by Jason Kornwitz

President Obama's four-day, three-country tour of Southeast Asia earlier this month exemplified his administration's ongoing foreign policy pivot from the Middle East to Asia. In his first postelection overseas trip—which comprised meetings and press conferences with leaders in Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar—Obama billed himself as "America's first Pacific president," and noted that the U.S. views the region as essential to American "growth and prosperity." Northeastern University news office asked Suzanne Ogden, an expert in U.S. policy in Asia and a professor of political science in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, to explain the social, political and economic ramifications of the historic trip.

One international studies expert in China noted that the country "can't be contained" and called the Obama administration's foreign policy pivot to Asia "a very stupid choice." President Obama, on the other hand, has said, "The Pacific will sculpt the future of the U.S." In what ways would fostering a stronger working relationship between Asia and America shape Obama's presidential legacy?

President Obama's policy is not an effort to "contain" China. The term "containment" is used by people locked into the mindset of the Cold War and the confrontation with communism. The U.S. is, however, concerned about the growing number of conflicts between China and other

Asian countries over islands in the region, and it does not want these to blow up into full-scale conflicts. The U.S. also wants to address the concern of Asian countries that America left Asia after it lost the war in Vietnam in 1975.

While a [concern](#) about the military balance of power in Asia is one element in our very deep and very complex relationship with China, in most respects the Sino-American relationship has grown stronger over the years. We work with, not against, the Chinese on almost every imaginable problem, from Interpol, drug trafficking, protecting sea lanes and world health, to legal reforms within China itself. Under the Obama administration, the U.S. has at long last stopped lecturing the Chinese as to what they should do and has developed a quite healthy relationship with China.

A report in The New York Times identified Asia as the "region of the future," and noted that that area will account for approximately 50 percent of the world's economic growth outside the U.S. over the next five years. Aside from courting countries like Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar, which the Obama administration has promised \$170 million over the next two years, what can the U.S. do to affirm its economic power in the Pacific?

It would be better to say that Asia is the "region of the present." The economies of Asian countries are growing rapidly, and although Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore have become major investors in Southeast Asia, China's investment is enormous and will ultimately dwarf the investment of others. China and the U.S. are each trying to form their own regional trade and economic alliances in the region, which is rich in

natural resources. China clearly has an advantage: It can have its state-owned corporations go into neighboring countries and build road, railroads, ports and airports and then have its heavily state-invested corporations go in to set up businesses in these countries. Of course, these countries are on China's doorstep, not on ours, and the Chinese far better understand Asian political and business culture than Americans do. American businesses have much less support from the U.S. government.

It certainly has done little for American economic power to have the U.S. forbidding American businesses to invest in Myanmar from 1988 until this year. This policy has allowed China to gain the upper hand economically in Myanmar—and in Cambodia and Laos. It is a pity that even though we know from the U.S. relationship with China that "engagement" works far better than trying to punish countries for their human rights policies by boycotting trade with them, the U.S. government continues to try to change governments' policies through economic instruments.

Foreign policy experts suggest that Asia's overwhelming reliance on oil produced in the Middle East would make it impossible for the U.S. to retreat from its relationship with the Arab region. In your opinion, how will the Obama administration's so-called "pivot to Asia" alter its view on its relationship with the Middle East?

The U.S. has long had a commitment to protect the world's sea lanes for trade, including trade in oil. It is hard to imagine we will ever relinquish that role, not because of Asia's reliance on Middle Eastern oil but because of the entire world's reliance on oil, and trade, whether from the Mideast or elsewhere.

In the last few years, however, U.S. exploration of shale oil has allowed it to become far less dependent on the supply of Middle Eastern oil. That in itself has made it easier for the U.S. to 'pivot' from the Mideast to Asia. The fact that the U.S. "pivoted," rather than paying more attention to Asia while not diminishing our focus on the [Middle East](#), perhaps indicates a belief that the resources—and problems—of Asia are becoming more important to us than Middle Eastern oil and problems.

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