



## **U.S. IN SEARCH OF NEW ALLIES IN ASIA-PACIFIC**

**Ankit Kumar**  
**Research Associate, CAPS**

The announcement by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) that the U.S. President Barack Obama has agreed to be the chief guest at 2015 Republic Day parade is indeed a diplomatic feat for India. More importantly, the new Indian government has signalled its intention that India is not hesitant in having closer collaboration with the United States anymore. This will be the first time that an American President would be attending India's Republic Day parade as the honoured chief guest. The 64 years delay in attending the republic day celebrations of the world's largest democracy by the president of world's most powerful and prosperous democracy is another part of the story. What this incoming visit tells is that the two countries are willing to leave the past behind and are ready to establish a new relationship. However, what both countries would want from each other in the relationship still needs to be seen. But now it seems that the convergence of interests of both exceeds the divergences. This also suggests that the U.S. is getting desperate to have new allies in the Asia-Pacific region as it no longer wishes to carry the burden of security on its own shoulders. Hence, it becomes important to understand the various factors and the possible strategy of the U.S. in Asia-Pacific region.

### **Changing Equations of Asia-Pacific**

Since the rise of Xi Jinping as China's President, China's strategy in the Asia-Pacific region has changed significantly. Instead of taking on "rebalance" strategy of the U.S. head-on, China, has very cleverly weakened the *spokes* of the 'hub and spoke' alliance system on which the *rebalance* was to be done. While the United States is still struggling to seal the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement even with its allies, China has already signed several Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with many countries which also include two of the closest allies of the U.S. — China signed FTA with South Korea on 10<sup>th</sup> November<sup>i</sup> and with Australia on 17<sup>th</sup> November<sup>ii</sup>. One could understand Washington's worry because Barack Obama in his Brisbane address has warned Australia against accepting the Chinese regional

leadership in return for FTA.<sup>iii</sup> Perhaps both South Korea and Australia are looking to gain economically with their deal with China but at the same time remain close to Washington. However, the way U.S. seems to perceive it is different. China has been pushing for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which in many ways is similar to the TPP. While members of TPP are still negotiating the deal because of their concerns regarding their domestic sectors, the possibility of RCEP coming into effect looks bright with members saying that RCEP negotiations would be over by the end of 2015<sup>iv</sup>. As China is the largest trading partner of all the 16 members of RCEP, it appears that China could well emerge as the economic leader of the region.

In foreign policy arena, the increasing cooperation between Russia and China on many fronts hints at the return of great power politics in Asia-Pacific. The changes in Northeast Asia since 2012 have made the region seemingly volatile. With Russia hinting at starting the process of reengaging North Korea<sup>v</sup>, the situation is likely to get more complex. This probably suggests that Russia might use North Korea as a trump card to deal with U.S. It would also reassure North Korean leadership which were worried because of strain in relations with China. Since February 2013 North Korea's relationship with China had soured a little because Pyongyang tested the nuclear weapons despite warning from China. Russia Japan relations that

seemed to have improved considerably after Japanese Prime Minister's efforts deteriorated once again following the Ukraine crisis. Japan had to join the US and west in imposing economic sanctions. But Japan's half-hearted sanctions showed that it was not very keen on imposing them especially after so much effort had been made to improve the relationship.

### Seeking New Allies

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With the continuing problems of Middle-East and the “pivot to Asia” not really working in its favour, the United States has been forced to change its policy. The importance of military bases in Asia-Pacific has increased for the U.S. power projection. However, with things not really going to the liking of U.S., it has been forced to look for and open new venues. The change was apparent when for the very first time Pentagon presented a report before the U.S. Congress which clearly stated that Pakistan is a sponsor of terrorism and uses it as a proxy against India<sup>vi</sup>, a truth that the US had known for a long time. What’s interesting is that the report was released following Prime Minister Modi’s U.S. visit and in the report the U.S. basically said what Indians wanted to hear. Is U.S. trying to appease India at the expense of Pakistan? Perhaps so, because Pakistan has now become the largest importer of conventional weapons from China and the growing proximity between the two is known to all. Importantly, if at all U.S. is looking to balance China in the region then Pakistan is not going to be of any help to the U.S. and so it is now looking for an ally in India as well as Vietnam.

Pakistan too seems to have understood the possibility of being abandoned by the U.S. and perhaps is the reason why the Pakistan’s Army chief is in the U.S. However, the focus of policy makers in Washington seems to be on Russia and China now and so they understand the importance of India and Vietnam. U.S. is already trying to enhance its security ties with Vietnam in order to strengthen Vietnam’s maritime forces. The U.S. partially lifted the sales of weapons to Vietnam in October this year and looks to supply weapons for defence and surveillance<sup>vii</sup>. How the rivalry unfolds in Asia-Pacific remains to be seen but developing countries need to be cautious of the great power politics and they must try conscientiously to avoid getting trapped in sticky situation.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)*

<sup>i</sup> “China, South Korea sign ‘substantial conclusion’ of free trade deal”, *Reuters*, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/10/us-southkorea-china-trade-idUSKCN0IU02Z20141110>, accessed on November 23, 2014.

<sup>ii</sup> “Australia and China seal major free trade deal”, *BBC News*, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-30076974>, accessed on November 23, 2014.

<sup>iii</sup> Hugh White, “Abbott clueless on how to handle US and China”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, at <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/abbott-clueless-on-how-to-handle-us-and-china-20141124-11sko3.html>, accessed on November 23, 2014.

<sup>iv</sup> “China-led RCEP talks to conclude in 2015”, *The BRICS Post*, at <http://thebricspost.com/china-led-rcep-talks-to-conclude-in-2015/#.VHayo9KUc4U>, accessed on November 25, 2014.

<sup>v</sup> “Pyongyang and Moscow boost ties as tense Beijing watches from the sidelines”, *The Asahi Shimbun*, at [http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/korean\\_peninsula/AJ201411260057](http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/korean_peninsula/AJ201411260057), accessed on November 26, 2014.

<sup>vi</sup> “Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan”, *Department of Defense*, United States of America, at [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Oct2014\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Oct2014_Report_Final.pdf), accessed on November 24, 2014.

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vii Matthew Pennington, "U.S. Eases Ban On Weapons Sales To Vietnam", Huffington Post, accessed on November 24, 2014 at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/02/us-weapons-sales-to-vietnam\\_n\\_5924728.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/02/us-weapons-sales-to-vietnam_n_5924728.html)

