



US REBALANCING STRATEGY: FACING SEVERE SCRUTINY?

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When there were speculations of a possible US military strike on Syria, political analysts across the world began claiming that the US had already got caught in a new rattrap in West Asia and their 'pivot policy' would now take a back seat. US Secretary of Defence, Chuck Hagel on his visit to South East Asia reassured the media that the Asia Pacific region would 'to continue to be a significant part of redefining international affairs' in spite of the problems prevailing in West Asia.ⁱ

Following his visit, the 16 day long shutdown of the US federal government only further damaged the US reputation in the region. The government shut down certainly worked in favour of the Chinese as President Barack Obama called off the most awaited South East Asia tour. The ASEAN and the East Asia summits along with the APEC meet were few of the important events that Obama had to forfeit from. He had also planned to visit a couple of the South East Asian countries such as Philippines and Malaysia, to enhance strategic and defence ties which would be crucial for the US at this point of time.

Another agenda that was close to Obama's heart during the trip was to guarantee leaders of the region of a quick resolve on the Trans Pacific Partnership, a 11 nation free trade agreement, which if came into existence could serve as a balance to China's trade with the ASEAN. Keeping in mind that only the president is capable of influencing the American business groups to make concessions that would get the TPP up and running, this decision to cancel his trip has come out as a huge negative for the US.ⁱⁱ

Ian Storey, senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, wrote that Obama's absence at the APEC meeting was a blow to the American image in Asia 'where symbolism is everything'.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet another expert referred to this gesture as the 'decline of the United States'.^{iv} Similar thoughts were also echoed by the US Secretary of State John Kerry, Obama's representative at the APEC meeting in Bali, where he was quoted saying that "I believe that those standing in the way (of a resolution) need to think long and hard about the message that we send to the world when we can't get our own act together".^v

Meanwhile as Obama was busy sorting out the domestic turmoil within his country, Chinese President Xi Jinping made sure to grab the opportunity that came his way and made visits to Malaysia and Indonesia. An address at the Indonesian Parliament, the first of its kind by a foreign leader, a boost in trade with ASEAN by \$1 trillion, word to set up a regional infrastructure bank and the signing of a number of deals worth 30 billion dollars or more in the field of mining were few of the developments during Xi Jinping's visit. The Chinese President's meet with the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, also saw some fruitful discussions, as the two officials agreed to work towards boosting both their military and economic ties. The Malaysian PM was also later quoted saying that 'It was a missed opportunity for Obama to assert his leadership, particularly in context of his policy pivot towards Asia'.^{vi}

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Yet another development that had taken place in the US and is known to have direct ramifications on the rebalancing strategy is the recent US defence budget cuts. A decision has been taken to cut \$52 billion in the 2014 US fiscal year which amounts to about 10 percent of the Pentagon's defence budget^{vii}. This defence cut is already seen to negate the ship force structure plan in the Asia Pacific in turn undermining the role of the US in the region.^{viii} In order to implement their strategy of air sea battle in the Asia Pacific, it goes without saying that the US will have to make significant investments in the region. It also becomes crucial for the US to signal its resolve to its allies in the region in order to get their

continued support. At a recent defence conference in California, Hagel has already cautioned that these cuts are threatening America's security and global military role.^{ix}

The much awaited and talked about US Rebalancing Strategy has received enough scrutiny and criticism even before it has acquired a concrete shape of its own. The US rebalancing strategy to a large extent is to convince its allies in the Asia Pacific and elsewhere that the US has not been weakened by its own economic and politic challenges. Hence in order to ensure its primacy and support in the region, the US has to learn to balance its act- both domestic and global.

(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)

ⁱ Abraham M. Denmark, "Will Syria Kill the Asia Rebalance?", *The National Interest*, 5 September 2013, also see <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/will-syria-kill-the-asia-rebalance-8995?page=1>

ⁱⁱ Joshua Kurlantzick, "How Damaging is the Cancellation of Obama's Trip?" *Gateway House*, 5 October 2013, see <http://www.gatewayhouse.in/how-damaging-is-the-cancellation-of-obamas-trip/>

ⁱⁱⁱ James Hookway, Natasha Brereton-Fukui and Peter Nicholas, "Obama Absence Gives China Opening", *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 October 2013, see <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303722604579114562261611206>

^{iv} Barbara Demick, "Cancellation of Obama's Southeast Asia trip a boost for China's Xi", *Los Angeles Times*, 4 October 2013, see <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303722604579114562261611206>

^v Matthew Lee, "John Kerry Warns Congress: Think 'Long and Hard' About Government Shutdown's Global Message", *Huffington Post*, 5 October 2013, see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/05/john-kerry-government-shutdown_n_4049758.html

^{vi} Mick Krever and Claire Calzonetti, "Malaysia PM: Obama's cancelled Asia trip a 'missed opportunity'" *CNN*, 31 October 2013, see <http://amanpour.blogs.cnn.com/2013/10/31/malaysia-pm-obamas-cancelled-asia-trip-a-missed-opportunity/>

^{vii} Cheryl Pellerin, "Service Chiefs Detail 2014 Sequestration Effects", *American Forces Press Service*, 19 September 2013, see <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=120825>

^{viii} Ely Ratner, "Pacific Power: The Politics of the US Military in SE Asia", *The Diplomat*, 13 November 2013, see <http://thediplomat.com/2013/11/pacific-power-the-politics-of-the-us-military-in-se-asia/>

^{ix} "US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel says' too steep, too deep'", *ABC News*, 17 November 2013, see <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-17/pentagon-chief-sounds-alarm-over-us-budget-cuts/5097582>