

# Renegotiating Asia's Regional Security Order: The Role of the United States

*Beverley Loke*<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, Asia holds a central position in a shifting global geopolitical climate.<sup>2</sup> However, the region remains plagued by historical grievances, territorial disputes and nuclear proliferation, and is confronted with non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, energy security and natural disasters. Yet over the years, the region has witnessed the rise of China and India, achieved substantial economic progress, and sought to forge a more coherent sense of regional identity. It has developed to become arguably the most dynamic region in the world, with the Asian security order currently undergoing processes of renegotiation to better reflect changing regional and global realities.

Naturally, one of the key questions emerging out of this shifting regional landscape concerns the role of the United States. In particular, what is the extent and nature of America's role in the renegotiation and orchestration of the Asian security order? This is the central research question this article seeks to address. Specifically, it situates America's role in Asia vis-à-vis two important regional developments: the rise of China, and Asia's responses to the policies of the George W. Bush administration. This article advances two major arguments. First, the US has played, and will continue to play, a vital role in the evolution of the regional security order. The extent of America's role in the region thus remains wide-ranging and highly fundamental. Second, the US

---

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Ralf Emmers for his valuable comments.

<sup>2</sup> For a volume that succinctly captures the regional-global nexus of Asian security, see William T. Tow, ed., *Security Politics in the Asia-Pacific: A Regional-Global Nexus?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

nevertheless needs to pay greater attention to the manner in which it conducts itself in the region. Indeed, “Asia is now far more than a bystander. It is no longer waiting to be led; it is an able and willing partner and expects to be treated as such.”<sup>3</sup> To this end, the nature of US involvement and its role in shaping a regional collective future must be recalibrated to better adapt to changing regional dynamics.

This article is organised into four sections. The first section offers a brief overview of America’s involvement in Asia. The second section examines the implications of China’s rise for US regional leadership and order-building initiatives. The third section introduces the concept of legitimacy and focuses on Asian reactions to Bush’s intensified unilateral policies. The final section provides a preliminary assessment of President Barack Obama’s Asia policy. Initial observations indicate that the Obama administration is demonstrating a keen awareness of Asia’s regional dynamism and is headed in the right direction with regard to the extent and nature of America’s role in the evolving regional security order, even as inherent challenges remain.

## THE US IN ASIA

From the very outset, the US has played a pivotal role in the construction of Asia’s security order.<sup>4</sup> The post-World War II Asian regional order was fundamentally characterised by bilateral security arrangements, commonly known as the “San Francisco System”. Under this system, the US provided public goods that significantly contributed to regional stability in the form of security guarantees, technology transfers and open economic liberalism. More than half a century after the San Francisco System

---

<sup>3</sup> Yoichi Funabashi, “Keeping Up With Asia: America and the New Balance of Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 5, September/October 2008, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, Evelyn Goh, “Hierarchy and the Role of the United States in the East Asian Security Order”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2008, pp. 353-377; G. John Ikenberry, “The Political Foundations of American Relations with East Asia”, in G. John Ikenberry and Chung-in Moon, eds., *The United States and Northeast Asia: Debates, Issues, and New Order* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), pp. 19-37; William H. Overholt, *Asia, America, and the Transformation of Geopolitics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 11-31.

was institutionalised, these bilateral alliance relationships remain an enduring feature and necessary component of contemporary Asian security. Yet, to an extent, they have largely shifted from an explicitly threat-centric agenda and adapted to changing regional realities.

Whilst bilateralism under the San Francisco System was the defining Asian security structure during the Cold War, it is perhaps more accurate to currently refer to Asian security structures in the plural and recognise that these traditional, albeit transformed, alliances comprise merely one of the security structures in an evolving regional order. Particularly over the last two decades, Asia's regional security architecture and regional order have undergone processes of renegotiation from within. Regional security structures are constantly being redefined to better capture changing regional dynamics and reflect a greater push toward multilateral initiatives. As a result, the contemporary regional security architecture is best characterised by myriad ad hoc and formal bilateral, minilateral and multilateral arrangements with often overlapping security agendas. Order-building in Asia thus remains a continuous project.

America's role remains central to the renegotiation and orchestration of Asia's regional order. Over the years, America's strategic objectives in Asia have remained largely constant: to strengthen its traditional alliances, de-nuclearise North Korea and establish stability on the Korean peninsula, curtail the threat of nuclear proliferation, encourage the peaceful development of China, eliminate terrorist networks in the region, and maintain American access to Asian economic markets. To achieve these goals and maintain America's regional leadership, US strategy in Asia has rested primarily on the provision of public goods, the management of regional conflict, and the legitimate exercise of its power.<sup>5</sup> Recent developments such as China's rise and Bush's unilateral tendencies have, however, cast a shadow of doubt on US influence in Asia. It is thus salient to assess the prospects for a continued US leadership role in light of such developments.

---

<sup>5</sup> Michael Mastanduno, "Hegemonic Order, September 11, and the Consequences of the Bush Revolution", in G. John Ikenberry and Chung-in Moon, eds., *The United States and Northeast Asia: Debates, Issues, and New Order* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2008), pp. 263-267.

## THE RISE OF CHINA: IMPLICATIONS FOR US REGIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ORDER-BUILDING

China's rise over the past two decades has been nothing short of remarkable. China's growing power is unambiguously leaving a material and ideational footprint in many aspects of international affairs. Whilst China's rise remains accompanied by much uncertainty, overall, China has not sought to destabilise the US-led regional and global order. To an extent, China acknowledges that its continued domestic development is highly dependent on the stability that a US-led order provides. Nevertheless, Beijing is equally aware that it has accrued sufficient power to project a more decisive influence in international politics. At a regional level, this confidence is manifested in China's enhanced participation in regional affairs and multilateral institutions.

Since the 1990s, China has adopted the view that multilateral institutions are platforms to advance China's interests and has come to embrace and even initiate such institutions. China was a key driver in establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001. In 2002, China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Although China has not relinquished its territorial claims over the Spratly Islands, the declaration represents a peaceful management of the dispute and prohibits a repetition of the 1995 Mischief Reef incident. Similarly, China became the first non-ASEAN member to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in October 2003. In addition, Beijing has forged greater cooperation on economic, transnational and non-traditional security issues. The 2009 Defence White Paper highlighted the "military operations other than war" (MOOTW) aspect of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), such as counter-terrorism measures, disaster relief and international peacekeeping. Overall, China has subscribed to the "responsible stakeholder" thesis, with Hu Jintao's "harmonious world" concept as an attempt to reconfigure and broaden China's national interests to take into account the common interests of other states.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, it is worth noting the damning critique presented by several Chinese scholars. Zhang Ruizhuang argues that the "harmonious world" thesis is "little more than rhetoric spiced with Wilsonian idealism." According to Zhang, "China's pursuit of a foreign policy with no principle, no vision, no cause, and no friends plus its relentless pursuit of economic ties and benefits

Yet, to be sure, there are forces tugging China in different and often divergent directions. There exists a potential tension between the extent to which China subscribes to the responsible stakeholder thesis without appearing to its domestic audience to be overly submissive to Western demands, while balancing this against calls to establish its own distinctive brand of great-power responsibility. On the one hand, China is expanding regional and global interests, aspiring to attain international status as a privilege-seeking state and greater socialisation into the international society by calling for the undertaking of greater international responsibilities. On the other hand, the accelerated pace of China's rise—and particularly since the onslaught of the global financial crisis, its increasing global influence—has caught its leaders by surprise and catapulted China into much greater responsibilities than for which it had prepared itself. Beijing is fully aware of the ripple effect that its growing power and responsibilities can create, and concerns have arisen within China that the country is shouldering more international obligations than its present capacity enables it to. China's policy makers fear that a rising external demand for China to undertake greater international responsibilities could drain the country's resources and divert attention away from its domestic development goals. Many believe China should not assume overwhelming international responsibilities and instead focus on its domestic obligations, resulting in a general reluctance to provide regional and global leadership. As a recent editorial in the *Global Times* stated, grandeur expectations of China's rise have led to the projection of inappropriate expectations of international responsibility onto China. Although much hope surrounds China's growing power, "the Chinese government and people should have a realistic idea of what the country is and what it isn't."<sup>7</sup>

---

around the world leaves an impression in the eyes of the rest of the world that China is simply a mercantilist nouveau riche." Zhang Ruizhuang, "Would There Be Two Tigers Living in the Same Mountain? The Geostrategic Implications of China's Rise for U.S.-China Relations", in Eva Paus, Penelope B. Prime and Jon Western, eds., *Global Giant: Is China Changing the Rules of the Game?* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 226. On the responsible stakeholder thesis, see Thomas J. Christensen, "Shaping the Choices of a Rising China: Recent Lessons for the Obama Administration", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 3, July 2009, pp. 89-104.

<sup>7</sup> "China Not Yet a Great Power", *Global Times*, 10 June 2009.

For the time being, the general consensus amongst foreign observers seems to be that “while China is willing occasionally to assume a leading role in concert with other states, it remains far from being a global leader in terms of either its mindset or its capabilities.”<sup>8</sup> As an article in *The Economist* commemorating the 60th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China commented, “China’s own world view has failed to keep pace with its growing weight. It is a big power with a medium-power mindset, and a small-power chip on its shoulder.”<sup>9</sup>

Such observations have a direct relevance for US-China relations and the future direction of Asia’s security order. With the China-US dyad arguably the most consequential relationship in the world, one of the key questions emerging out of the current climate is whether China and the US will collaborate, co-exist or compete in regional and global order-building. In Asia, regional security actors would certainly not favour a scenario in which they would have to make tough choices between China and the US. Previous alarmist power transition predictions about Sino-American conflict, however, have not materialised.

Although power shifts are certainly in play, it is premature to speak of a destructive power transition between China as a rising great power and the US as a declining one. While China’s rise undoubtedly presents certain challenges to the US, in the form of human rights issues and a lack of military transparency, over the years, Washington has come to realise the importance of Chinese cooperation on many fundamental issues of regional and international security. Engagement, rather than containment, has become the cornerstone of America’s China policy, with both countries pragmatically accommodating and cooperating with each other. As Obama declared, “in an interconnected world, power does not need to be a zero-sum game, and nations need not fear the success of another...so the United States does not seek to contain China, nor does a deeper relationship with China mean a weakening of our bilateral alliances.”<sup>10</sup> To this end, it is expected

<sup>8</sup> Evan S. Medeiros, “Is Beijing Ready for Global Leadership?”, *Current History*, vol. 108, no. 719, September 2009, p. 256.

<sup>9</sup> “The People’s Republic at 60: China’s Place in the World”, *The Economist*, 1 October 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall”, Tokyo, Japan, 14 November 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-suntory-hall> (accessed 11 January 2010).

that both countries will continue to deepen their interdependence and cooperation amidst a shifting regional geopolitical structure.

Yet, while China is undertaking a more positive regional role, it is unlikely that Beijing will emerge to assume the duties and obligations of the US. Compared with the US, Chinese government elites tend to focus on a narrower conception of their national interest, even as such conceptualisations continue to evolve and be conditioned by its interactions with the international system. Beijing is in some aspects still testing the waters and struggling to implement a cogent strategy that grants it greater prestige and leadership status without undermining its core national interests of territorial integrity, domestic development and regime preservation. As Victor Cha aptly reminds us, “Critics who predict an American sunset in Asia are missing a fundamental point: in order to be a region’s benefactor, a leading power must be willing and able to provide for the region’s public good.”<sup>11</sup> As the discussion above underscores, China at present does not appear to possess the capacity or ability to assume this leadership role.

## AMERICA’S CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY UNDER BUSH

Yet, as developments in the past decade have demonstrated, it is salient to recognise that US leadership is neither guaranteed nor secure. Here, it is worth noting that the notion of leadership is sustained through acts of legitimisation. Legitimacy is significant to the extent in which it engenders acquiescence by the other members of international society to the leading state’s vision of order. Imbued with the power to both confer and withhold legitimacy, the international society is the gatekeeper of legitimacy. As Thomas Franck has stated, “it is the community which invests legitimacy with meaning. In this sense, community is not only the essential ingredient in an ultimate rule of recognition, it is also the *sine qua non* of the entire enterprise of defining legitimacy.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Victor D. Cha, “Winning Asia: Washington’s Untold Success Story”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 6, November/December 2007, p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas M. Franck, *The Power of Legitimacy Among Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 204-5.



To this end, the nature and purpose of US power under Bush featured prominently in international politics. US actions demonstrated how enlightened self-interest could also be enacted at the expense of international order. The lack of international legitimacy for the Bush administration was directly related to the perceived unilateralism undertaken in its foreign policy decisions, particularly in the context of the Iraq War. For many, the administration's muscular and moralistic foreign policy contrasted sharply with its predecessor's—the Bill Clinton administration—warm embrace of multilateralism. Such observations about US foreign policy, however, should be taken into perspective, as both Clinton and Bush schizophrenically oscillated between unilateral and multilateral tendencies. Indeed, the Clinton administration's 1995 National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement declared that the US “will act with others when we can, but alone when we must.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the 1999 National Security Strategy for a New Century stated, “we will do what we must to defend these interests, including—when necessary—using our military might unilaterally and decisively.”<sup>14</sup> Conversely, Bush's commitment to multilateralism outside the Middle East was often insufficiently acknowledged. In Asia, for instance, such multilateral overtures included the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative and its commitment to the Six Party Talks.

Yet, particularly in the first term of the Bush administration, it appeared that the US was articulating a new vision of world order; one based on an intensified unilateralist impulse and revisionist attitude to the international liberal order it had sought to construct in the post-WWII era. America's willingness to circumvent the rules that it helped to establish and operate on its own terms was indeed exemplary of a situation where a “former norm entrepreneur [had] become the leading norm revisionist.”<sup>15</sup> Prominent foreign policy experts warned that power does not necessarily translate into influence and authority, and cautioned against an overtly muscular

---

<sup>13</sup> “A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement”, The White House, February 1995, p. ii.

<sup>14</sup> “A National Security Strategy for a New Century”, The White House, December 1999, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Clark, “Setting the Revisionist Agenda for International Legitimacy”, *International Politics*, vol. 44, nos. 2-3, 2007, p. 334.



foreign policy. Henry Kissinger, for instance, stated, “America’s special responsibility is to work toward an international system that rests on more than military power—indeed that strives to translate that power into cooperation. Any other attitude will gradually isolate us and exhaust us.”<sup>16</sup>

As the Bush administration came to realise in the context of the Iraq war, legitimacy is a highly valuable asset in international politics. On the whole, however, Bush’s unilateral actions and counterterrorism policies did not weaken the US’s standing in Asia to the extent that it did in Europe and the Middle East.<sup>17</sup> In Asia, the US bolstered its traditional bilateral alliances, effectively engaged the two rising powers in the region—China and India, strengthened its relationships with countries such as Singapore and Vietnam, and reinforced its commitment to regional organisations such as the Six Party Talks and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Yet, perceptions do matter, and towards the end of the Bush administration, there was a general view, within both US and Asian policy circles, that Washington’s preoccupation with fighting a protracted war in the Middle East was neglecting the shifting balance of power and multilateral initiatives emerging in Asia. Many predicted the decline of US power and influence in an increasingly self-confident Asia and called on the new administration to augment its engagement with the region.<sup>18</sup> Such appeals have fallen on the current Obama administration, with preliminary evaluations indicating that it is headed in the right direction.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in David P. Forsythe, “Global Leadership: American Exceptionalism in a Changing World Order”, in Morton H. Halperin, Jeffrey Laurenti, Peter Rundlet and Spencer P. Boyer, eds., *Power and Superpower: Global Leadership and Exceptionalism in the 21st Century* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2007), p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> Michael J. Green, “The Iraq War and Asia: Assessing the Legacy”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 2, Spring 2008, pp. 181-200. For a debate between the critics and defenders of Bush’s Asia policy, see T. J. Pempel, “How Bush Bungled Asia: Militarism, Economic Indifference and Unilateralism Have Weakened the United States Across Asia”, *The Pacific Review*, vol. 21, no. 5, December 2008, pp. 547-581; Michael J. Green, “The United States and Asia after Bush”, *The Pacific Review*, vol. 21, no. 5, December 2008, pp. 583-594.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Jason T. Shaplen and James Laney, “Washington’s Eastern Sunset: The Decline of U.S. Power in Northeast Asia”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 6, November/December 2007, pp. 82-97.

## ASSESSING OBAMA'S REGIONAL SCORECARD

Both in rhetoric and in action, Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have demonstrated a strong awareness of America's diminished image in the Bush era and have sought to revitalise America's global legitimacy and leadership. They have persistently emphasised "a new era of engagement" in international relations and advanced the notion of smart power—an all-encompassing toolkit of military, diplomatic, economic, political and cultural measures—as a defining feature of US foreign policy.<sup>19</sup>

In Asia, the Obama administration has articulated a regional strategy that is collaborative, consultative, pragmatic, problem-oriented and grounded in mutual respect. As Secretary Clinton has remarked, "it really is about listening as much as talking."<sup>20</sup> Amongst many Asian states, America's increased attention and enhanced diplomatic efforts to the region have created renewed goodwill towards the US, largely countering previous perceptions that US influence in the region was in decline.

To be sure, there exists some apprehension among Asian leaders over the future direction of Obama's regional policies, and challenges remain even among America's close allies and friends. Recent tensions arising over the 2006 realignment roadmap and the shifting of Futenma base on Okinawa continue to highlight the complications of the US-Japan alliance. In addition, the Obama administration must move to assuage India's concerns of US neglect and further cement the US-India strategic partnership. Nevertheless, US bilateral relationships continue to underpin its policy in Asia and efforts have been made to move from patron-like relationships to partner-based ones. In his speech at the 2009 Shangri-La Dialogue, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates reinforced, "Moving forward, we would like to see a good deal more cooperation among our allies and security partners—more multilateral ties in addition to hubs and spokes...This does not

---

<sup>19</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Foreign Policy Address at the Council on Foreign Relations", Washington DC, 15 July 2009, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126071.htm> (accessed 11 January 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Overview of Trip to Asia", Remarks by Secretary Clinton En Route to Tokyo, Japan, 15 February 2009, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/02/117345.htm> (accessed 11 January 2010).

mean any weakening of our bilateral ties, but rather enhancing security by adding to them multilateral cooperation.”<sup>21</sup>

On this latter point, the Obama administration has advanced a greater commitment than its predecessor to developing and supporting regional multilateral initiatives. The US finally signed the TAC in July 2009 and held the inaugural US-ASEAN summit four months later. In his first visit to Asia as president of the United States, Obama declared America’s intentions to participate in regional deliberations on Asia’s future and to anchor its engagement in appropriate regional organisations.<sup>22</sup>

To this end, Clinton’s recent remarks are worth examining. On January 12, 2010, Clinton delivered a definitive policy speech outlining five key principles underpinning America’s regional strategy:<sup>23</sup>

1. A reinforced commitment to US bilateral alliances and a further strengthening of its bilateral relationships with China, India, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam;
2. Utilising regional institutions to promote regional security, economic opportunity, and political progress;
3. A firm belief that regional organisations should be action-oriented towards addressing regional security challenges;
4. Pragmatically drawing on formal and informal bilateral, minilateral and multilateral groupings to achieve the results the US seeks; and
5. Engaging in consultations to determine the defining regional organisations and the best way forward to promote a collective and cooperative regional order.

Keeping in line with the administration’s problem-driven and results-oriented foreign policy approach, the speech reaffirmed America’s commitment to the region and willingness to engage

---

<sup>21</sup> Robert M Gates, “America’s Security Role in the Asia-Pacific”, First Plenary Session at the 8th IISS Asia Security Summit, The Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 30 May 2009, <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2009/plenary-session-speeches-2009/first-plenary-session/dr-robert-gates/> (accessed 11 January 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Obama, “Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall”.

<sup>23</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks on Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities”, Imin Center-Jefferson Hall, Honolulu, Hawaii, 12 January 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135090.htm> (accessed 15 January 2010).

regional actors on the basis of equality, respect and mutual interests. Of particular significance was the message that regional institutions had to adopt greater functional roles to address security challenges and strengthen regional cooperation. As Clinton remarked, "The formation and operation of regional groups should be motivated by concrete, pragmatic considerations. It's more important to have organizations that produce results, rather than simply producing new organizations."<sup>24</sup>

This comes amidst an increasing recognition that Asia lacks an overarching regional security architecture and is instead composed of a plethora of overlapping and often ill-equipped regional institutions. To be sure, some of these institutions have achieved noteworthy goals and contributed to regional order. Yet, as a recent Council on Foreign Relations report has critiqued, oftentimes "form, not function, has been the principal driver of nearly all Asian multilateralism for more than a decade. Process has become an end in itself as Asians have formed redundant group after redundant group, often with the same membership, closely overlapping agendas, and precious little effort on regional or global problems."<sup>25</sup> In this regard, Asia has witnessed a growing momentum over recent years to conceive of institutional groupings that better capture Asia's regional dynamism; Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 proposal for an Asia-Pacific Community may be seen in such terms.

What will be crucial is for the Obama administration to hold true to its promise of renewed engagement and multilateral leadership. It will need to strike a balance between, on the one hand, engaging consultatively with regional partners and, on the other, ensuring that real progress is made toward tailoring and streamlining coherent security structures that are driven by functionality and common purpose in order to better shape Asia's future.

---

<sup>24</sup> Clinton, "Remarks on Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities".

<sup>25</sup> Evan A. Feigenbaum and Robert A. Manning, "The United States in the New Asia", Council Special Report No. 50, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, November 2009, p. 5.

## CONCLUSION: AN EVOLVING REGIONAL SECURITY ORDER— WHAT ROLE FOR THE US?

As the US has often demonstrated, one of its greatest assets is its ability of innovation and renewal; indeed, the Obama administration was elected into office under the promise of hope and change. Yet, as America is undergoing processes of change, so is Asia: “Asia has become a region in which the old is juxtaposed with the new, a region that has gone from soybeans to satellites, from rural outposts to gleaming mega-cities, from traditional calligraphy to instant messaging, and most importantly, from old hatreds to new partnerships.”<sup>26</sup> In many aspects, the global outlook has gravitated to this new geopolitical and economic centre, leading many to label this “the Asian century.” To this end, the extent and nature of America’s role in the renegotiation and orchestration of Asia’s security order is of fundamental concern.

The above discussion has underscored that the US has been, and remains, an instrumental security actor in the region. The US is widely regarded as a pillar of security and has demonstrated its ability to adapt to changing regional realities whilst retaining its core strategic objectives. The recalibration of America’s Asia policy under the Obama administration is a welcome development. In its first year, the administration has managed to recast a previously tarnished reputation and counter perceptions of US decline in Asia. The Obama administration would be well advised to continue down this path of renewed engagement based on partnership, equality and respect.

Nevertheless, when push comes to shove, the administration must equally be willing to exercise its leadership, even if it means being tough on certain regional security issues. At present, the Obama administration appears preoccupied with establishing a good image in Asia and being appealing to as many regional states as possible. A preliminary evaluation of Obama’s Asia policy indicates that such an approach has renewed US legitimacy and leadership in the region. Whether such a policy can be sustained, however, remains to be seen, resulting in some regional anxiety about the future direction of Obama’s regional strategy.

---

<sup>26</sup> Clinton, “Remarks on Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities”.

Particularly in light of emerging and persistent security challenges, as well as shifting regional dynamics, the US will need to strike an astute balance between its partnership-leadership, bilateral-multilateral, and consultative-functional approaches. At the dawn of a new decade, one may be cautiously optimistic of America's role in Asia's evolving regional security order.

**Beverley Loke** is a PhD candidate in the Department of International Relations at the Australian National University.