

Obama Visiting Asia To Ease Trade Tensions

Charles Hutzler, Associated Press Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Days after coming to power in September, Japan's new prime minister broached forming a new East Asian trading bloc with rival China — one that would exclude the United States.

Some in Washington took it as a snub from the nation that has been America's rock in Asia for decades. Even more, Tokyo's new rhetoric underscored how China's rapid rise to power is challenging Washington's once-dominant sway in the region.

This is the reality President Barack Obama confronts as he departs Thursday for his first Asia trip, perhaps his most challenging overseas journey yet. He'll find a region outgrowing a half-century of U.S. supremacy and questioning America's relevance to its future. More so than Obama's previous foreign trips, this nine-day, four-country tour has the president on something like a salvage mission.

The trip also comes at a delicate time for Obama at home.

He is wrestling with one of the toughest decisions of his 10-month presidency, a war strategy for Afghanistan, and is urging Congress to approve his biggest domestic priority, health care.

Those pressing concerns make it notable that he is spending so much time away — a sign of Asia's importance to the U.S. and the need to tend to relationships there without delay — though he put off his original departure by a day over the weekend because of Thursday's deadly shooting spree at the Fort Hood military base in Texas. Obama will speak to U.S. troops in Alaska and South Korea, with his much-awaited decision on more troops for the Afghanistan war probably still pending.

Obama stops first in Japan, a traditional U.S. stalwart now looking toward closer engagement with China and the rest of Asia. He makes a two-city stop in China, where leaders proud of their country's one-generation leap to prosperity seek a bigger say in shaping the region's affairs.

The president also visits Singapore for a summit of Asia-Pacific leaders, where his participation is being cut by a day, and wraps up his trip in South Korea. Those countries are having to accommodate a more muscular China while wondering whether a U.S. weakened by financial crisis is in decline.

"Asia is changing very fast. It's undergoing a fundamental transition," said Huang Jing, a Chinese politics expert at the National University of Singapore. "This is not the kind of Asia or Asia-Pacific of America's traditional understanding. That old understanding is that America is dominant but friendly to the developing nations and Japan, America's perpetual ally, is No. 1. Asia is now totally different and China is the No. 1, not Japan."

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Throughout his travels, starting with a scene-setting speech in Japan, Obama is expected to deliver a message of staunch U.S. commitment to old friends and newer partners alike, promising to help keep what for decades has been one of the fastest growing regions of the world secure and thriving, according to U.S. officials.

In Tokyo, he's likely to call for a reinvigorated alliance with Japan while insisting that new Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama live up to a pending agreement on reconfiguring U.S. military bases. He's scheduled to take part in Beijing in the kind of pomp that Chinese leaders crave as a sign of respect, but also plans an event with Chinese university students aimed at telegraphing U.S. values to a broader Chinese audience.

On the sidelines of the gathering of Asia-Pacific leaders, he'll hold a first-ever summit with Southeast Asia's 10-nation alliance, a grouping whose economies are increasingly tied to a growing China but still are anxious about Chinese power. Included in that meeting will be Myanmar's leader — the first such meeting between a U.S. president and the head of a repressive government formerly shunned by Washington, though now part of a new outreach by the Obama administration.

Throughout, issues like North Korea's and Iran's nuclear programs are likely to be raised repeatedly, though little concrete progress is expected.

While popular in some parts of the region, Obama does not have the rock-star appeal in Asia that he has in Europe and elsewhere. He will have to overcome strong suspicions among Asian leaders that he is more concerned about domestic battles over health care and the economy than about matters like freer trade that are so crucial to Asian nations and U.S. businesses.

Obama comes to Asia "bringing absolutely nothing to the table" on trade, said Michael Green, a White House Asia adviser during the Bush administration and now an analyst at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. Without American leadership on trade, the fear is that the U.S. will be left behind while other nations roar ahead with their own agreements, Green said.

"There is a risk that he will come to Asia for just a star turn and photo opportunities while reserving his strength for other battles. But more is needed and should be expected of him," Simon Tay of the Singapore Institute for International Affairs said.

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration gained a reputation in Asia for distraction and an overemphasis on security. Meanwhile, China has supplanted the U.S. as the top or leading trading partner of Japan, South Korea and the ASEAN nations. The Chinese economy, a decade ago only slightly larger than Italy's, is on track to next year surpass Japan's, the world's No. 2.

Chief among Obama's goals on the trip will be to make "vividly clear to the peoples of Asia that the U.S. is here to stay in Asia," Jeffrey Bader, Obama's top Asia adviser, said at a public event in Washington on Friday. "As Asia continues to grow and as new groupings and structures take shape, the U.S. will be a player and participant

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on the ground floor, not a distant spectator."

In Japan, where Obama and his election inspired the public, it looks like the president will have his most difficult stop.

Prime Minister Hatoyama won election on an Obama-like message of change. But he's begun rethinking the U.S.-Japan alliance in which Tokyo has often felt itself the junior partner. He proposed the East Asian community that initially excluded the U.S., though he has since sidestepped the issue.

His government plans to end Japan's Indian Ocean refueling mission that supports U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan. His review of the agreement on basing 47,000 U.S. troops in Japan has caused particular tension, chiefly over relocating Futenma Marine air field on Okinawa. The U.S. has agreed to a more remote location on the island while Hatoyama has suggested moving the forces off the island. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates last month demanded Tokyo not put off resolving the issue until next year as Hatoyama has hinted.

In China, sizable distrust over trade tensions, Tibet and other human rights issues and Beijing's robust military buildup are likely to be papered over.

The Obama administration has tried to set a more constructive, cooperative tone for relations, calling Beijing a needed partner in tackling global issues like the economic downturn and climate change. The governments have identified clean energy as ripe for cooperation.

Chief among Obama's tasks in Beijing will be to establish the kind of trust that President Hu Jintao had with George W. Bush, according to Chinese scholars. China reacted angrily to recent U.S. moves to impose punitive tariffs to stem surging imports of low-cost Chinese-made tires, seeing it as reneging on Obama's promise earlier this year not to resort to protectionism during the economic crisis.

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