

## Obama's visit to Japan: strategic significance

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President Barak Obama's state visit to Japan, the first stop of his Asia tour, holds significant implications for the East Asian theater. In the backdrop of mounting criticism related to the Syrian and Crimean crises, Obama's objective was to showcase the US commitment towards Asia and infuse energy to the pivot/rebalancing strategy. Unlike the February 2013 Obama-Abe summit in Washington where Obama avoided making any direct reference to the contested islands, this time the American President expressed "strong concern" with regard to the heightened tensions in the East China Sea. The joint statement underscored that US has "deployed its most advanced military assets to Japan and provides all necessary capabilities to meet its commitments under the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. These commitments extend to all the territories under the administration of Japan, including the Senkaku Islands"<sup>i</sup>. It is important to note that there is no shift in US policy. While US refrains from taking a position on the ultimate sovereignty of the islands, they recognise the islands are under the administration of Japan and fall within the scope of Article 5 of the security treaty obligations. President Obama reiterated Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel's comments on opposing any unilateral or coercive action undermining Japan's administrative control of the Senkaku islands. This is reassuring for Japan particularly when a school of thought is emerging in US arguing that it should not get involved in Japan's conflict with China.

The Chinese expressed concern over the joint statement and articulated that the US-Japan Security Treaty is a product of the Cold War era<sup>ii</sup>. China maintained that Obama should "stick to its commitment of taking no sides in relevant territorial disputes"<sup>iii</sup>. Chinese scholars often argue that Japan fabricates the 'China threat' theory to justify Abe's calculated moves towards making Japan a "normal country". China argues that the right wing orientation of Abe reflects in his approach towards history, Yasukuni Shrine, initiatives to change the pacifist orientation of the constitution, and the recent shifts in security policy.

Prime Minister Abe is eager to consolidate Japan's position in the fast evolving regional security architecture by strengthening the security alliance with the US, which is expected to serve the goal of managing a rising China. This summit was an opportunity for Abe to erase faultlines, especially after his December visit to the Yasukuni shrine which displeased his most important ally. Japan's takeaway from this summit was that Abe for the first time managed to get a US President clearly articulate American position on one of the security hotspots in the region- the fiercely contested sovereignty claims over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Obama's utmost priority is securing market access and the much debated Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free trade negotiation, the economic pillar of his rebalancing policy, to reach an agreement. However, things did not unfold to that effect. TPP free trade initiative continued to navigate through difficult negotiations on tariff barriers.

Differences over the issue of elimination of tariff barriers between the US and Japan have delayed the TPP negotiations. While Japan is keen on protecting its sensitive sectors such as rice, wheat, beef and pork, dairy and sugar, US is firm on the issue of elimination of agricultural tariffs. The US is keen on Japan making substantial tariff reduction related to beef imports. During bilateral discussions to address the unresolved issues, reduction of the existing tariff rate of 38.5 percent is fiercely debated. Meanwhile, Japan decided to ease tariff on frozen beef to 19.5 percent within 18 years in its economic partnership agreement with Australia. Abe cannot afford major reduction in the tariff since it would affect the cattle farmers. With regard to pork, there is a debate over the gate price system. The US stresses on reducing the existing 4.3 percent tariff on pork. The influential farm lobby in Japan, the Central Union of Agricultural Co-operatives (JA-Zenchu) registered strong protest fighting the trade liberalisation arguing that the Japanese farming industry should not be "victimized for the sake of the Japan-U.S. alliance" or for the benefit of the US with influx of cheaper imports.

President Obama's strategy in Asia is underscored by strengthening old alliances including Japan while engaging in a new type of major power relation with China. Despite Japanese enthusiasm on Obama's demonstrated commitment towards the defence of Senkaku islands, it is important to note that he stressed that the US has "strong relations" with China and outlined that both parties should engage in confidence building measures. Abe, on the other hand, is focussed on showcasing US-Japan alliance as the core of Japanese security policy while initiating a domestic debate on right to collective self-defence and also building its own capabilities in dealing with an increasingly powerful China. Obama endorsing Abe's strategic dynamism will serve as an encouragement to Abe's ambition of revising the constitutional interpretation of the right to collective self-defence.

A Sino-Japanese conflict is not in the US interest and certainly not in Japan's. Stability in the regional security landscape cannot be solely guaranteed by reaffirming the US-Japan security alliance, which provides space for the US to flaunt its military might through deployment. One major concern is the challenges and future trends related to the US budget constraints. Underscoring Obama's persistent commitment to the rebalancing policy, re-energising the US-Japan security alliance and reviewing the US-Japan defence cooperation, scheduled in the latter half of the year, are positive developments for Japan, but unless there is de-escalation of tensions between Japan and China and the irritant of aggressive historical baggage is addressed, peace and

*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.*

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<sup>i</sup> "U.S.-Japan Joint Statement: The United States and Japan: Shaping the Future of the Asia-Pacific and Beyond", The White House April 25, 2014 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/25/us-japan-joint-statement-united-states-and-japan-shaping-future-asia-pac>

<sup>ii</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, April 25, 2014  
[http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1150345.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1150345.shtml)

<sup>iii</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, April 23, 2014  
[http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1149585.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1149585.shtml)