

Why the New “Emphasis on Asia” in U.S. Policy? 米国の「アジア重視」なぜ今? 田中宇 Tanaka News •Japanese original is available

Tanaka Sakai

Why the New “Emphasis on Asia” in U.S. Policy? Japanese original text is available

Tanaka Sakai

Translation by Hase Michiko

In his remarks to the Australian parliament on November 17, President Obama [declared](#) that the U. S. was making the Asia-Pacific region a top priority. While promising a continued U.S. military presence in the region, Obama also expressed his intention to strengthen U.S.-China cooperation. This declaration, however, was made at the same time as Obama announced a series of anti-China measures: to station U.S. forces permanently in Australia for the first time, to promote the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – a multilateral trade agreement that excludes China – and to discuss the South China Sea Islands at the ASEAN summit, to Beijing’s displeasure. Therefore, the Japanese media view Obama’s emphasis on Asia as strengthening an anti-China containment ring.



American Marines and Australia Soldiers listen to Obama address in Darwin, Australia

In Japan, there is heightened expectation for Obama’s new policy, which is thought to signal that the U.S. is finally treating China as an enemy. However, the “awkward timing” of the U.S. announcement doesn’t sit well with me. Since the late-1990s, U.S.-China relations have seen China’s ascension and America’s decline, especially in the economic arena. An anti-China policy of the United States would inevitably involve pro-U.S. Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN.

Those Asian nations, however, cannot afford to antagonize China because it has replaced the U.S. as their biggest trading partner. The same is true for the United States: it cannot go too far in antagonizing China, the largest holder of U.S. treasury bonds, because if China sold them, U.S. finance and the dollar would collapse. If the U.S. intended to treat China as an enemy and fortify its anti-China containment

as a national strategy, it should have started sooner. From the perspective of the interests of both the Asian nations and the United States, it is absurd for the U.S. to adopt an anti-China policy in Asia at a time when China has become the most important country in the economic arena.

Giving Asia Top Priority Means Abandoning the U.K. and Israel

If one puts the issue in a global, rather than Asian, perspective, one begins to see another meaning of the US declaration to give Asia top priority. The flip side of an emphasis on Asia is putting less emphasis on the Middle East and Europe, the regions that previously received top U.S. priority.

In the Middle East, Israel has dictated U.S. world strategies since the 1970s, but Israel now needs U.S. support more than ever. Until the invasion of Iraq in 2003, U.S. domination in the Middle East had served Israel well. After the 9.11 attacks in 2001, U.S. world strategy so focused on the Middle East that some said it had become a Middle-Eastern country, while U.S. allies in Asia, including Japan, were close to being ignored.

Since then, however, there has been a backlash against the extreme anti-Islam policy of the United States in the form of an anti-U.S., anti-Israel Islamist movement; since the revolution in Egypt last spring, Islamism has been accelerating under the rubric of democratization. Previously pro-Israel Egypt and Turkey have since turned anti-Israel, and the Palestinian Authority, once a puppet of the U.S. and Israel, is increasingly defiant in its attempt to gain United Nations membership. Even in formerly secular Tunisia and Morocco, the Islamists are [rising in the elections](#).



Palestinian President Mammoud Abbas with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon

The United States has not changed its pro-Israel policy. U.S. politics is still under the thumb of right-wing Israelis. However, the U.S. followed the wishes of the Israeli right-ring in carrying out “democratization” as a way to overturn the government, and as a result anti-American, anti Israel Islamism has risen. For this reason, it has now become impossible for Israel to press the U.S. to change the current situation in ways more favorable to Israel. Besides, U.S. military forces are scheduled to pull out of Iraq by the end of the year. U.S. military influence in the Middle East will decrease dramatically.

At the very time that all this was happening, the Obama administration launched its policy of giving Asia top priority. The U.S. government will maintain the appearance of being at Israel’s beck and call, but in practice it is about to abandon Israel surrounded by its enemies. The Muslim Brotherhood is overjoyed. From a Middle-Eastern perspective, Obama’s emphasis on Asia means the “abandonment of Israel.”

U.S. global policy-making has also been dictated not only by Israel but by the United Kingdom. To the U.K., the 40-year-long Cold War was a long-term strategy to fortify its alliance with the U.S. with the objective of confronting the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, the U.S.-U.K. alliance controlled the world

through financial markets. Today, however, as the U.S.-U.K. financial system continues to break down, Obama's emphasis on Asia means a shift to prioritizing Asia over the U.S.-U.K. alliance, and this is not good news for the U.K.

The EU is in the midst of a Euro crisis. American and British speculators are trying to crush the euro, their potential rival, to protect the U.S. dollar as the key international currency. Financial integration of the euro zone, which would strengthen the EU, is needed to stave off the ongoing crises. The EU, centering on Germany, has been battered by the U.S. and U.K. in this crisis. Therefore, after the current crisis the EU will reduce its dependency on the U.S. and strengthen its collaboration with countries like Russia, which are anti-U.S. and geopolitically important to the EU. Just as Europe was going through this transition Obama unleashed his "Asia First" announcement, which is virtually a declaration of a "Europe Second" policy.

The United States was traditionally an "Atlantic country." This time, the U.S. has announced that "we are a Pacific country." To Europe, this means that the U.S. will not emphasize Europe as before. American speculators caused the bond crisis, hurting the EU; the EU in turn is likely to think: "If the U.S. is not going to emphasize Europe, we won't emphasize the U.S., either." NATO, the Europe-U.S. military alliance, will lose its importance, too. The end of the NATO mission in Afghanistan in 2014 will likely be a turning point.

Obama Has Not Transformed U.S. China Strategy

Let's turn to Asia again. The most important question left unanswered in Obama's Asia-first announcement is "whether the U.S. is going to treat China as an enemy in earnest." "Does the U.S. consider China an enemy or a future ally?" The question itself and the ambiguity surrounding it existed 100 years ago, when the United States supported Sun Yat-sen's

Nationalist Revolution. The United States considered China a prospective ally until the Korean War in 1950 (which is why the U.S. made China a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council after World War II even though it was then a divided and weak country). Between the Korean War and Nixon's visit to China in 1972, the United States was dominated by the Cold-War camp (the military-industrial-British complex) and tended to view China as an enemy.

Nixon's China visit transformed the situation, and the United States has since had the mixed policy of viewing China both as an enemy and as a prospective ally. In U.S. politics under the powerful influence of the military-industrial complex supported by the U.K. and Israel, previous U.S. administrations deliberately left ambiguous the question of whether China was an enemy or an ally. Although the ambiguity lingers, since the 1990s when it lifted the economic sanctions that it had imposed after the Tiananmen Square incident, the U.S. has gradually been treating China more as a prospective ally in the situation in which it began to develop as an economic superpower. The strongest recent expression of U.S. embrace of China as a prospective ally was the proposal for a "U.S.-China G2", recognizing China as "a responsible superpower (-to-be, along with the U.S.) during the former Bush administration.

If Obama's "Asia First" declaration was a clear indication of "China as an enemy," that would be a reversal of the China strategy that the U.S. had maintained until the end of the Bush administration. But it is unclear whether Obama's Asia-first policy is a policy to treat China as an enemy. This vagueness is a continuation of the deliberate ambiguity in the U.S. strategy toward China since Nixon's visit to China. The conclusion drawn from the foregoing analysis is that Obama has not reversed the previous course of U.S. strategy toward China.

The interests of the military-industrial complex, which pushed the U.S. to treat China as an enemy, has been paralyzed by the failure of the wars on terror. Large U.S. companies, including financial interests, are making profits in China and would not want to be driven out of the Chinese market as a result of worsening U.S.-China relations. I do not think that there are many at the center of power in the U.S. who wish to promote “an anti-China policy that goes beyond campaign rhetoric.”

Recently even the military-industrial complex has refrained from promoting an overt anti-China agenda. The Department of Defense is said to be working on a military strategy called “Air-Sea Battle” to contain China. At a recent Pentagon press conference, however, the discussion remained opaque, only revealing that “it is a not a strategy, not a concept of operations, . . . and is not directed at any particular country” ([link](#)).

One explanation that is circulating is that the Air-Sea Battle concept involves a shift from the old way of attacking an enemy (China) by launching planes from huge aircraft carriers to one of launching unmanned fighters and short-range missiles from smaller warships. But the Pentagon [has not clarified](#) the strategy.

The Bush administration, too, tended to keep the goals of “Transformation” secret, but the main goals were to upgrade U.S. military technology, to make the military smaller and lighter, and to ensure profits for the military-industrial complex by pouring in huge development funds. The true aim of Air-Sea Battle, too, may be to increase profits for the military-industrial complex while suggesting that it is a strategy to counter China’s growing military power.

High Cost of Paying Lip Service to Anti-China Containment

The Obama administration made its “Asia First” announcement simultaneously with announcing

plans for the TPP and the U.S.-Korea FTA. The timing suggests a bargain: “Accommodating the wishes of Asian nations like Japan, South Korea and Australia nervous about China’s rise, the U.S. will not withdraw its forces from the Asia-Pacific. In exchange, Asian countries, through TPP and FTA, must restructure their economic systems to assure U.S. corporate profits” ([link](#)).

The U.S. Will Trample Japan and South Korea Through Trade Agreements

In Australia, Obama emphasized that “reductions in U.S. defense spending will not — I repeat, will not — come at the expense of the Asia Pacific.” This gives the impression that the U.S. government is increasing its military expenditures in the Asia-Pacific despite overall budget reductions. However, there is a 20-year-old pattern in which every time the Japanese government has sought continued U.S. military presence, the U.S. has made it contingent on Japan’s increased share of expenditures for U.S. bases in Japan, resulting in a greater financial burden on Japan. If this pattern holds, the Australian government will shoulder part of the cost of building new Marine barracks and other expenditures for having U.S. Marines stationed in Australia ([link](#)).



Map shows relative distance of Australia and Okinawa from China

If some of the U.S. Marines in Okinawa are to be moved to Australia, and if the Australian government is to pay for the transfer, the U.S. only dictates the terms of the exchange. Neither the U.S. nor the Australian government has disclosed anything about cost. But given the dire state of U.S. finances, it is highly possible that Obama announced that “America will give Asia a top priority (as long as Asia bears the cost).” It is reasonable to think that TPP and U.S. military presence come with an expensive price tag.

The U.S. government has announced that it will shape TPP into a free-trade agreement among countries that abide by a rules-based order. The U.S. thinks that China’s lack of a rules-based order—it’s a party dictatorship—makes it ineligible to join TPP. However, Vietnam, with a one-party rule similar to China’s, has been allowed to participate in the negotiations. This suggests that the U.S. treats TPP as part of the anti-China containment ring that excludes China politically.

If TPP is a U.S.-led containment ring directed against China, the question remains whether it is effective. My conclusion is that TPP will not be effective in containing China. To many Asian countries, China is the biggest trading partner, and China’s importance will only increase in the future. By contrast, the United States, which was long the greatest trading partner of most Asian nations, has lost its middle classes’ spending power and will lose its status as a dominant trading partner.

Given the precedent set by the U.S.-Korea FTA, moreover, participation in TPP would compel Japan to change its economic rules modeled on American ones. The United States in the past few years has been rife with corrupting tendencies, allowing large corporations to

change government rules to their liking through lobbying activities. Japan, as a TPP member nation, would be put under constant pressure to reshape its domestic economic institutions to benefit U.S. businesses. The “rules” in the U.S. government’s “rules-based order” are those that are prevalent in the U.S. and favor large U.S. businesses.

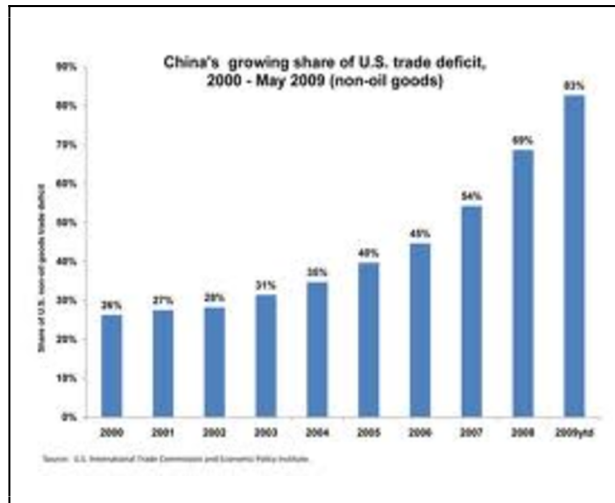
WTO May Be Taken Over By China and Russia

Asian nations nervous about China’s rise are begging the U.S. not to leave Asia. The U.S. government is telling them: “We are not leaving Asia, but you must pay for our base expenditures. In addition, join TPP or the U.S.-Korea FTA and make your domestic systems profitable for U.S. companies.” The United States is not to blame. The dependency of Asian nations like Japan is allowing the U.S. to pursue a crafty strategy.

The more the U.S. publicizes its anti-China containment, the more quickly China will strengthen its military to counter it. The more China strengthens its military, the more fearful Asian countries will become, increasing their dependency on the U.S., and the United States will take advantage of the dependency to impose a corrupt American-style economic system on Asia. The corruption of their economic systems will in turn weaken Asian nations, including Japan. China, which is excluded from TPP, will be spared this baptism of corruption. China alone will profit from TPP.

On top of this, the United States will be an unreliable importer of Asian goods while Asian countries will continue to increase their economic dependence on China. The current U.S. strategy toward Asia only reinforces China’s superiority. By the time Asian nations give up on a weakened America, their economic systems will be in tatters as a result of TPP, and there will be no choice for them but subservience to an even more powerful China. The U.S. Asia policy looks to be a “disguised

multipolarism (polycentrism)” which actually “strengthens China while pretending to contain it” and “pushes Asian nations toward China while professing to ally with them.”



In terms of the international trade system, Russia's accession to the WTO, which is likely to occur by the end of this year, will benefit China. China and Russia are fortifying their strategic ties. Once Russia is admitted to the WTO, China, already a WTO member, [will work together](#) with Russia to recruit BRIC countries such as India and Brazil, and developing countries like South Africa, to transform the WTO politically from a system favoring advanced economies into one favorable to emerging and developing countries.

The Doha round of the WTO has stalled for the past several years. It is possible, however, that

by the time the WTO gets moving again, it may have been taken over by emerging countries and may try to dominate the world as a completely transformed body. Some people may think that China would not want to maintain a free-trade system, but they are wrong. While weak economies tend to lose under a free-trade system, it benefits stronger economies. The economic strengths of BRIC are approaching the level at which it suits their national interests to promote a free-trade system. 『日本が、対米従属を脱する日多極化する新世界秩序の中で』

This is a translation of an article that appeared in [Tanaka News](#) under the title 米国の「アジア重視」なぜ今? Tanaka Sakai is the creator, researcher, writer and editor of Tanaka News (www.tanakanews.com), a Japanese-language news service on Japan and the world. Tanaka Sakai's new book is 「 」

- 』 [The Day Japan Breaks with "Subordination to the US": Amidst the Multipolarizing New World Order](#)

Hase Michiko taught women's studies at San Jose State University and the University of Colorado at Boulder. She participates in Women for Genuine Security and has served as a translator and interpreter at international meetings.

Recommended citation: Tanaka Sakai, 'Why the New "Emphasis on Asia" in U.S. Policy?,' The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 49 No 1, December 5, 2011.