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Raising the stakes > The US responds to China's growing power in the East Asian region

China's rise, driven by impressive economic growth, rapidly escalating military spending and an increasingly assertive stance in regional affairs has triggered US aspirations to reassert the country's influence in the Asia-Pacific.

A recent article by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in *Foreign Policy*, heralding "America's Pacific Century", clearly stated Washington's ambitions to form a counterweight to China and to take on a leading role in a region "eager for US leadership and business". The US aspires to lead the way in regional trade liberalization, strengthen its military presence in the region, and play a greater role in regional and multilateral institutions. In the week between 12 and 19 November 2011, three distinct occasions provided a forum for President Obama to underscore that "in the Asia-Pacific of the 21st century, the US is all-in".

First, the most prominent outcome of the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit on November 12-13 was the US joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade bloc which potentially covers a market 40% bigger than the EU's. The TPP gained additional importance when Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda agreed, during the same meeting, to join the partnership which excludes China, but further comprises Australia and New Zealand, four individual ASEAN countries, Canada, Mexico, Chile and Peru. As a form of competing regionalism to the TPP, China supports the ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, South Korea)

as a guiding tool for trade liberalization.

Second, during an ensuing visit to Australia, President Barack Obama announced a stronger military presence on the Australian north coast. The agreement to permanently post 2,500 marines in Darwin by 2016-17 may not be a dramatic move, but it did send a symbolically strong signal about Washington's strategic intentions. Chinese media called the US decision an attempt to pin down and contain China.

Third, on November 19 Obama was the first American president permitted to join the East Asia Summit (EAS), a regional forum focusing on broad political, security and economic issues. The EAS started in 2005 and gathers the heads of state and government of the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in addition to China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, India and Russia. The sixth summit, held in Bali, offered the chance to acknowledge political reforms in Burma (Myanmar), a country with a very strong Chinese influence and presence. The US announced an official visit by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in December, and implicitly endorsed Burma's chairing of the ASEAN meetings in 2014. After the recent suspension of a

Chinese dam construction project in Burma, Beijing's grip on the country could be loosening. In addition, the US successfully lobbied to put the issue of maritime security in the South China Sea on the summit table, in spite of Chinese resistance.

In addition to the renewed US focus on the Asia-Pacific, other regional players look set to shape the course of the East Asian region. All the major actors aim to profit from China's economic rise while "socializing" it to a regional order. Japan, for example, is hedging its bets, given its "hot economy, cold diplomacy" relations with China. While supporting a US-led TPP, Japan has also endorsed an ASEAN-based framework, which it hopes to develop by including India, Australia and New Zealand in the existing ASEAN+3 configuration. Nevertheless, in the realm of security it is unlikely that Japan can afford to loosen its close alliance with the US anytime in the near future.

Australia is firmly in Washington's camp, and has sought to balance its own closer alliance with East Asia by safeguarding the role of the US as security provider. Russia, increasingly focusing on its Far East, seeks recognition as an East Asian power. Having joined the latest EAS together with the US, the country is not likely to accept a leading role by the US as

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vanguard of the regional security order. Russia will certainly showcase its own vision for regionalism in 2012 when it hosts the next APEC summit.

India, seen by many as forming a vital counterweight to China, is also increasingly involved in the East Asian regional architecture. Similar to China, India regards economic regionalism as the prime means to safeguard domestic interests and ensure growth, but security relations between the two countries are increasingly antagonistic.

The EU, then, remains a more important trading partner for East Asia than the US. The total volume of EU trade has doubled compared to ten years ago, and the relative importance of the East Asian region has increased to 28%. As a political actor, the EU could play a meaningful role as a mediator or as a “soft power”. However, only in 2012 will the EU be allowed to accede to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), a pre-requisite for even being considered as a candidate for a seat at the East Asia Summit table.

ASEAN, albeit weakly institutionalized, is therefore the region’s “leader by default”. The organization is at the core of most regional free trade agreements, and serves as a broker in the regional order. Propelled by China’s rise, the US

re-engagement with East Asia will continue to draw the other players, old as well as new, more closely into the East Asian power game. This will increase the significance of ASEAN-run multilateral structures, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit, in order to dispel mounting geopolitical tensions in the region.