

AMERICAN DECLINE

‘The Asian Age’

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During the height of the Cold War era, Iran and Pakistan were American spheres of influence from which other great powers were excluded. Now, the best the US can manage in Pakistan is the political (and military) equivalent of a condominium or perhaps a time-share—and in Iran, nothing at all.

Despite his feel-good trip to India last month, during which he announced some important business deals for US goods, Obama has remarkably little to offer the Indians. That undoubtedly is why the president unexpectedly announced Washington’s largely symbolic support for a coveted seat as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a ringing confirmation of India’s status as a rising power.

Some Indian politicians and policy-makers, however, are insisting that their country’s increasing demographic, military, and economic hegemony over South Asia be recognized by Washington, and that the US cease its support of, and massive arms sales to, Pakistan. In addition, New Delhi is eager to expand its geopolitical position in Afghanistan, where it is a major funder of civilian reconstruction projects, and is apprehensive about any plans for a US withdrawal from that country. An India-dominated Afghanistan is, of course, Pakistan’s worst fear.

In addition, India’s need for petroleum is expected to grow by 40% during the next decade and a half. Energy-hungry, like neighboring Pakistan, it can’t help glancing longingly at Iran’s natural gas and petroleum fields, despite Washington’s threats to slap third-party sanctions on any firm that helps develop them. American attempts to push India toward dirty energy sources, including nuclear power (the waste product of which is long-lived and problematic) and shale gas, as a way of reducing its interest in Iranian and Persian Gulf oil and gas, are another Washington “solution” for the region likely to be largely ignored, given how close at hand inexpensive Gulf hydrocarbons are.

It is alarming to consider what exactly New Delhi imagines the planet’s former “sole superpower” has to offer at this juncture—mostly US troops fighting a perceived threat in Afghanistan and the removal of Congressional restrictions on sales of advanced weaponry to India. The US military in Afghanistan is seen as a proxy for Indian interests in putting down the Taliban and preventing the reestablishment of Pakistani hegemony over Kabul. For purely self-interested reasons Prime Minister Singh has long taken the same position as the new Republican majority in the House of Representatives, urging Obama to postpone any plans to begin a drawdown in Afghanistan in the summer of 2011.

The most significant of the Indian purchases trumpeted by the president during his encounter with India were military in character. Obama proclaimed that the \$10 billion in deals he was inking would create 54,000 new American jobs. Right now, it’s hard to argue with job creation or multi-billion-dollar sales of US-made goods abroad. As former secretary of labor Robert Reich has pointed out, however, jobs in the defense industry are expensive to create, while offering a form of artificial corporate welfare that distorts the American economy and diverts resources from far more crucial priorities.

To think of this another way, President Obama is in danger of losing control of his South Asian foreign policy agenda to India, its Republican supporters in the House, and the military-industrial complex.

As the most dynamic region in the world, Asia is the place where rapid change can create new dynamics. American trade with the European Union has grown over the past decade (as has the EU itself), but is unlikely to be capable of doubling in just a few years. After all, the populations of some European countries, like powerhouse Germany, will probably shrink in coming decades.

India, by contrast, is projected to overtake China in population around 2030 and hit the billion-and-a-half-inhabitants mark by mid-century (up from 1.15 billion today). Its economy, like China's, has been growing 8% to 9% a year, creating powerful new demand in the world market. President Obama is hoping to see US exports to India double by 2015. Likewise, with its economy similarly booming, China is making its own ever more obvious bid to stride like a global colossus through the twenty-first century.

Unsurprisingly, beneath the pomp and splendor of Obama's journey through Asia has lurked a far tawdrier vision—of a much weakened president presiding over a much weakened superpower, both looking somewhat desperately for succor abroad. If the United States is to remain a global power, it is important that Washington offer something to the world besides arms and soldiers.

Obama has been on the money when he's promoted green-energy technology as a key field where the United States could make its mark (and possibly its fortune) globally. Unfortunately, as elsewhere, here too the United States is falling behind, and a Republican House as well as a bevy of new Republican governors and state legislatures are highly unlikely to effectively promote the greening of American technology.

In the end, Obama's trip has proven a less than effective symbolic transition from George W Bush's muscular unilateralism to a new America-led multilateralism in Asia. Rather, at each stop, Obama has bumped up against the limits of American economic and diplomatic clout in the new Asian world order.

George W Bush and Dick Cheney thought in terms of expanding American conventional military weapons stockpiles and bases, occupying countries when necessary, and so ensuring that the US would dominate key planetary resources for decades to come. Their worldview, however, was mired in mid-twentieth-century power politics.

If they thought they were placing a marker down on another American century, they were actually gambling away the very houses Americans live in and reducing them to a debtor nation struggling to retain its once commanding superiority in the world economy. In the meantime, the multi-millionaires and billionaires created by neoliberal policies and tax cuts in the West will be as happy to invest in (and perhaps live in) Asia as in the United States.

In the capitals of a rising Asia, Washington's incessant campaign to strengthen sanctions against Iran, and in some quarters its eagerness for war with that country, is viewed as another piece of lunatic adventurism. The leaders of India, China, and South Korea, among other countries, are determined to do their best to sidestep this American obsession and integrate Iran into their energy and trading futures.

In some ways, the darkest vision of an American future arrived in 1991 thanks to President George H W Bush. At that time, he launched a war in the Persian Gulf to protect local oil producers from an aggressive Iraq. That war was largely paid for by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, rendering the US military for the first time a sort of global mercenary force. Just

as the poor in any society often join the military as a way of moving up in the world, so in the century of Asia, the US could find itself in danger of being reduced to the role of impoverished foot soldier fighting for others' interests, or of being the glorified ironsmiths making arsenals of weaponry for the great powers of the future. □□□