



Not since Dean Rusk in the 1960s has a US Secretary of State chosen Asia for a first foreign trip. So Hillary Clinton's recent visit to Japan, South Korea, China and Indonesia raised eyebrows and expectations.

Yonsei University political scientist Jong Kun Choi examines whether Clinton's trip signals anything more than style over substance.



Smart Power or Star Power?

Thinking About Clinton's Asian Tour

By Jong Kun Choi

IN MANY WAYS, the Bush era seems like such a long time ago: the axis of evil speech, neoconservatives riding roughshod over policy debates, the economic boom and things like the ban on stem-cell research. Where are they now? Perhaps I feel this way because the bottomless pit of the global economic recession preoccupies my mind. Or maybe we are still overwhelmed by the election of the first African-American US president. But on the shoulders of a 47 year-old-first-term senator with no major executive or foreign affairs experience lies the burden of cleaning up the Bush left-overs — two major wars, the economic crisis and relationships in a state of flux around the world.

How this superpower, seemingly in decline, will lead the world during the worst economic crisis since the end of World War II will largely be determined by how President Barack Obama will differentiate his leadership from the former administration. Will he be a truly transformative figure or a transitory phenomenon? A transformative leader has to present a new vision, but he also has to exercise power in new ways that win over other significant players. We have yet to observe such a tangible change.

How the new American leader will cope with what one author calls a new era of instability, an “axis of upheaval,” will be determined by how Obama meets the chilling realities he faces. I think the Asian reality could be the critical meeting point for this presidency, and in this vein Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's February Asian tour provided a good preview of what we might expect.

STAR POWER MEETS ASIA

In February 2009 Clinton sailed through four Asian states — Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and China — determined to give America's tarnished image a makeover after the damage done by the Bush administration's unilateralism. For the former first lady and senator, this Asian tour was her debutant ball as the US chief diplomat. What she brought to the party was unquestioned star power. She gloriously appeared on popular

TV programs in Tokyo and Jakarta, and enthralled female college students at a town-hall meeting in Seoul. Her charisma was on display at informal gatherings in all four capitals. She was careful to tailor her language at press conferences to local sensitivities (except for a frank, taboo-breaking assessment of North Korea's leadership on her way to Seoul). To some, her public appearances in Asia looked more like a continuation of her 2008 presidential campaign. Certainly, she seemed to connect with Asian crowds, and that, coupled with Obama's popularity, has jump started the rehabilitation of the damaged US image in the region and given a boost to the new administration's foreign policy standing in Asia.

BACK TO REALITY

But Asia is a daunting reality for Obama in a time of economic crisis. Given the dismal record of the Bush era, the US leadership now has to engage with the key regional actors by creating effective communication links and listening to its partners' interests. In this vein, cooperation with South Korea, Japan and China are crucial, not only to forestall regional instability but also to recuperate from the current financial crisis. China's economic rise is likely to continue as it emerges as a dominant power. All three countries are vital to revitalizing the Non-proliferation Treaty regime through the Six Party Talks. And Obama's reluctance to endorse free-trade agreements will be tested by the pending deal with South Korea. The ongoing global shift of power to the east will show even more clearly during Obama's tenure, and that reality made Clinton's trip even more timely.

DID SHE LISTEN?

Other than Dean Rusk in the 1960s, Clinton is the first Secretary of State to make her first visit in office to Asia, and the choice of destination speaks to the new administration's priority for better coordination and cooperation in Asian affairs. Countering the impression created under Bush that Washington was somewhat estranged from its Asian allies, the trip was a chance to transmit

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a simple but strong message: “Change has come and we are ready to listen.”

But did she listen? Could we sense any substantial change in US policy? As an international relations scholar in Seoul, I have mixed feelings about this. Her tour promised too much and at the same time delivered too little.

Her trips to Japan and China, the two most powerful countries in the region, were successful from the US perspective. In Japan, Clinton was smart in utilizing Japan’s anger over Bush’s removal of North Korea from Washington’s list of state sponsors of terrorism in 2008 by assuring her audience that Japan remains a cornerstone of the US foreign policy. Clinton met in person with families of missing North Korean abductees as a way to comfort the Japanese government over this emotional issue. She even called the abductees a priority for the Obama administration. Clinton also underscored the new administration’s approval of the planned relocation of US Marines from Okinawa to Guam, for which Japan will spend about \$2.8 billion to build bases and facilities in Guam by 2014.

Her most significant visit was to China. As a rising power, China’s cooperation is vital for managing a range of global challenges — from climate change to economic recovery and nuclear prolif-

eration. Clinton sent the clear message to Beijing that the US sees China as a global partner. And we know what this means; while largely refraining from dealing with the human rights issue, she urged China to continue buying US Treasury bonds to help finance the US stimulus package. From this we can infer that American cooperation with a rising China will become something that we have to get used to.

Clinton’s visit to Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority nation in the world, was also a good choice, given that the US is involved in two wars in Muslim countries. Apart from Obama’s personal links to Indonesia, where he lived for several years as a child, Clinton’s visit and the warm reception she received may go some way to smoothing relations between the US and the Muslim world. But a total facelift? Not yet.

While praising Indonesia’s success as an emerging democracy and its efforts to recuperate from the economic crisis, she did not meet any prominent Muslim organization leaders, something that would have been in harmony with her stated goal of “listening.” If Obama wants the Muslim world to believe that the US is crafting a more amicable policy towards the Muslim world, Clinton should have listened closely to what Muslim communities in Indonesia had to say. It remains to be seen how

much attention the US will really pay to the voices of Muslim communities worldwide.

In Seoul, security experts must have been reminded of Condoleeza Rice, as Clinton essentially echoed the language of the last administration as she said “the complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea” remains the top priority. Moreover, her remarks on the leadership of North Korea in the post Kim Jong Il era, whether intentional or not, set off unexpected and unwanted sparks on the Korea Peninsula. She also set aside public discussion of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement, which has yet to be ratified by either country, while ironically voicing the Obama administration’s commitment to free trade. Her showcase, a town-hall meeting at the elite Ewha Womans University in Seoul, was nothing like “listening.” Granted that her speech inspired bright Korean female college students, the purpose of the town hall meeting was to hear a successful American female politician tell her story. Here in Seoul, too, she did not listen to “other voices” that may oppose the current Lee government’s North Korea policy and stance on the US-South Korea alliance.

DIFFICULTY AHEAD

If there is anything we learned from the last eight years it is that even a hegemonic state cannot go it alone. And we know that the Obama administration knows this. However, as Clinton’s trip demonstrated, if the Obama administration tries to do too much in too short a time it may end up delivering not much.

Consider this: Clinton promised to reaffirm the importance of Japan as the cornerstone of Washington’s regional foreign policy. But we know, and perhaps Japan also knows, that no US administration can sacrifice real progress on North Korea’s nuclear weapons to the emotional but ultimately parochial issue of Japanese abductees. For the US, the trouble with removing North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism was the simple fact that North Korea’s promise to accept a verification protocol never materialized. But Japan felt betrayed by the ac-

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tion. During her Tokyo tour and thereafter, we did not hear any serious reflection on this, and I believe the issue will not go away and risks creating divisions between the two allies.

On the other hand, Seoul may also feel betrayed if the US Congress fails to ratify the Korea-US FTA, which could easily happen given current protectionist sentiment. During Clinton's visit to Seoul, she reiterated Obama's earlier stance during his campaign that the deal was "unfair" to the US and said portions of it covering autos may have to be renegotiated. (In early March, Obama's nominee for US Trade Representative, Ron Kirk, said the FTA "just simply isn't fair" and said Washington was "prepared to step away" from the biggest trade pact for the US since the North American Free Trade Agreement in the 1990s, unless the Koreans agree to make changes that would benefit the suffering US auto industry.) This is the kind of thing that will anger and dismay those Koreans who support the pact and feel they have already made enough concessions.

As for North Korea, Clinton's message to Pyongyang during her Asian tour was tough, and not much different from Bush administration policy. This may have been a way to send the message that when it comes down to two Koreas, Seoul comes first. From this, we can anticipate that US-North Korea relations may go down a bumpy road given the Obama administration's stance that it wants the complete denuclearization of North Korea before offering any concessions. I doubt that North Korea will make things any easier given its belligerence on its long-range missile programs. At the end of the day, the Obama administration's approach to North Korea will be conditional, meaning that it will observe how Pyongyang behaves (a.k.a., not negotiating with it until it changes its attitude), which is pretty similar to what Seoul has done for the last year. Hence, we may have to bear in mind that North Korea's nuclear problem will not go away for some time.

WILL SMART POWER PREVAIL?

From my perspective, Clinton's trip was not fueled by any serious consideration of how to use

America's newly articulated smart power but rather by an appeal to her considerable personal star power — a factor she shares with the new president. A question that comes to mind is whether the US really will repair its damaged relations with Asian states by exercising smart power. The administration's idea is that "smart power" blends the essence of hard power with the art of soft power. But if Obama's Asian policy is to rely on a few actors' star power, we may witness an incongruent and confusing US presence in the region. Star power is based on popularity, but popularity is only temporary. It has to be sustained by the delivery of promises, which means the superpower has to be really smart from now on. The first challenge could come as a result of North Korea's announcement that it will launch a communications satellite using a long range missile. That may prove to be the first tangible security challenge to the US during Obama's tenure, and it will have to be met with a smart response.

But it won't get any easier for Obama. As he proclaimed in his inaugural address, the US is "in the midst of a crisis" and it faces major difficulties internally and externally. With the economic crisis challenging globalization, the world now worries about the reemergence of protectionism. International security is threatened both by non-national actors and environmental problems on a global scale. Indeed, very smart power will be needed to counter these issues.

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