

The US as a Pacific Nation

By Satu Limaye

America's Pacific Presence

On his inaugural visit to Asia as president in November 2009, Barack Obama declared himself “America’s first Pacific president” and the US a “Pacific nation.”¹ President Obama’s self-characterization, based no doubt on his unusual biography of having been born in Hawai‘i and partly raised in Indonesia, is novel. Identifying the US as a Pacific nation, however, is a long-standing tradition, increasingly common today and one that resonates for many reasons, ranging from geography to a complex mix of American ideas, attitudes, and interests. This is surprising for a country created by European migrants and long accustomed to a European, or “Atlantic,” outlook.

The claim that the US is a Pacific nation rests first on geographical reality. Territorial expansion between the late eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries brought the US from its origins along the Atlantic seaboard across the North American continent to the shores of the Pacific

Ocean. These territorial gains resulted from a combination of diplomacy, purchase, and conflict with other countries and Native Americans.



Secretary of State James Baker.

Source: <http://tiny.cc/76aqmw>.

The large land acquisitions included the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, Texas annexation in 1845, the Oregon Territory in 1846, Mexican cession in 1848, and the Alaska Purchase in 1867. Despite Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s recent assertion that “The US has *always* [emphasis added] been a Pacific power because of our very great blessing of geography,” in fact, the US acquired its present Pacific coastline nearly a century after the founding of the republic.² The opening of the Panama Canal in 1915 allowed American ships to pass from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean faster and unhindered.

Today, the US Pacific coastline is one of the longest in the world and is crucial to the US economy. The five Pacific “coast” states of Alaska, California, Hawai‘i, Oregon, and Washington account for almost 20 percent of US GDP and 15 percent of the national population. They lead the US in trade, investment, civic, and educational interactions with Asian countries on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. These five states rank the highest in the country in the share of their total exports going across the Pacific Ocean to Asia as well as the number of jobs created from those exports. High numbers of Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans also live in these states.³ Of course, the idea of being a Pacific nation is not restricted to Pacific coast states. In the nineteenth century, the northeast US was the starting point for American activities in the Pacific through the clipper trade, whaling, and Christian missionaries. In the past three or so decades, the southern states of the US have seen steady growth as sites for Asian companies, beginning with Japanese automobile companies in the 1980s and,

more recently, Korean car manufacturers. The sense of a “Pacific nation” has spread across the US from coast to coast.

In addition to the US Pacific coastline, the US also has several territories in the Pacific Ocean itself. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates described the US as a “resident power” in the Pacific because “there is sovereign American territory in the western Pacific, from the Aleutian Islands all the way down to Guam.”⁴ Hawai‘i’s annexation in 1898 and ultimate statehood in 1959 remain milestones in US relations with the Pacific. In 1898, victory in the Spanish-American War also brought Guam and the Philippines under US jurisdiction, though the Philippines gained independence from the US in 1946. The US also acquired part of Samoa fol-

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lowing the Treaty of Berlin in 1899, which settled German, American, and British competition over the islands.

Less well-known is the US acquisition of smaller territories in the Pacific Ocean from the mid-nineteenth century onward. These territories, sprawled across the western and southern parts of the Pacific Ocean, include the Midway Islands, Wake Island, Johnston Atoll, Howland and Baker Islands, Kingman Reef, Palmyra Atoll, and Jarvis Island. The US occupied these unoccupied islands because they were well stocked with *guano*—excrement of birds, bats, and seals—that was valuable as fertilizer. Some of these islands would play critical roles during the Pacific War against Japan from 1941 to 1945. Finally, the US acquired these territories as a result of post-World War II arrangements, administering the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau until they became sovereign countries in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, the US retains a close relationship with these three countries through the Compacts of Free Association and has also entered into a political relationship with the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas. Moreover, the jurisdiction over land territory in the Pacific Ocean has given the US millions of miles of exclusive economic zone in the surrounding waters—enhancing America’s claim to be a Pacific power.

So closely are America’s identity and interests bound up with being a Pacific power that former Secretary of State James Baker warned against any attempt to form organizations that would draw a line separating the US from Asia. The US has consistently argued against any restrictions on the

ability of the US to pursue its commercial, diplomatic, and security interests in the region. In addition to its “resident power” role, Robert Gates describes the US as a “straddle power across the Asia Pacific,” that is, a country that reaches across the Pacific to the western shores of the Pacific—Asia.⁵ Of course, the world cannot be marked, organized, and divided except on human-made maps or in politically made organizations. If seen from a space capsule, the earth does not appear as shown on a classroom map.

Part of what makes the US a “Pacific nation,” apart from a Pacific coastline and owning territory in that ocean, is a mental image or identity of being so. A complex and intricate mix of history, ideas, and interests have shaped the story of the US being a Pacific nation. American politicians, poets, and intellectuals have repeatedly employed the rhetoric of the US as a Pacific country. This rhetoric first peaked in the mid-nineteenth century at the height of westward settlement—California statehood in 1850 and completion of the first transcontinental railroad about a decade later. “Facing west” and turning away from Europe was then seen as fulfillment of America’s “manifest destiny”—of creating a new, better country and world “untainted by Europe, by wars, by feudalism (by history).”⁶ In addition, anti-British and anti-European sentiments in the US ran strong at the time. Senator Thomas Hart Benton said, “I for one had as leif [sic] see American ministers going to the emperors of China and Japan, to the King of Persia, and even to the Grand Turk, as to see them dancing attendance upon those European legitimates who hold everything American in contempt and detestation.”⁷ Of course, commercial considerations also shaped perspectives on the importance of the US becoming a Pacific player. An 1852 *New York Times* editorial titled “The Pacific Fleet,” written on the eve of Commodore Perry setting sail—toward what would become the “the opening of Japan” in 1853—declared that “the extension of American power to the Pacific is likewise a simple question of time” but counseled that the US “advance across the ocean be step by step” lest the country “make an irreparable blunder if a hasty calculation lose us that grandest prize of commerce, the mastery of the Pacific.”⁸

The Civil War from 1861–1865 and Reconstruction blunted the focus on the Pacific. This was the era of the booming Midwest, particularly Chicago. Interest in the Pacific was stirred briefly at the end of the century with the almost-accidental acquisition of the unfamiliar territories of Guam and the Philippines after winning the Spanish-American War in 1898. Two years later, the young Senator Albert Beveridge justified colonizing the Philippines by saying

And the Pacific is the ocean of the commerce of the future. Most future wars will be conflicts for commerce. The power that rules the Pacific, therefore, is the power that rules the world. And, with the Philippines, that power is and will forever be the American Republic.⁹

It is no accident that in January 1900, *National Geographic Magazine* published a map titled “Philippine Islands at the Geographical Center of the Far East.” Believing in the economic opportunities offered across the Pacific did not mean that the US welcomed Asians coming to the US. A series of

restrictions, starting as early as 1882 with the Chinese exclusion acts and the 1917 “Asiatic barred zone,” drew a racial line between Asia and the Pacific.

Not until 1941, with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, did the Pacific once again become a fixture of US perspectives and policies. Although the Cold War between the US and Soviet Union centered on Europe, the Communist victory in China in 1949, entry of the US into the Korean War in 1950, and the Việt Nam War later, were all elements of persistent engagement with the Pacific. The 1970s and 1980s once again witnessed a renewed interest in the Pacific as rapid economic growth among the “four tigers” (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong) contrasted strongly with the poor performance of European and US economies that stemmed

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from the 1973 oil crisis. In 1978, Vice President Walter Mondale, speaking at the East-West Center in Honolulu, asserted that “The Pacific Basin has become the most dynamic economic zone in the world.”¹⁰ The emergence of Japan as an economic powerhouse in the 1980s, and its purchase of the Pebble Beach golf course and Rockefeller Center, also contributed to the US once again turning its attention toward the Pacific. The Vapors song “Turning Japanese” caught the zeitgeist in the US—making it to number thirty-six on the US Billboard Chart of top 100 songs. By the 1980s, the US and its allies were forming economic and political groupings in order to build a regional economic community through increased trade, investment, and business ties. President Clinton hosted the first Asia Pacific Economic

Cooperation (APEC) summit in the US in 1993, appropriately in the bustling Pacific coast city of Seattle.

US focus on the Pacific, however, turned out to be unsustainable. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 riveted the US and the world in the last decade of the twentieth century. In the same year, Americans were appalled by the brutal crackdown by Chinese authorities of pro-democracy protestors in Tiananmen Square. But even the massacre could not compete with the European and Russian transformations for the country's attention. The post-Cold War era was short-lived, as the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC, on the morning of September 11, 2001, shifted US energies to Southwest Asia and two of America's longest wars in Afghanistan/Pakistan and Iraq. The turn of greater US attention toward the Pacific was again interrupted.

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President Barack Obama and President Lee Myung-bak of the Republic of Korea shake hands after President Obama's remarks welcoming the Republic of Korea leader during the State Visit Arrival Ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House, Oct. 13, 2011. Source: Screen capture from the White House video of the event at <http://tiny.cc/w7tinw>.

A Pivot Toward the Pacific?

Many US officials and commentators are suggesting that the end of combat operations in Iraq in September 2010 and the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 drew the era of the “global war on terror” closer to an end and will allow the US to renew focus on the Pacific. A more likely outcome is that the US will remain firmly engaged in the Middle East due to the developments arising out of the Arab Spring, ongoing nuclear tensions with Iran, and persistent watchfulness against terrorism and militancy. That is, the US will continue to focus on these two main theaters—the broader Middle East and the Asia-Pacific—while remaining engaged globally.

Still, official US government policy has highlighted the focus on the Asia-Pacific region. Speaking to the Australian Parliament in November 2011, President Obama declared that he had “made a deliberate and strategic decision—as a Pacific nation, the US will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future by upholding core principles and in close partnership with our allies and friends.” The same month, Secretary of State Clinton published an important article titled “America’s Pacific Century,” which explained the importance of the region for America’s future.¹¹ The Asia-Pacific, with its rising powers such as China, India, and Indonesia; allies such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, Thailand, Philippines, and New Zealand; and close friends such as Singapore and new ones such as Việt Nam; booming economies and major problems such as carbon emissions and North Korea’s provocative behavior, constitutes a region that will help determine America’s future. In June 2012, Secretary of

Defense Panetta announced that “by 2020 the Navy will re-posture its forces from today’s roughly 50/50 split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to about a 60/40 between those oceans.”¹²

The current administration is not, of course, the first one to announce and work toward strengthening America’s relations with the region. The previous administration of George W. Bush, for example, took office similarly committed to allocating more attention and resources to the Asia-Pacific. In fact, in the *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)* of September 10, 2001, the Bush administration emphasized the importance of the maritime Asia-Pacific by introducing the concept of an “East Asian littoral” running from the Bay of Bengal to the Sea of Japan. It enhanced earlier efforts to develop strong relations with Việt Nam and India and developed a formal relationship with the member countries of the Asso-



ciation of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—not least of which was to deal with a rising China that is beginning to make many regional countries nervous with its territorial claims, approaches to settling disputes, uneven economic impacts, and massive military modernization. In fact, the scope of issues is broader, though today the US faces a rising China where once it faced a rising Japan—albeit Japan’s democracy made its rise far less worrying. The notion that America’s destiny depends in great part on getting the Pacific right has echoes from earlier periods in US history and has been a staple across US administrations, whether led by a Democrat or Republican.

Doubts about the US as a Pacific Nation

Not everyone agrees that the US is or should place a high priority on being a Pacific nation. Leslie Gelb, former White House chief of staff to President Clinton, argues that “Europe Plus” (meaning Europe plus Japan, Australia, Canada, and Israel), “should—on the merits—remain the rock of US national security strategy” because it “is the group of nations that most closely shares US values and interests.”¹³ He notes that only these countries can be counted on for military assistance, to provide economic aid to poorer nations, and to form “the great bulk of US trade and investments.”¹⁴ Robert A. Pastor at American University, a former member of the US National Security Council, argues that the US should

*start in North America and build a community that will benefit not just our three countries [US, Canada, and Mexico] but provide us leverage in Asia and a model for a better world.*¹⁵

Even among those who believe that the US should focus more on being an Asia-Pacific power, some are doubtful that the US can do so. They note that, as has happened in the past, the US may become distracted by unpredictable events. America's economic difficulties and war fatigue may also lead the US to play a less active role internationally and to concentrate on addressing social and economic grievances at home.

America as Part of the Asia-Pacific

At the start of the twenty-first century, perhaps the concept of the US "re-balancing" or "pivoting" toward the Pacific makes less sense than it did in an earlier era—when distances really were major constraints to movement, when racism created clearer demarcations between nations, when commerce was between two countries rather than part of a complex global supply and production network, and when Asians lived on the other side of the Pacific and stayed there. That era is gone. Today, the US is a Pacific nation because almost all parts of the country interact with Asia in significant and sustained ways, whether through trade, investment, the presence of Asian-Americans, foreign students from Asia, and/or other forms of relationships. However, at the same time as the US is increasing its economic, social, political, and other ties across the Pacific, the same sorts of ties are also increasing *within* Asia—and China is at the center of this regional integration. The US has long sought to prevent a situation in which a major country seeks to exclude the US from pursuing its interests in the region. If China is able to harness regional integration in a way that marginalizes the US, Washington will face a major challenge. Already, the US is crafting initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that will create a US-centered regional trading regime that binds the US to Asia across the Pacific—preventing over-reliance on China. The outcome of this competition, which rests in large part on the trajectories of and relations between the US and China, will heavily influence whether the US will remain, as it has so longed to do, a committed, enduring Pacific nation in the unfolding twenty-first century. ■

NOTES

1. Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall, Tokyo, Japan, November 14, 2009, accessed September 17, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-suntory-hall>.
2. Speech by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century," in Chennai, India, accessed September 17, 2011, <http://1.usa.gov/T3Gcox>.
3. See East-West Center, www.AsiaMattersforAmerica.org.
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5. *Ibid.*
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