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Asean in middle of US-China ties

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Obama's visit forges a new regional multilateralism with new rules: analysts

Increasingly, as the United States follows through on its pivot towards Asia, it brings Washington's interests to the gates of Beijing - with Asean in the middle.

That much was evident this week as the Asean 10 gathered with other regional and international leaders for the annual East Asia Summit (EAS).

US President Barack Obama, fresh from his electoral triumph, and with an economy showing stirrings of life, was back in a region where many economies were taking a pause or had substantially slowed.

China, the world's No. 2 economy and Asia's biggest, is struggling to grow at 8 per cent, a far cry from its double-digit expansion days. Japan is tipping into recession and India, Asia's No. 3 economy, is also sputtering.

All the more important then, that disputes over territory and control should not stand in the way of trade and investments critical to the region.

Obama may have received a hero's welcome in Myanmar, but in Cambodia, closely linked to China, the reception was muted.

After bonhomie-laced visits to Thailand and Myanmar, the US leader landed in Phnom Penh late on Monday to attend a dinner kicking off the summit.

He found banners outside the venue of the Asean and East Asia Summit welcoming China's Premier Wen Jiabao and extolling the friendship between China and Cambodia. Unlike in Myanmar, nobody lined the streets to greet him.

The EAS brings together the 10 Asean members and eight others, including the US, China, India and Japan. It also includes Russia but Russian leader Vladimir Putin has been in surgery and was unable to attend.

There was certainly no lack of contentious issues.

Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda discussed Tokyo's dispute with Beijing over the Senkaku islands, which China calls the Diaoyu islands.

And in a bilateral meeting, which a US official later called "tense", the US President put Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen - chair of the summit - on the defensive. Obama cited Myanmar as an example of a country that was improving its human rights record. He brought up the imprisonment of a radio broadcaster as one example of hurdles to the US-Cambodia relationship.

Obama was criticised by the opposition at home for visiting Southeast Asia during a looming fiscal crisis in the US. But he was obliged to come to the summit. And visiting Cambodia without dropping by Thailand - America's oldest ally in the region - would have been an insult to Bangkok.

The President's trip to Myanmar was seen as a reward for the reforms unleashed by President Thein Sein which, despite residual scepticism, now have bipartisan support in Washington.

The trip has succeeded in cementing Southeast Asia on Washington's geopolitical map and, in effect, has set up a "geopolitical ring around China", wrote Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of the Bangkok-based Institute for International and Strategic Studies, in a Monday commentary.

But he added: "At the same time, the US has engaged China in a nuanced and mutually beneficial fashion on trade and investment, providing space for Beijing to operate under multilateral rules and institutions."

Pessimists may view the US efforts as an attempt to contain China, he wrote, but optimists see it as a new regional multilateralism with new rules.

Indeed, at their bilateral meeting, President Obama and Premier Wen were conciliatory.

Obama said Washington and Beijing must work together to "establish clear rules of the road" for trade and investment.

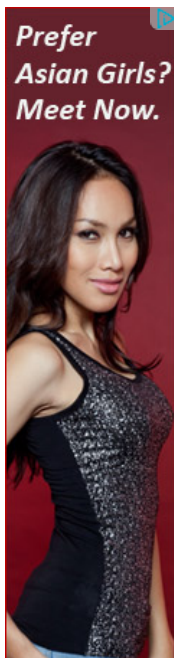
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Unlike his criticism of Hun Sen, he did not accuse China of violating trade rules - a topic that had figured in the recent presidential election campaign, with Obama's rival, Republican Mitt Romney, making a point of saying he would be tough on China.

Obama reportedly told Wen that he was committed to working with China and committed to working with Asia. Wen, in turn, mentioned "differences and disagreements" between them but said these could be resolved through trade and investment.

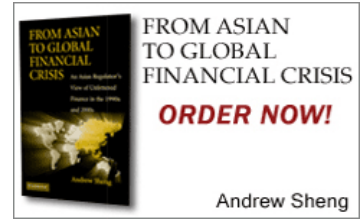
And while Chinese delegates were firm on Beijing's position on the South China Sea, Premier Wen said he did not want to spread tension in the region.

For some, the winner of the fight for regional influence is already clear.

"The Americans are very good at symbolism and gestures, but when it comes to putting money on the table, they can't match them [China] anymore," Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew Institute of Public Policy, told *The Straits Times* over the phone.

Still, he noted, Asean can benefit from US-China competition. "During the Cold War, Asean was relevant. After that, it became strategically irrelevant and the Americans dropped the ball. Now, the Americans are playing the game."

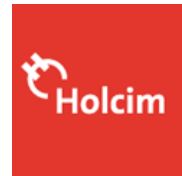
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