

The Obama administration's foreign policy agenda in 2009 was daunting. Upon taking office the new president tackled a host of ambitious challenges, from improving America's fading global image to engaging Iran in genuine negotiations over its nuclear program. Given that many of his 2009 goals remain unachieved, 2010 looks to be no less daunting. Yet aside from the ongoing war effort in Afghanistan/Pakistan and diplomatic conflict with Iran over its nuclear program, Obama's foreign policy priorities in 2010 will be different from those of last year – indeed, great power relations will come to dominate his agenda. Specifically, America's relations with the Asian great powers and Russia will occupy Obama's foreign policy inbox in 2010.

If the seat of geopolitical power in the 18th and 19th centuries was Europe, and those of the 20th century were North America and Eurasia, then the 21st century will be geopolitically dominated by North America and Asia. Current and projected demographic and economic data confirm this inescapable reality. Today, two out of the three largest economies (U.S., Japan and China) are located in Asia, as are the two most populous countries (China and India). Goldman Sachs projects that in 2050 India's economy (\$37.67 trillion) will be almost the same size as the United States' (\$38.51 trillion), and that China's (\$70.71 trillion) will be nearly double. Such figures speak to the importance of maintaining constructive bilateral diplomatic relations with Japan, China, and India, as well as of preserving into the future a balance of power between them in order to prevent destabilizing and potentially destructive tension.

But these relationships are also essential to the United States' current national interests. China is a key player in solving the North Korean nuclear issue, imposing forceful sanctions on Iran should they become necessary, and redressing global financial imbalances. Japan is also critical to the North Korean crisis and is a long-time ally through which the United States is able to project military power in the region. India is a vital economic partner with a strong cultural connection to the United States through immigration, and is essential to the stabilization of Afghanistan and therefore Pakistan, as any Pakistani effort to fully combat Afghan Taliban elements within its own country would require a cooling of tensions over Kashmir and assurances about Indian designs on Kabul.

Yet despite Obama's symbolic trip to Asia and more substantive gestures such as the expansion of the Strategic Economic Dialogue with China and reaffirmation of the nuclear cooperation agreement with India, strains are beginning to show in bilateral diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the three Asian great powers. And unfortunately, these strains are set to continue through the rest of 2010. Tensions over human rights, Tibet, Iran, climate change, Taiwan, and protectionism are clouding U.S.-Sino ties, as each side has begun to ratchet up its rhetoric. The Japanese election of 2009 brought the DPJ to power on a platform of more equal relations between the U.S. and Japan and a more Asia-leaning foreign policy. Japan has put these principles into practice by terminating its refueling mission for NATO naval vessels in the Indian Ocean and by renegotiating the Futenma air base agreement with the U.S. And Obama's strategic focus

on Pakistan and emphasis on China has caused anxiety among many Indians about his interest in their country relative to his interest in their rivals to the north and east.

Setting these diplomatic relationships on the right strategic footing given their current and future importance will be a formidable yet conquerable challenge for Obama in 2010. On China, Obama should not back down in supporting Taiwan with defensive weapons or critiquing Beijing on human rights issues related to Tibet, Xinjiang, or censorship. These are fundamental national interests related to an ally, in the case of the former, and core values, in the case of the latter. The Obama administration should, however, back down on the issue of protectionism – specifically the tariff on Chinese tires. Trade barriers are economically damaging to both countries, and the tariff issue offers a way to grant a concession to China so as to soften the blow of other controversial U.S. positions such as those regarding human rights. But the Obama administration should be more cautious in the language that it uses regarding Chinese actions. China is particularly sensitive to diplomatic language (think “one China” policy). Using strong condemnations such as Secretary Clinton’s public comments about the diplomatic isolation China would face should it not sign on to sanctions against Iran unnecessarily exacerbates underlying divergences of national interests.

On Japan, the greatest diplomatic effort must be made to resolve the row over the Futenma air base, but the U.S. should *not* discourage Japan from resolving historic tensions and building a constructive relationship with China. Japan’s new Asia-leaning foreign policy is inevitable as China rises, and the closer the relations between the two countries the less likely that there will be future destabilizing tension between them. It is crucial, however, that America facilitate this shift while reaffirming and further strengthening its alliance with Japan. In so doing, Obama will ensure that America for some time to come will have a reliable regional partner to back its interests when they do conflict with China’s or any other Asian power’s.

On India, Obama must assuage Indian fears about America’s strengthening of bilateral relations with China at their expense by decisively moving forward on fulfilling the nuclear deal. More naval and military exercises might also help. As President Bush had to do, Obama must walk the tightrope of simultaneously reaffirming bilateral ties with both China and India. Doing so would give America the ability to temper potentially destabilizing recriminations between India and China over Arunachal Pradesh should border tensions escalate further.

The Obama administration’s other foreign policy priority in 2010 will be responding to challenges in the post-Soviet space from an increasingly assertive Russia. Although the global financial crisis disproportionately set back the Russian economy, Moscow has enjoyed a number of key geopolitical successes in the past few years. The war with Georgia in August 2008 was a lopsided affair and exposed several weaknesses in the Russian military, but most importantly it was viewed by Moscow as a success in asserting power in Russia’s “near abroad”. The recent Ukrainian presidential election, in

which the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich emerged victorious, is another feather in Russia's cap that might cause the Kremlin to act more aggressively in its neighborhood. As a result, it is not inconceivable that tensions between Russia and Uzbekistan, Moldova, Belarus, or Georgia might again provoke a regional crisis.

The United States should focus on using careful diplomacy with Russia to prevent outright hostilities between Moscow and its neighbors and on responding with resolved condemnation should they occur. Despite America's "reset" with Russia, if the Kremlin seeks to dominate the post-Soviet space, it would clash with the United States' vital interests in both a stable and secure Eurasia and the independence and political development of post-Soviet states. Since most countries of the former Soviet Union do seek independence and even a closer relationship with the West, not responding decisively to any Russian aggression would be more destabilizing than not taking determined action. However, while the U.S. should prepare effective diplomacy with the possibility of targeted financial sanctions on Russian elites should hostilities erupt, a militarized Western response that would risk the expansion and scope of tensions should be avoided at all costs.

In the meantime, the Obama administration must facilitate greater European integration of post-Soviet states through efforts such as the EU's new "Eastern Partnership" initiative. It should also engage more effectively with the Central Asian republics. In spite of conventional wisdom, Central Asian states are increasingly pursuing "multi-vector" foreign policies that don't solely rely upon Russian patronage. The U.S. should be encouraging this development, and the best way to do so would be the completion of a trans-Caspian pipeline that would connect Central Asian energy directly to Europe, free from Russian control. If the United States can help bring Eastern European and Central Asian states out of Moscow's orbit and closer to Europe and the West through artful diplomacy, Russia will inevitably have to follow their lead and give up any pretensions of regional hegemony. Not facilitating this strategic shift toward Europe will risk Moscow's reassertion of authority in its backyard, and a destabilizing cycle of Russian aggressiveness and aggrandizement of power in the Eurasian region and abroad. Such are the stakes of the Obama administration's response to the Russian challenge in the coming year.

Thus, aside from Afghanistan/Pakistan and Iran, these two foreign policy priorities – repairing and further deepening diplomatic relationships with the key Asian great powers, and quelling any destabilizing Russian resurgence in Eurasia – will test the Obama administration's diplomatic mettle in 2010. Whether or not it is up to the task will determine the stability of Asia and Eurasia for at least the decade to come.