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How to Measure the Success of Obama's Trip to Asia

The U.S. president has the opportunity to score a number of economic and human-rights legacy achievements.

By Jared Genser

U.S. President Barack Obama today begins a [six-day trip](#) to Asia that will include stops in China, Myanmar, and Australia. Obama's visit to the region will take him to a series of [key multilateral and bilateral summits](#): first to Beijing, for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Meeting and APEC CEO summit followed by an official state visit to China; then to Myanmar, for the East Asia Summit and U.S.-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit and a bilateral meeting with President Thein Sein; and finally to Australia for the G-20 summit.

This trip will offer Obama the opportunity to drive home his "pivot to Asia" policy, which was [initiated by his administration](#) in 2011. One of the administration's [central foreign policy objectives](#), the pivot is intended to be a rebalancing of U.S. interests from Europe and the Middle East towards East Asia. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [provided the original description](#) of the pivot. In a [Foreign Policy article](#), Clinton listed six key elements of the strategy: "strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening our working relationships with emerging powers, including with China; engaging with multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights." Accordingly, since the policy's implementation, the U.S. has begun to seek closer ties – economically, militarily, and diplomatically – with the Pacific Rim countries.

In reality, Obama's Asia pivot has leaned heavily on military cooperation. His administration has focused on bolstering defense ties with countries throughout the region and expanding the U.S. naval presence there. As a result, the [achievements of the pivot](#) thus far have been primarily military in nature. Notably, under the banner of the pivot, the Obama administration [struck a 25-year long deal](#) for U.S. Marines to rotate through Australia, as well as an [agreement that the Philippines will provide](#) the U.S. military with increased access to some of its bases. Currently, more than 250,000 U.S. troops and 200 ships are based in the Pacific and five of the United States' seven treaty alliances are in the region. The [Pentagon plans to shift](#) around 60 percent of all Navy warships to the region by 2020.

Obama's trip to Asia presents the chance for the administration to round out its approach to the pivot by refocusing on the diplomatic and economic elements of the strategy. The following is a list of five key measures that should be used as benchmarks to assess the success of the trip for the Obama administration.

1. **Articulate a clear and compelling vision for U.S. Asia-Pacific policy.** Though the pivot to Asia is allegedly a central component of the Obama administration's foreign policy, the president has struggled to make clear exactly what his goals are in Asia and [to articulate](#) a case for pro-Asia policies. Without a broader vision for the United States' relationship with Asia, it is close to impossible for the administration to sell the components of such a policy. It [has been announced](#) that in Australia, Obama will deliver a speech on U.S. leadership in the Asia-Pacific. Obama should use this speech to put into words his grand strategy for U.S. Asia policy, namely cultivating relationships with allies in the region that share U.S. values.
2. **Assert U.S. values in the U.S.-China relationship.** The U.S.-China relationship is complex, to say the least. Secretary of State John Kerry [called the Sino-U.S. relationship](#) the "most consequential in the world today." Though officials from the two countries air disagreements over regional security, particularly in the South and East China seas, as well as over currency manipulation, intellectual property, cyber espionage, and human rights, as two of the world's largest economies – with [total bilateral trade](#) at \$562 billion in 2013, up from \$2 billion in 1979 – their interdependence is thick. Obama's meeting with President Xi Jinping will likely cover these key issues, let alone mutual foreign policy challenges such as Iran and North Korea. It is imperative that Obama seize the opportunity to clearly explain the thinking and goals behind the U.S. rebalance; uphold the United States' commitment to human rights [by calling for the release](#) of Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo and his wife, Liu Xia, among other prisoners of conscience; and secure a greater commitment from China for the global fight against climate change.
3. **Join with partners to encourage inclusive economic growth at the G-20 summit.** Since the global financial crisis, the [world has witnessed](#) increasing unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Sustained long-term economic growth is needed to address these issues. Hence, the [Australian government has set](#) economic growth and resilience as priorities for the 2014 G-20 summit. The U.S., under Obama's leadership, should ensure that the communiqué that comes out of the summit reflects a commitment to achieving *inclusive* economic growth that unambiguously indicates that the G-20, including the U.S., is not just concerned with the production of wealth, but also with its distribution. This vision aligns with Obama's own campaign promises, and he should oversee the implementation of the policy that comes out of the G-20 in the U.S. at the national level.
4. **Encourage responsible reform in Myanmar.** Hailed by the Obama Administration as a [real foreign policy success](#), Myanmar is by any measure still a long way from having made a permanent and irreversible transition to a liberal multi-ethnic and multi-religious democracy. The country has [made progress on several fronts](#), including a broadening of civil and political rights in the country, which do mark a dramatic shift from the past. That said, some 80 percent of the country's 53 million population are subsistence farmers and the government still spends less than two percent of its annual budget on health and

education combined. In addition, President Thein Sein has failed to deliver on specific commitments made two years ago to Obama during his last visit, including opening an office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and taking decisive action to address the [abuses of the Rohingya in Rakhine State](#). If Obama intends to keep his promise to the Burmese people, he must press the Burmese government to reform its constitution, end its conflict with the ethnic groups, and drop its plan to move to proportional representation in the parliament, which will likely make permanent the current government's grip on power.

5. **Make human rights a priority in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).** For Obama, the TPP is an opportunity to bolster his legacy and fully develop the economic leg of the "pivot to Asia." The TPP, [potentially the world's largest free trade agreement](#) between a dozen regional countries, would impact 40 percent of global GDP and a third of its trade. A multitude of human-rights issues arise in the TPP framework, among them a potential lack of access to life-saving medical care due to proposed intellectual property provisions, and the failure to address Vietnam's ongoing human-rights violations. To date, TPP talks [have been delayed](#) while Washington and Tokyo debate key details, including Japanese tariffs on agricultural imports and U.S. access to Japan's auto market. With trade ministers having agreed on an intensified timetable for TPP talks, Obama must use his trip to Asia to discuss negotiations, particularly with Japan, and build on the momentum of the past few months, encouraging the incorporation of human-rights safeguards into the agreement while it is still under discussion.

Clearly, there is much at stake. If he can use this trip to balance his Asia pivot, Obama can score a number of economic and human-rights legacy achievements. However, if he fails to do so, he risks creating a legacy of the U.S. acting reactively to opportunities and challenges in the Asia-Pacific, while failing to proactively define its strategy for the region.

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