Redefining US role: Each of Mr Obama’s three Asian visits served a different set of US objectives as the country sought to reestablish its role in global economic and political affairs, and each of those visits was marked by a different approach by Mr Obama in the way he viewed the world.

Obama’s Asia visits and his evolving worldview

If a large TPP becomes a reality, it’ll be the most important consequence of his latest visit

by SHARAD JAVED BURK

President Barack Obama returned to Washington on Nov 19 after concluding an eight-day visit to Asia and one day he spent in Hawaii, hosting the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) summit. This was the American president’s third visit to Asia. Each of these visits served a different set of US objectives as the country sought to reestablish its role in global economic and political affairs. Each of those visits was marked by a different approach by Mr Obama in the way he viewed the world.

Mr Obama was accommodating new factors into his evolving worldview while continuing to maintain that Asia was now the area deserving of most attention by the United States. The first visit undertaken in November 2009 within the first year of his presidency was aimed at re-establishing the rise of China.

In what will be seen as a historic speech made in Tokyo as he headed towards Beijing, Mr Obama invited Beijing to join his country in leading the global system towards a new order. Implicit in this was the recognition that global affairs could be ordered by creating a G-3 arrangement at its apex with G-10 made of the world’s largest economies, developed and emerging, as the next level. The rest of the world will then form the base of the supposed pyramid. Beijing was not particularly keen to play that role, fearing that unless it consolidates its position in its immediate neighbourhood, it will end up playing the second fiddle to the still dominant US. Second, powerful foreign policy consistencies in the US were taken over by the new president’s eagerness to embrace China as his country’s equal. They mobilised to reassert what was viewed as “American exceptionalism” – the view that the US came into being as a nation to influence the rest of the world, to have its values and political and economic systems not only respected around the globe but to be seen as the models to be followed.

The American right was not prepared to step back and accommodate China in the front rank. China may be on its way to becoming the world’s largest economy but its values and systems could not be more different from those that were American.

Any suggestion that China could be treated as one of the two models for the world was not acceptable to the forces of conserva-
tivism in the US.

The second visit came in November 2013, a year later, and this time the American president seemed to have two related objectives. First, to signal support of his country for the democratic regimes in the Asia-Pacific region. The second aim was to signal the arrival of the global economic centre of India as a near-super power.

The most noted statement of the second visit was to indicate that he did not see India as a rising power but as a power that had already risen. India is part of the core in the contemporary economic rise of China. If it were to succeed in maintaining its current growth trajectory and structural reforms, it would be able to challenge China’s economic dominance. It is true that much of that growth has been attributable to and driven by rapid US-led expansion to accommodate China’s economic growth.

The third visit came in April 2017, the first visit to Indonesia and the first in which China was not foremost in the presidential visit. The third visit was to reestablish his country’s position in the immediate region, a significance that, because of its intensity, was expected to “reduce the Great Recession of 2008-09”. However, there was an expectation that the recession, like most others in the post-World War II period, would end as quickly as it had begun. That did not happen. The second visit was undertaken when there was a growing recognition that deep structural changes were taking place in the global economy with economic realign-
ments proceeding much faster than anticipated by those who had claimed that the 21st century will be the Asian century.

Containing China

The third visit came during a period of great economic uncertainty in the US and Western Europe. While America, with a growth of 2.3 per cent in the third quarter of 2011, seemed to have avoided a "second dip" recession, Europe had plunged into a deep existential threat. Large sums of mon-
ey were needed to pull several members of the European Union (EU) out of a woman-

ing financial situation.

Unlike large amounts of finance were committed to bolster the finances of some of the weaker economies in the area, there was fear that some of them could go into default and bankruptcy. A significant part of the new money needed was expected to come from China.

Beijing, while willing to help, was also dem-

manding a larger say in international finance. It was also beginning to flex its unprece-
dentedly large financial muscles in its region.

The third Obama visit acquired “containing and courting China” as an im-

plicit objective. This was reminiscent of the effort made by the administration head-
ed by president Dwight Eisenhower when the objective was the containment of the Soviet Union which had expansionist ambi-
tion. However, unlike the 1950s, Washing-
ton in 2011 was not entirely focused on military alliances to constrain China.

President Obama mixed a heavy dose of economics with politics in the third visit. While there was agreement to have a few thousand US troops in northern Australia, the decision to start work on a Pacific trad-
ing arrangement will be of greater conse-
quence.

At the Apec meeting in Honolulu, lea-
ders from Canada, Japan and Mexico agreed to join nine Pacific rim countries – Australia, Brunei, Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the US and Viet-
nam – to create a new trading arrange-
ment.

Called the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the pact has the potential to rival the EU in terms of its impact on global trade. It accounts for many more people and con-

sumers than the EU, produces 40 per cent of the world’s gross domestic product, and has greater economic dynamism than the EU.

The TPP, by excluding China, aims to los-

ten China’s economic impact on the Pa-

cific, while increasing that of America and Japan. If the TPP becomes a reality – and if it is large – this will be the most important consequence of Barack Obama’s third visit to the Asia continent.

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