

U.S. Braces for China's Rise

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With the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit recently ending in Vladivostok, nowhere in the world should the focus on the upcoming U.S. presidential election be more intense than in Asia. President Barack Obama was the only leader of a major APEC power not to attend, and Asians are surely wondering what his actions and the possible future actions of Republican candidate Mitt Romney will mean for them.

With more than 2 billion people and some of the largest economies in the world, Asia is on the brink of dramatic change, and which candidate wins in the U.S. election in November will surely have a major effect.

Both U.S. candidates believe that the most important nation to focus on is China, but just how they approach this delicate subject could have very different effects on the region. Furthermore, with President Vladimir Putin a dominant force at the APEC summit and his government strengthening its alliance with China, Russia stands at a major crossroads between the two superpowers. Romney and Obama clearly want the United States to remain the dominant nation, but is that even possible?

It is fair to say that Obama's Asia policy has not been his top focus. At the Democratic National Convention, he mentioned Asia only twice. That said, the nature of the administration's policy is clear: Maintain influence over East Asia and counterbalance a growing China. ☒

Romney also seems to believe that the United States should maintain an influence in Asia, but he is taking a completely different approach to his policy. He sees China as the enemy.

Romney has no qualms about verbally attacking China directly, or Russia for that matter. He called Russia the "No. 1 geopolitical foe" of the United States — despite his rhetoric against China — and was promptly lampooned by Putin himself.

Strategists for Obama believe China may have an opportunity to gain influence over some nations in Asia, especially with growing economies in India, Vietnam and elsewhere. To counter this perceived threat, the administration first turned to diplomacy. Obama visited China last fall and was not greeted warmly.

Several months ago, Obama announced that 2,500 marines would be stationed at a new base in Australia by 2016. Speaking in Canberra, he said the move was to "project power and deter threats to peace." This move itself infuriated the Chinese, especially given that he did not address it during his fall visit. Romney's statements have echoed Obama's call for greater buildup in the region.

In contrast to their somewhat similar military views, Obama and Romney have starkly different approaches to the economic components of their Asia-Pacific policies. Romney wants to create a new economic partnership in Asia. The invitation to join this zone would go out to all Asian nations, including China, but their participation is not expected. Rather, this trade agreement would likely act as a way to continue the United States' sphere of influence in the region while discouraging imbalanced bilateral trade relations between China and its neighbors.

With no solution similar to Romney's, Obama stands to lose face. Compounding that issue were comments made during U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent visit to Beijing, where the Chinese asserted sovereignty over the South China Sea.

It seems that Romney's and Obama's positions in Asia differ crucially by their public appearance. Romney is seeking to appear tough on China with verbal attacks, while Obama is hoping to appear more open to negotiation. But the Chinese do not appreciate either side's rhetoric of the United States' planned dominance in the region.

Expect both candidates to stand strong on defense policies in Asia. Romney will be vocal about the threat posed by China, and Obama will be vocal about the potential of strengthening diplomatic relations between the two powers while engaging in very little diplomacy.

China is a rapidly changing country and is on the verge of becoming the dominant superpower in the world. Both candidates fear a loss of influence in Asia and the power of China, but they are living in a dream world. China is surely on its way to becoming the world's leading nation.

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