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# The State of America's Foreign Affairs

Contributed by Khanh Vu Duc  
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Obama may have bypassed foreign policy in his State of the Union speech, but US commitments abroad remain crucial

The most memorable moment of the State of the Union address by President Barack Obama on Tuesday might not have been the address itself but what happened after: US Senator Marco Rubio's strangled dive for a drink of water during the Republican response, which has been the subject of much humorous discussion.

Nonetheless, while the president's address focused primarily on urgent domestic issues, what will undoubtedly be the biggest foreign policy issues facing the United States weren't mentioned - the Middle East, nuclear Iran and North Korea, and the US's relationship with China.

## The Middle East Bog and Nuclear Ambition

Despite President Obama's best efforts to disentangle the United States from the Middle East, events such as the Arab Spring continue to draw the US back into the region. After having withdrawn from Iraq, and with plans to scale back from Afghanistan, the US remains unable to part completely with the region while the Syrian civil war continues, and a potential nuclear Iran threatens Israel.

Thousands of Syrian rebels and civilians have died while aspiring to remove the corrupt regime of Bashar al-Assad from power. However, as has been the concern of some US and foreign officials from the start: who are these rebels?

Jahbat al-Nusra, one of the rebel groups fighting against the Assad government, was accused by the US government as being a terrorist organization as an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq. While not all rebel groups are labeled as such, these concerns, in addition to reports of war crimes perpetuated by all sides, have continued to trouble the US, which has so far refused to directly intervene.

Beyond Syria, there are of course Iran's nuclear ambitions and the potential Israeli response. The US will be hard-pressed to find measures to deter Iran's ambitions and ease Israel's fears. Should the unthinkable happen - a preemptive Israeli strike and a possible regional conflict as a consequence - the US will undoubtedly find itself drawn back to the Middle East.

In addition to Iran, North Korea's nuclear ambitions continue to threaten peace on the Korean Peninsula and throughout

Asia. Walled off from the rest of the world, North Korea carried out its recent nuclear test despite efforts to curb such activities by the US and United Nations. What remains true is that efforts to curtail North Korea's nuclear ambitions will not prove effective as long as China continues to support its neighbor. At present, only China possesses the influence necessary to dissuade North Korea from further nuclear tests.

### East Meets West

Among key players in Asia-Pacific and Asia throughout, China is the biggest of them; and the US's future in the region is inextricably tied to its relationship with Beijing.

The two are competitors, not only economically but politically and militarily as well. Although far from contentious, there remains an undercurrent of distrust that is made worse by accusations of cyber attacks, such as those reported by the New York Times and Wall Street Journal, themselves victims.

For its part, China has attempted to paint its emergence as a restoration to its rightful place in the world, not a rise from nothing but a "rejuvenation," as mentioned by Xi Jinping. All of this, however, has merely fueled fears throughout the region of an increasingly assertive China.

China's rise, rejuvenation or restoration has gone hand-in-hand with its militarization, particularly with respect to upgrading its blue water navy. This has in turn ignited a regional arms race, from Japan in the northeast to Vietnam in the south. Bilateral (such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands with Japan) and multilateral disputes (the Spratly Islands with a host of other nations) set the stage for China's growing ambitions in the Pacific.

The challenge facing the US will be how best to navigate these issues. With US treaty allies Japan and the Philippines both in dispute with China over separate matters, Washington must thread a fine needle between maintaining its partnerships while avoiding direct conflict with China.

### The US Beyond 2013

Although the US remains a global force, it has lost some of its shine. Weakened by the global recession, and with a military that is sure to be reduced by looming budget pressures, the future of its foreign policy will be found in multilateralism and strategic partnerships. No longer can the US act alone. It must act as part of a whole, whether as part of the UN or NATO.

American foreign ambitions will be driven in part by a desire to open new markets. Of all the global arenas, Asia, with respect to America's pivot, will serve as the primary theatre, with an especially critical eye on the South China Sea and its disputes.

What will be the US' role in the region remains in question. Regional allies and strategic partners will hope that an American presence will balance against China's rise; however, the US might find itself unwilling to confront China so directly.

The US should take the opportunity to emphasize democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights in its foreign policy objectives in Asia and the Pacific, and wherever its ambitions takes it. The US should work to restore its place in the world as the flag bearer for democracy and liberty, not through unilateralism but through multilateralism, not through exploitation but cooperation. By lifting the disadvantaged and creating a more even playing field, the US will find itself among allies and friends.

Such ambitions were stated by President Obama in his State of the Union address:

"We also know that progress in the most impoverished parts of our world enriches us all - not only because it creates new markets, more stable order in certain regions of the world, but also because it's the right thing to do."

(Khanh Vu Duc is a Canadian lawyer who researches on Vietnamese politics, international relations and international law. He is a frequent contributor to Asia Sentinel.)