

The NATIONAL STRATEGY FORUM REVIEW

An Online National Security Journal Published by the National Strategy Forum

"Showing Up" is Good, but is it Good Enough?

By Eduardo Lachica

Eduardo Lachica is a former reporter for The Wall Street Journal Asia.

The United States has found a practical way of elevating its diplomatic game in Asia—and that’s just by being there when invited. By declaring that “the United States is back in Asia,” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton took a thinly-disguised partisan dig at the Bush administration for skipping too many high-level East Asian meetings and signaled a return to active, face-to-face engagement with the leaders of the region. The failure of the U.S. to participate at those functions “demonstrates a lack of respect and willingness to engage,” Mrs. Clinton declared during her remarks on regional architecture in Honolulu last January. “That is why I made it very clear upon becoming Secretary of State that the United States would show up. I don’t know if half of life is showing up but I think half of diplomacy is showing up.”

Secretary Clinton has been true to her word. She has made four separate trips to Asia, starting with one to Japan and Indonesia on her very first as secretary of state and including another with President Obama to represent the U.S. at the Asia Pacific Economic Forum in Singapore. She was on her way on a fifth trip last January, stopping over in Honolulu to deliver that speech, when she had to return to Washington to help organize the huge U.S. relief effort for earthquake-devastated Haiti.

The Clinton initiatives appear to be paying off, at least in Southeast Asia where this level of U.S. engagement has been most missing. At a Washington event, with former Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte at his side, Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo heaped praise on the Obama administration for injecting a “fresh impetus” and “dynamism” in the bilateral relationship. The Philippines has had a great deal of attention from the United States. President Gloria Arroyo was invited to the White House for a talk with President Obama. Manila got a morale-boosting visit from Defense Secretary Robert Gates in the midst of its campaign against the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group. Mrs. Clinton herself was around, too, at a time of desperate need, handing out funds to replace new schoolhouses washed away by two killer typhoons.

President Obama's visit to his childhood hometown of Jakarta, with First Lady Michelle and their two daughters in tow, already has the makings of a hit – the ultimate example of this personalized, celebrity-driven style of public diplomacy. The Pew Research Center attributes the recent surge in America's standing in Indonesia to President Obama's popularity. Long before he was elected, the charismatic, Harvard-trained lawyer was the clear favorite of Indonesia's political elites. "Obama is closer to Indonesian hearts," the noted Indonesian critic Jusuf Wanandi wrote. "At last there could be a U.S. president that has the experience, the nuance and flexibility in his mind and in his heart to be able to appreciate Indonesia, a diverse country which is still struggling to create a healthy and mature democracy in the biggest Muslim country...on earth."

What many in the Bush administration dismissively thought to be mere ASEAN "talk shops" are to the Obama team an opportunity to "socialize" in the intimate way Asian diplomats are most comfortable with. Former Indonesian foreign minister Hassan Wirajuda called this kind of dialogue "*musyawarah* or consultation in search of *mufakat* or consensus." Democrats, going back to Bill Clinton and his secretary of state Madeleine Albright, have been more invested than Republicans in meeting and conferencing as a way of resolving international disputes. It's in their genes. Heeding Harvard professor Joseph Nye, Jr.'s advice, the Clinton administration put its trust in American "soft power" to help influence international opinion. The Obama administration has the same game plan. President Obama and Mrs. Clinton have genuine celebrity power, which makes them even more effective in dealing with Asian publics. On her first trip to Jakarta Mrs. Clinton met gaggles of wide-eyed fans wherever she appeared. In Bangkok she bantered with her hosts and drew appreciative laughter from her audience, performing as much as a glamorous talk show guest as a diplomat.

The ultimate test of public diplomacy, though, is how far it can help the U.S. attain its foreign-policy goals. It may not be entirely fair to judge the Bush administration's record entirely on the basis of its serial absenteeism at Southeast Asian fora. To the Bush administration, the most important diplomatic commodity was time. This administration did not have enough of it to send the president and his secretary of state on multi-day trips to Southeast Asia with two wars raging in the Greater Middle East. His communicative skills were a standard joke, so it is understandable why he entrusted much of the burden of public diplomacy to others. The Iraq war had plunged America's standing among Asia's Muslim communities so low that chatting up ASEAN leaders alone wouldn't make it lovable again.

The Bush administration, however, was good at signaling its resolution in waging a campaign against terrorism. The fact that these countries were themselves victims of this mortal peril made them willing listeners. The administration used quiet diplomacy to establish a semi-permanent U.S. military presence in southern Philippines; it also quietly restored military assistance to Indonesia that the previous Democratic administration had cut off out of human rights concerns. Ralph Cossa, the president of the Honolulu-based Pacific Forum CSIS, judges that, as far as results are concerned, the Bush administration has "left Asia in pretty good shape."

The Obama administration still has its work cut out for it. For years to come, the U.S. will have China to deal with as an increasingly powerful rival for the friendship and convictions of Asian publics. Charm alone won't win the diplomatic wars. Nor, with China throwing around billions of dollars to build airports and dams for its Asian friends, can the U.S. compete just in terms of economic assistance. A story is going around about how one Indonesian cabinet officer declined to take part in a televised signing of a U.S. economic assistance program because the amount involved *only* \$10 million – a pittance compared to the country's development needs.

The U.S. has to use “smart power” to convince Asians that the U.S. is not only back, but, as Mrs. Clinton made clear, “there to stay.” It has to make a more sustained effort at public diplomacy, using all the tools at hand. These include programs to bring more Asian students and professionals for study in the U.S., such as Fulbright fellowships for the arts and social sciences, Humphrey fellowships for engineers and the hard sciences. Gone from the region is the sprawling U.S. Information Service (USIS) infrastructure that helped deliver America's message during the Vietnam war. In place of the defunct USIS libraries are “American corners” – stacks of selected books and reading materials—in local universities which are less vulnerable targets for demonstrators and bomb-throwers.

The good news is that the State Department is adapting well to the media revolution. In Kuala Lumpur, Ambassador James R. Keith keeps in touch with Malaysian citizens through a personal blog on his embassy's website. An internet-delivered eJournal has replaced the hard-copy magazines that USIS used to distribute around the region. Budget constraints need not handicap U.S. assistance if projects are creatively packaged. A good example is how the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention and the Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences work with Thai authorities to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and other diseases under the banner of “health diplomacy.” Only time will tell what the results will be of the intensified United States engagement with Asia, but the signs are hopeful.