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## In Asia, Obama seen as 'weak'

By Rick Moran

The president is jetting off to Asia today for a summit meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping. He will follow that up with a meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting where the US will try to conclude negotiations on a new trade agreement - the Trans Pacific Trade Partnership, that would include 11 countries, but not China.

This is part of the president's "pivot" to Asia where an increasingly bellicose China is threatening its neighbors in the South China Sea. Some of those countries - Vietnam and the Philippines are especially concerned with Chinese expansion - are looking for closer US military ties.

The problem is that Obama is seen as weak and in the "autumn of his presidency," according to this article in [Financial Times](#):

The rest of the world, and China in particular, sees Mr Obama in the opposite light – as a weak leader in the autumn of his presidency. China-watchers say Mr Xi's ebullience since he took power has been spurred by the view that Mr Obama has only a limited window in office. After that, Hillary Clinton, or a Republican, will take over. Either would be tougher on the world stage than Mr Obama. Even if that is wrong, Mr Xi has shown Mr Obama little respect since their first summit in California last year. Mr Obama warned his Chinese counterpart to stop the cyber attacks on the Pentagon and other targets. China's cyber-incursions increased. Earlier this year, the White House indicted five Chinese nationals for cyber-espionage, including a senior military officer. None are likely to be brought to trial. It was the kind of empty gesture Beijing has come to expect of Mr Obama.

It is a fair guess that China would be more assertive whoever was in the White House. Its aim is to become a global power. It sees bodies such as the International Monetary Fund as ciphers of US interests. Whoever was US president, China would be trying to undercut US-led institutions.

Likewise, it is hard to believe Mr Obama has caused Chinese military spending to be higher than it would otherwise have been. It is soaring nonetheless.

Since Mr Obama took office, China has invested heavily in expanding its "area of denial" to deter the US from coming to the defence of other claimants in the South China Sea. China is close to joining the US and Russia to become a triad nuclear power with the ability to launch warheads from submarines as well as from air and land. It is investing billions in "hypersonic" ballistic missiles and other future tools of warfare. Once a symbol of impregnability, America's fleet of aircraft carriers look increasingly archaic.

Even at the height of his authority, there was not much that Mr Obama could do about most of this. He inherited trends that are bigger than the transient power of leaders. Yet perceptions matter in diplomacy too. On his last visit to China, when he was still riding high at home, Mr Obama was treated shabbily by his hosts. Today's much-diminished figure is unlikely to have greater sway.

There is a brewing confrontation with superpowers on opposite sides of the world. So, of course, Obama wants to cut the military budget. Small countries that feel bullied by Moscow and Beijing are not getting much help from the US besides banal platitudes and soothing words from Washington.

There are, indeed, powerful forces at work that are beyond the control of any leader to direct, much less control. The rise of China was inevitable once the crushing yoke of Mao's brand of Communism was discarded and some free market reforms allowed to flourish. China is too big not to become a regional hegemon and there's nothing any president could have done to stop it. Similarly, the rise of countries like India, Indonesia, Malaysia - the so called emerging economies - could also be seen as inevitable once political stability was established and their security assured. Pivoting to Asia is the right move but is being implemented incoherently and incompetently by the Obama administration.

Intelligent policy demands more than what we are doing. It is doubtful the president is capable of doing what is necessary to insure the security of our friends in the region while letting China know the limits of its power.