Clinton’s visit signals sea change in Pacific politics

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U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s latest visit to the Australia and other Pacific locales signals a genuine sea change in how the U.S. will conduct its regional security relations. Clinton’s trip is intended to finesse what is effectively the end of the long-standing U.S.-dominated ‘hub-and-spokes’ security approach to Asia. Washington’s is now ready to work with its traditional Asia-Pacific security allies to establish a flexible set of bilateral arrangements based on more equal partnerships and to work more closely regional security actors to shape burgeoning multilateral security architectures. How well Mrs Clinton does this week will signal how effective President Obama’s security policy in East Asia and the Pacific will be.

From Canberra’s perspective, it is tempting to view the forthcoming annual Australia-U.S. Ministerial Meeting (AUSMIN) as the centerpiece of Ms Clinton’s trip. But the real action took place during her previous stop in Honolulu. There she met with Japan’s foreign minister to discuss the increasingly tense Okinawa basing issue. She also delivered a definitive speech on emerging U.S. policy approaches to Asia-Pacific multilateral security. Her stop in Wellington will also be important. The Key Government has done all it can to repair U.S.-New Zealand alliance relations that were ruptured during the 1980s over New Zealand’s anti-nuclear politics. It hopes to be ‘rewarded’ soon for its efforts by the U.S. announcing a resumption of regular U.S.-New Zealand military exercises. While visiting Papua New Guinea, Clinton is also expected to announce substantial increases in U.S. development assistance to the region.

All of these trends combine to signal that the U.S. is no longer attempting to reinforce asymmetry in its regional allies and friends but is seeking more diverse and contemporary strategies for collaborating with them. Unlike the Cold War when U.S. power was regarded as the only real counterweight to communist expansionism in Asia, America’s regional allies are now more independent and self-confident. This is predicated on them experiencing decades of economic prosperity and projecting increasingly independent diplomacy. Security relations between the various ‘spokes’ have intensified in recent years as evidenced by upgraded security ties between Australia and Japan, Australia and South Korea and Japan and the Philippines. China’s evolution as a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the region’s future stability and prosperity is now well established and its recent projection of ‘soft power’ towards its neighbors has been unquestionably successful. Its characterisation of the postwar U.S. bilateral alliance system having reached its use-by date has intensified pressure on U.S. policy planners to become more creative in justifying that system’s continued existence.

Perhaps most fundamentally, continued U.S. preoccupations on neutralizing jihadist elements throughout the Middle East and Central/South Asia seem less central to U.S. allies in the Pacific. To be sure, Japan recently earmarked $US5 billion toward infrastructure building in Afghanistan and South Korea has contributed peacekeeping forces to Afghanistan and Iraq. Both Tokyo and Seoul, however, are increasingly preoccupied with stabilizing the Korean peninsula and with defining their own independent relations with China. Australia remains a stalwart U.S. ally but its future security and prosperity rests more on sustaining and
expanding its regional trade ties and on gaining acceptance as a bona fide regional actor. Washington’s two treaty allies in Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Thailand both confront domestic terrorism. But they are more preoccupied with overcoming persistent domestic political instabilities and economic problems. U.S. regional allies understand the importance of offering principled support to what the Obama Administration now labels ‘Overseas Contingency Operations’ (formerly known as the ‘Global War on Terror’). On a relative scale of importance, however, such operations are less critical to their own national security postures than they are to the U.S. agenda.

While visiting Canberra, Ms Clinton and her entourage may well pressure Australia to ‘do more’ to support U.S. efforts in Afghanistan or in other distant flashpoints in return for Washington’s stronger endorsement of multilateral security politics in the region. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd will need to weigh any such U.S. pressure against the need to calibrate Australia’s own bilateral relations with regional powers. Australia’s relations with Japan and China appear to be particularly sensitive at this time. Canberra’s dispute with Tokyo over Japanese whaling in the Southern Ocean and its concern about China’s crackdowns on commercial practices within its boundaries and its hardline position on environmental politics are illustrative. While such intra-regional differences do not necessarily affect the Australian-American alliance directly, they are capable of spilling over in ways that could undercut the momentum for regional cooperation and community-building. Both Clinton and her Australian hosts will need to apply a distinctly nuanced approach to alliance relations in this increasingly complicated security environment.