

Lame-Duck Obama's Brave New World

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[Agenda](#)

Fresh out of his latest Congressional election shellacking delivered by the minority who bothered to vote in the United States, the formerly most powerful leader in the world, US President Barack Obama, will star in a thriller this weekend, appearing in the same room with China's Xi Jinping, Japan's Shinzo Abe and – fasten your seat belts – Russia's Vladimir Putin.

What a drag – the Bomber-In-Chief must be musing. The global economy is mostly a disaster. China, even growing at “only” 7% a year, keeps eroding his “indispensable nation” aura. Japan has decided to copy the Federal Reserve and embark on its own kamikaze version of quantitative easing. Numerous Southeast Asian nations keep freaking out about a few rocks in the South China Sea.

And last but not least, Obama's nemesis, pesky Vlad “the Hammer” Putin, has just been crowned Most Powerful Leader in the world – even if for the most stupid reasons (“unpredictable” head of a “rogue state”) [1] – while he, the Nobel Peace Prize leader of the exceptionalist, indispensable nation, is now nothing but a pitiful lame duck.

The get-together, extended to Monday and Tuesday, will be the highlight of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing – actually, outside of Beijing, so presumably unpolluted blue skies may also have a chance at the photo op. This is APEC's 25th birthday. And the 20th birthday of the Indonesian summit in Bogor – I happened to be there – which, under Bill Clinton's flowery charm, set the 21-member APEC nations a goal of “free” and open trade and investment by 2020. “Free” as in US corporations dictating the rules, of course.

What the whole planet really wants to know about APEC is whether The Lame Duck will meet The Bear face to face, one on one. The White House remains mum. The Kremlin did not rule it out. Well, there's always Plan B: the Group of 20 summit on November 15-16 in Brisbane, Australia.

What the whole planet already knows is that the new slimy show premiering on Capitol Hill on January 2015 has a top priority: the Republicans will do everything in their power to make the lame duck cry for mercy over and over again. So what will this mean in terms of Obama's self-styled “Don't Do Stupid Stuff” foreign policy doctrine, which that 2016 juggernaut known as “The Hillarator” has already derided as a “non-organizational principle”? Just extra layers of cosmic stupidity, or something more substantial?

That old axis of evil

Let's start with The Caliph, aka Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Obama

already said, after his shellacking, he is going to seek Congressional authorization for his coalition of the cowards bombing IS – aka Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or Daesh, the jiahdi outfit's Arabic acronym.

Now that's not a dumb move. If Republican-ruled Congress says "yes", they will be responsible for the fiasco (and it's already a fiasco). If they say "no", the fiasco can be attributed to their irresponsibility.

Republicans are immersed in their own internal split – the boots-on-the-ground favored by the establishment against the non-interventionist Tea Party. So in the end, the lame duck may profit from it after all.

Iran is a much dicier proposition. It all depends on a nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) being reached in a little over two weeks, on November 24. That's a taller-than-the-Himalayas order, although feasible. The Obama administration is desperate for a deal – as the leak of a "secret letter" from Obama to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei attests. But a deal under Washington's terms, which for Tehran is unacceptable. [2]

The new US Senate only takes over in January. Obama has already stressed he won't ask the Senate to ratify the deal. Once again, the problem is what deal? Obama's idea of a grand design in the Middle East is to use a "responsible" – according to US standards – Tehran to balance the Sunni-Shi'ite divide and get rid of the current proxy wars, the whole thing arbitrated by Washington. This is a pipe dream. But it's what the lame duck wants.

Needless to say, Republicans – for whom Tehran never left the "axis of evil" – will try to bomb the dream, pipelines and all, for instance by passing legislation preventing the lifting of key sanctions. Sparks will fly. Tehran won't accept a nuclear deal where Washington just says "take my word for it, we will lift sanctions"; this has to be in the letter of the agreement. After all they have vast experience of dealing with gun-crazy Republicans in power.

Nothing will change on Russia – even as the Obama administration needs Moscow to get a deal with Tehran. The relentless demonization of Putin and the resurgence of the same old Cold War meme, "The Russians are Coming", are guaranteed to keep propelling stupidity 24/7 to intergalactic spheres.

Capitol Hill will go on overdrive. After all, Russia demonization is a bipartisan sport in Washington. The only "solution" would be regime change. Not only is Putin not going anywhere, but he's ratcheting up his defiance of the Empire of Chaos. This implies increased problems with Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel keeps appeasing the Americans while German businesses want increased trade with Russia and Eurasia as a whole.

Another China win-win?

On trade, here's where APEC collides with the two-pronged US version of an economic NATO: the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with Europe and the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with Asia.

What the Obama administration is fighting for is nothing less than a totally unregulated global marketplace. Imagine the "free" market – as Bill "Bubba" Clinton was already parading in Indonesia two decades ago – setting all sorts of standards on everything from

working conditions to the environment. In theory, that's exactly what Republicans love. So here Obama would be right in their alley, which implies an easy Senate ratification.

It's actually way more complicated. Republicans simply cannot stomach an Obama victory. That means this upcoming Senate won't give him the fast track he needs to clinch the TPP deal.

That happens to be exactly what China wants. Beijing will use APEC to promote the road map for its own, anti-TPP trade deal, the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP). TPP involves 12 APEC members – but not China. And even inside TPP there's a monster revolt; Tokyo is battling the US because they Japan is sure its auto industry and agriculture may be devoured by US corporations.

So we're right into a titanic Transformer-style Battle of the Deals. In fact any deal is problematic, as China, Japan and South Korea may want, in principle, broader economic cooperation. But on trade, in so many levels, they are fiercely competing against each other – as in the auto industry and agriculture, for instance – not to mention that heavy historical baggage between Japan and China and Japan and South Korea.

The Chinese charm offensive at APEC in Beijing is all about “innovative development”, “building infrastructure investment” and “comprehensive connectivity”. It's all a mirror image of the extremely ambitious New Silk Roads proposed by President Xi to connect Eurasia.

Beijing is proposing a new “connectivity framework” into three key areas – “physical connectivity, institutional connectivity, and people-to-people connectivity”. But still no one knows how this will work out in practice towards Asia integration. Washington doesn't care; it just wants a “free” unregulated mega-market for US corporations.

Beijing sees Asian economic integration as APEC facilitating an FTAAP by 2025. Needless to say, the US and a few vassals aboard the TPP have been adamant that no regional deal jeopardizes TPP. Washington was betting on TPP being signed before APEC. It didn't happen. So Plan B is to boycott FTAAP until TPP is signed. And that Beijing won't allow. The lame duck will have to duck a lot on his one-on-one with Xi in Beijing.

Finally, what about the Obama-Capitol Hill battle on the climate-change field? For the absolute majority of Republicans, climate change and global warming are nothing but an evil conspiracy. End of story.

The lame duck and Capitol Hill at least may agree on – what else – the Global War on Terror. Pentagon supremo Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel recently said the US should get ready for endless wars, as “tyranny”, “terrorism”, national security challenges and – surprise! – climate change pose a substantial “threat”.

Since 2002, the Pentagon has been saying to anyone who was bothered to listen that Endless War is the only deal in town – or the universe, for that matter. The lame duck might even fraternize about it with his Republican nemeses over the odd round of golf. What a wonderful (lame duck) world this would be.

Notes:

1. [Putin Vs. Obama: The World's Most Powerful People 2014](#), Forbes, November 5, 2014.
2. [Obama Wrote Secret Letter to Iran's Khamenei About Fighting Islamic State](#), Wall Street Journal

Online (subscription).

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