

# Obama Legacy: Outreach to Asia still a work in progress

By Kathleen Hennessey  
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The Associated Press

**V**IENTIANE, Laos — U.S. President Barack Obama's final trip across the Pacific wasn't just a valedictory tour through Asia. It was a tour through the good, the bad, and the ugly of his Asia policy.

As Obama hopped from summit to summit in China and Laos, the geopolitical forces and characters that have confounded his attempt to reshape American influence in the region arose for parting shots. China flexed its muscle, North Korea reared its head, Washington politics piped up from afar, even the Middle East — a perpetual distraction for Obama — briefly stole the spotlight.

Obama's successes also had their turn. The president celebrated progress in his long fight against climate change. He reset relations with an erstwhile war enemy. He used the power of his personal story to connect with Asia's rising generation.

And so, as he moved from tarmac to pagoda, from crowded summit dinners to a quiet Buddhist temple, Obama confronted his legacy: He will leave unfinished his effort to shift U.S. diplomatic and military attention and military spending from the Middle East to a rising Asia. But he has set a course for his successor — should he or she chose to follow it.

"Many American presidents in the past have said, 'Oh, Asia is the future.' With the pivot, Obama said, 'Asia is not just the future, it is now,'" said Victor Cha, President George W. Bush's former Asia adviser. "It set a bar that other presidents will either try to meet, or not. And that would be noticed."

Democrat Hillary Clinton is largely viewed as backing Obama's approach. Republican Donald Trump has sharply criticized Obama as being weak in his negotiations with the Chinese.

Obama shot back: "I don't think the guy is qualified to be president of the United States. And every time he speaks, that opinion is confirmed."

Soon after his election, Obama put a premium on ensuring Asian capitals knew



**ASIA OUTREACH.** U.S. President Barack Obama pauses in the Ho Raj Rod, or Carriage House, while touring the Wat Xieng Thong, or Temple of the Golden City, a tourist destination in Luang Prabang, Laos, because of its architecture, history, and artwork. Obama's final trip across the Pacific wasn't just a valedictory tour through Asia. It was a tour through the good, the bad, and the ugly of his Asia policy. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

Obama has argued repeatedly that the goal of his so-called Asia rebalance strategy is not to contain China or meddle. Still, he was repeatedly reminded of whose sandbox he was playing in. When he was forced to disembark Air Force One from the plane's back exit in Hangzhou, due to a stair snafu, observers called it a sly snub by the Chinese. Trump declared he would have abandoned the summit. Obama said Trump's take was "overblown."

The White House has instead focused on diplomacy with Beijing. Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping eagerly celebrated the next step in a landmark climate-change deal, the high-water mark of their relationship.

But other diplomatic efforts yielded less celebratory results. China lobbied aggressively and successfully at ASEAN to avoid a forceful rebuke for its recent territorial expansion in the resource-rich South China Sea. It was likely aided by Cambodia, which had recently secured a \$600-million aid package from Beijing.

Obama walked away from his talks with no progress to announce on his standing effort to get Beijing to use its influence to prod North Korea to trim its nuclear program. Pyongyang responded to the arrival of world leaders in the region by launching three ballistic missiles, a move analysts cast as a cry for attention. Obama condemned the act and promised to tighten sanctions, but the incident served as a reminder that North Korea has become an even more unpredictable nuclear threat during Obama's tenure.

The launch wasn't the only distraction. Talks with Russia over a possible ceasefire in the Syrian civil war sucked up much of the oxygen in Hangzhou. The effort to find a deal — like the conflict in the Middle East — is to be continued.

they would be more than an afterthought to him. Evan Medeiros, Obama's top Asia adviser until last year, said the president began in 2009 with a round of meetings and calls to Asian leaders to say he knew many were frustrated with Washington, but that he wanted a "fresh start."

Obama committed to attend the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) annual meeting, a regional summit that China, too, attends, as well as the East Asia Summit. His repeated visits led him to 14 Asia-Pacific countries during his tenure — besting the tallies of Bush and President Bill Clinton, who each visited nine.

He was the first sitting U.S. president to visit Myanmar, Cambodia, and tiny landlocked Laos.

"Anytime we asked Obama to do something on Asia, he did it," Medeiros said.

The president used his frequent trips for maximum symbolic value and capitalized on his connections. Particularly in Southeast Asia, Obama would recall his childhood years in Indonesia. He took regular detours to landmarks and temples. He slipped off his shoes and toured a centuries-old temple in the northern city of Luang Prabang, Laos.

The lush scenery, "it's very familiar to

me," he told a group of young people.

For Obama, these trips became moments to connect with Asia's exceedingly young population and to cast aside old antagonisms.

He was the first president to visit Hiroshima. He lifted the arms embargo on Vietnam. He declared the U.S. had a "moral obligation" to help Laos recover from the nine-year shadow war the U.S. conducted in the 1960s and 1970s. Obama announced an infusion of new U.S. aid for cleanup of unexploded ordnance.

As Obama expanded the map, he negotiated a massive Trans-Pacific Partnership, a multi-nation free trade pact at the heart of his plan to counter China's economic dominance. Years of negotiation landed a deal, but not in time to save it from an election-year flogging. Deviating sharply from Obama, Clinton now says she opposes the deal, as does Trump. The deal is stalled for the foreseeable future in a Republican-led congress unwilling to give an outgoing president a major win.

Obama's efforts are at the core of a game of catchup. China dominates economically and culturally across the region. While the U.S. will now spend \$90 million in Laos over three years to clear unexploded ordnance, the Chinese have committed \$7 billion for a high-speed railroad.

## Newly crowned Miss Japan is proud of Indian roots

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in India.

To help send her message out, Yoshikawa hopes the elephant training license on her résumé will catch attention because, she says, there will be more mixed-race people in Japan and that will no longer be a way to stand out.

The license, which she obtained in Laos, is not just a decoration. She loves elephants, in part because of her Indian roots, and can ride an elephant with a passenger on the back and can bathe them. "That's me, I can do that."

Beyond Miss World, she wants to achieve her ambitions in India — in Bollywood's film industry and Kolkata.

"I would like to go into that industry. I need to learn dancing and Hindi but yes, of course, I love to try anything," she said.

## Indonesia screens travellers from Singapore for Zika

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesia is screening travellers from neighboring Singapore for the Zika virus as the city-state reports a growing number of infections and its first case of a pregnant woman testing positive.

Indonesian Health Ministry spokesman Oscar Primadi said

health officials recommended the Foreign Ministry issue an advisory against travel to Singapore.

Singapore issued a statement saying it had identified 22 new Zika cases and its first case involving a pregnant woman. Doctors believe the virus can cause serious developmental disorders in unborn children.

Primadi said thermal imaging equipment to detect abnormal body temperatures was installed at eight Indonesian ports with routes serving Singapore, including Jakarta's airport. Malaysia's Health Ministry also said a woman who travelled to Singapore became that country's first Zika case.

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