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NEWS ANALYSIS

Muted hopes for Obama's Asia visit

Real progress not likely to be made in key areas of concern during his trip

By Jeremy Au Yong In Washington

FOR all the buzz about United States President Barack Obama's visit to Asia this week, the tour will likely be greeted in the region with muted expectations over what he can accomplish.

While there is much symbolic value in the tour of Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines to the US' strategy of refocusing on Asia, few people in the region expect much tangible change in any of the key areas of concern.

The two biggest doubts are: the issue of US military engagement - whether the US can be relied on to intervene militarily in Asia given its reticence over the unfolding Ukraine crisis - and whether the President can muster enough political will at home to get any potential free trade deals ratified.

A media note from the Singapore Institute of International Affairs last week was titled "Obama's visit - Asia's turn to be distracted", in which the institute's chairman Simon Tay says "while he (Mr Obama) will still be greeted with much fanfare when he arrives next week, the truth is that the region has moved on".

All of it adds up to deep scepticism in the region over the health of the so-called "Asia pivot".

Part of the problem, say observers in Washington, is that for the White House to deliver the kind of engagement Asia wants, the hard work at home has not yet been done.

Says Mr Ernie Bower, senior adviser and Sumitro chair for South-east Asia Studies at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies: "The most savvy Asian leaders are watching for President Obama to make the case to Americans that Asia is fundamental to their economic future, their prosperity and their security. In other words, they want to see a political paradigm shift in the United States, in which US leaders embrace engagement with Asia - and don't treat it like a political third rail."

He adds: "So far, President Obama has not taken this case to Americans. If he intended to do so this year, he needed to deliver that message well ahead of his April trip."

Mr Bower notes, however, that to do that will require Mr Obama defying advisers who would rather he focus on the more immediate needs of the mid-term congressional elections in November.

Without buy-in from Americans, the pivot will never stand on very solid political foundations. The administration's commitment is thus liable to be questioned whenever distractions crop up - and there have been numerous ones since last October, when Mr Obama called off his Asia trip.

The most recent, the Ukraine crisis, has been damaging to the US' Asia strategy on two fronts.

First, it undermines one of the foundations of the Asia rebalance - that Europe and the Middle East are now stable enough for Washington to shift its gaze elsewhere. Second, it brings into question US military power, especially among countries nervous about China's provocative actions.

The announced Pentagon budget cuts earlier this year and talk of moving the army off a war footing have only added to concerns.

None of this is to suggest that the President cannot make some progress on this trip, although the task is a difficult one.

A key problem is finding the correct balance in his messages. He would want to reassure allies that they can rely on US support without sounding too threatening to China.

Says Dr Satu Limaye, director of the East-West Centre in Washington: "Doubts about US military intervention put too much emphasis on conflict and not enough on the US role to prevent conflict - including through deterrence and military cooperation with allies."

Mr Bower sees the challenge as being particularly acute when Mr Obama lands in Manila on April 28. There, he would likely tout the new expanded military access agreement that shows "a real tangible dedication of US military assets and investment" to modernise and boost the country's defence capacity.

"But for many in Asia, that kind of support in which you can touch, feel and see US military assets on the ground feels a bit more provocative towards China than some countries are comfortable with," he said.

In the end, most expect Mr Obama to tread the same path that Vice-President Joe Biden, Secretary of State John Kerry and Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel did on their recent visits. That means reassuring Japan of US alliance commitments, talking about the need for China to follow international law and encouraging allies to work on resolving disputes through peaceful options.

Still, Asia should see some of the recent moves in Europe and the Middle East as a clear indicator of the shift towards Asia, said Dr Richard Bush of the Brookings Institution. He noted: "Getting out of Afghanistan, staying out of Libya, Syria and Ukraine, and working hard to get a nuclear deal with Iran, all strengthen the United States to play well in the main area of geopolitics: East Asia."

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