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## Kowtow Diplomacy: How Today's America Resembles Imperial China

By [Stephan Richter and Sreeram Chaulia](#)

Perhaps the most perplexing feature of contemporary politics is U.S. political leaders' desire to receive expressions of subordination. Even more stunning is the way in which this reality resembles the practices of imperial-era China. Here then is a case of two nations who, across time and space, are curiously united in their desire to demand the presentation of tributes from foreign lands.

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**W**ay back in the 17th and 18th centuries, the envoys of foreign powers, upon their arrival in Beijing, had to prostrate themselves in front of the emperor. So sensitive was this practice that a number of foreign diplomats protested this mandatory act of humiliation, but the Imperial Chinese court never made exceptions.

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Now, it is the United States that is expecting tribute — ostensibly as a sign of reverence, but really as a sign of submission.

An Imperial Chinese-style prostration would clearly be too crass an act in today's world. But how, then, do U.S. leaders expect today's variation of the kowtow to be performed? Their preference is for these signs of submission to be put on display in bilateral forums as well as at regional summits and multilateral gatherings, even if in a particular case they are not a participant.

Take, as a prime example, meetings with what, in the American mind, are the "little" nations of Asia.

What irks a number of Southeast Asian nations is that the United States has toned down criticism of China for illiberal policies even as it goes around their region as a moral enforcer who can teach good behavior to smaller states.

For example, when U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently visited Vietnam, she criticized her host government for human rights abuses and intolerance of dissent and spoke in a patronizing tone about how this key Southeast Asian hub of economic growth is "on the path to becoming a great nation" but for its authoritarian tendencies.

What particularly irritates Southeast Asian countries is that, in their view, the United States' moral power to preach is premised not on the country's consistent pursuit of lofty values. Rather, it derives from material power differences and relations of dependence with specific states and regions.

The main reason for the "yes, sir" yearning — that is, the milder but still effective form of kowtow — in American interactions with developing and emerging economies is Washington's self-belief that it is indispensable in all corners of the world either for economic or for security reasons.

Symbols and psychological needs aside, structurally speaking, the U.S. government believes across the board that the ASEAN nations have an inelastic demand for U.S. military guarantees and presence because of the region's fear of China. The same holds with South Korea and Japan, which the U.S. government largely believes will do anything to keep American bases.

In short, as long as China's shadow looms in Asia, the United States is convinced that all Asian states should seek shelter under the American umbrella — and/or that they have no other option.

If, in contrast, the demand for American economic and security benefits were to become elastic (i.e., no longer fixed in place, but rather reflecting cost/benefit calculations), that shift would shatter the myth of the United States as a savior who must be bowed to and placated.

All that is required for this to happen is one of two steps: First, Asian states form regional alliances no longer centered around, or directed toward, Washington. And second, economic growth within each country makes possible military modernization out of one's own resources (as is the case in countries like Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan). That way, a viable national military becomes an integral part of both sovereignty and modernization.

Of course, it is very important in this context to understand some rather perverse alignments of stimulus and response mechanisms. For its part, the United States sees its need for external demonstrations of support rise because of the country's increasing domestic difficulties. The current U.S. desire for subordination thus stems from a desire for external compensation for internal weaknesses.

America seems to be in psychological need of not only new enemies every decade or so but also of outside affirmations of its "king of the hill" status. This tendency is thankfully much more civilized compared to the crass 19th and 20th century reaction pattern, when regimes felt the urge to go to war abroad in order to distract from domestic problems.

At its very core, this entire debate boils down to the "TINA" factor — the belief among American foreign policymakers that there is no alternative to their role in the world. This rigid belief system emboldens the United States to lecture countries of the Global South. Whether this is a reality, merely a perception in developing countries or a bit of both, the key point is that the TINA equation is no longer working in Africa.

In Africa, there is a structural break from the old pattern because an alternative has emerged in the form of China. As a result, the U.S. government can no longer dictate terms or expect that African leaders and people will queue up to beg and bow before American presidents, defense secretaries or secretaries of state.

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It is even worse than that. The United States has to contend with charges that its strategy for the continent, via the U.S. Navy and the efforts of the Africa Command (AFRICOM), has a heavy military component. In contrast,

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China’s principal weapon on the African continent is commerce (ironically, the United States’ original weapon).

Ultimately, these transformations all follow a pattern of how to mobilize and organize a region so that it is able to say “no” and “treat us with dignity” to the Americans. Africa and Latin America have already demonstrated how to make exchanges with the United States more dignified and less insulting. It is now up to Asia to do the same — although the China threat factor complicates this mission.

Perversely, China’s offensiveness makes the United States more relevant in Asia, which is the opposite of China’s almost stated goal for its policy for the region. The incentives for rational behavior are thus aligned very imperfectly: As China tries to dominate, the U.S. role gets strengthened. The consequence? In order to be needed in the region, the United States must want a China that is acting imprudently in its own “backyard.”

Still, can such decoupling from the United States work in a region like Asia that has been the focal point of military tensions? Turkey has done this. It was a reliable U.S. ally that essentially kowtowed to American demands for decades. Then, suddenly, the AKP came to power and began disentangling Turkey from the doctrine of blind followership.

By now, the Davutoglu Doctrine — pairing a healthy dose of self-confidence (based on economic growth) with a distinct level of knowledge of the historic forces at play and an untiringly intensive outreach to all players in the region — has made the country solidly independent of the former U.S. overlord.

In fact, it has become so strong that the U.S. government is trying to lobby on Turkey’s behalf for the Israeli government to come up with an apology for the deadly Gaza flotilla attack of 2010. Turkey achieved this by virtue of its “zero problems” foreign policy in its neighborhood and also through economic growth.

These factors made independence from U.S. dominance a lot easier in the last decade. If a state has fewer enmities and disputes with its immediate neighbors, it makes the field less amenable for powerful extra-regional forces such as the United States or China to come in and play the role of arbiter of destinies.

The rest of Asia should learn from the experience of Turkey — although the China menace is one card that the United States still has in hand to force many Asian powers to perform modern expressions of subservience. But, ironically, this is something the Chinese can mitigate through amending their own regional hegemonic characteristics. The less aggressive they are, the less the real and perceived need for the United States to maintain its presence in Southeast, South and East Asia.

So it comes down to the South China Sea dispute, which rears its ugly head as an entry point for the United States to play sheriff around Southeast Asia. Just as Americans expected obsequience from Europe in exchange for protecting those little nations from the Soviet monster in the second half of the 20th century, it is similarly taking advantage of fears of China’s naval power in the South China Sea.

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The paradox about the management of international relations via prostrations is that, in the course of modern history, they are demanded all the more firmly by the presumed Über-power as its real-world ability to project power diminishes.

The year 1911 in China, when the ceremonial pomp of the last emperor’s court went

on as if it were still the cynosure of the whole world, is not quite the same as where the United States finds itself in 2011. But the United States' prolonged difficulties in sorting out its internal affairs explain why the country has misplaced assumptions about being wanted and obeyed in the rest of the world.

The historian John Lewis Gaddis has written that the United States had crafted an "empire by invitation" rather than imposition in the post-World War II era. The changing world order of today is sending a contrary message that the very language and customs of empire are obsolete — and that American diplomacy must step back from what is widely regarded as condescension.

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