

Turning America's Gaze Toward Asia

By Emily Cadei, CQ Staff

Nov. 14, 2011

In April 2001, Jim Webb took a break from writing novels to pen a testy opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal* that heavily criticized the recently departed Clinton administration's record on China and called for Washington to "reinvigorate" its alliances in East Asia, particularly Japan, to counter Beijing's rising assertiveness in the region.



Just over a decade later, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton issued a strikingly similar call for "updating" and "strengthening" America's East Asian alliances. "We need to update them for a changing world," she wrote in a lengthy piece in *Foreign Policy* magazine titled "America's Pacific Century."

While the Obama administration has turned to that goal in earnest over the past few months, Webb has been working on it his entire career — from his days as a Marine during the Vietnam War and a top defense official in the Reagan administration to his election to the Senate as a Virginia Democrat in 2006.

Webb's years of outreach to East Asian and Pacific leaders, his regular travel to the region and his efforts to raise the region's profile in Washington have made him one of the most sought-after American public officials in capitals from Tokyo to Bangkok. In a part of the world where diplomacy is a high art, those types of relationships are invaluable to U.S. policy makers. But just as the administration has begun to shift more of its attention to the region, Washington will be losing that very asset: Webb announced earlier this year that he will not seek a second term in the Senate.

Webb maintains that, regardless of his formal post or title, he will continue to be an active force in U.S.-Asian relations. But his departure from the Senate will create a vacuum on Capitol Hill when it comes to comprehensive engagement in the region — one that no other current member of Congress may be able to fill.

The Obama administration, if it wasn't before, is now on the same page as Webb on the need to focus on Asia and its ever-expanding economic and political clout. As Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns said in a recent speech, "The broader Pacific will be the most dynamic and significant part of the world for American interests for many decades to come."

Frequent Fliers

In the past month, a slew of top administration officials from the Pentagon and the State Department have traveled to East Asia. U.S. diplomats participated in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation summit last week. And President Obama headed to Hawaii at the end of the week to host the 2011 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

The scaled-up U.S. outreach is in part a reaction to China's rise and its increasingly assertive military posture, which have close Asia watchers such as Webb worried that it could destabilize the region. Webb is wary of China, but he has also avoided engaging in the sort of finger-pointing and demagoguing toward Beijing that has become common in Congress. Instead, he has pushed for the United States to become more active in the broader region, both in its bilateral and multilateral relations, arguing that America is the only country in a position to maintain stability.

The administration appears to agree. Clinton "has been indefatigable about getting out to the region," says Douglas Paal, an Asia expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. During her past two and a half years at Foggy Bottom, Clinton has made eight trips to Asia. In fact, it was her first foreign destination as secretary. But it is only in the past few months that the administration as a whole has begun to shift more high-level attention to the region.

Obama's hosting of APEC — an economic group that includes 21 countries in the Asia-Pacific region — followed Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta's high-profile trip last month to Indonesia, Japan and South Korea, his first as Pentagon chief. From APEC, both Clinton and Obama head to Bali, Indonesia, for the East Asia Summit, an 18-nation security forum created in 2005 to address the burgeoning military issues in the region. Obama will be the first American president to attend.

Through these kind of high-profile engagements, the administration is hoping to seize the initiative for its Asia and Pacific agenda after constant distractions posed by the North Africa, Middle East and global economic crises. And with the Iraq and Afghanistan wars ostensibly winding down, officials hope they can sustain that momentum in the coming years.

Paal says he doubts that the rest of the world's hot spots will ever settle down enough to allow the administration to turn its foreign policy focus predominantly toward Asia. "Asia tends not to be headline-grabbing," he says, compared with the way the Arab Spring, for example, has been. But what is more important, according to Paal, is that below the surface, "the ducks keep paddling under the water."

“It’s those quiet, persistent trips that pay off in the longer run,” says Paal, who in the 1980s and 1990s served on the National Security Council staffs of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush.

Personal Relationships



Quiet diplomacy is exactly what Webb has devoted his time to since entering the Senate. In nearly a dozen trips through East and Southeast Asia since 2007, he has met with government officials, diplomats, military commanders and business leaders.

Webb’s visit to Myanmar in 2009 was the first by an American political leader in more than a decade. He met with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the head of Myanmar’s ruling junta, Gen. Than Shwe — the only time Shwe has met with an American official. While there, Webb managed to secure the release of

John Yettaw, an American citizen who swam across a lake to visit Suu Kyi, an act that resulted in Yettaw’s imprisonment and an extension of her house arrest.

Webb says that type of in-person contact is essential to strengthening the United States’ traditional alliances in the region so that the country can continue to play a central, stabilizing role among emerging economic and political powers, most notably China.

The key to diplomacy in Asia, he says, is “continuity.”

“I can remember, for instance, I was bringing American companies into Vietnam in the early ’90s, and the typical American business technique was to prep your meeting, go in, have two or three days, think you’ve sealed your deal, and leave and turn it over to an in-country partner,” Webb recalls. “That really doesn’t work in Asia. They want to know you have a long-term interest in what you’re doing.”

So early in his Senate career, Webb decided that rather than trying to legislate Asia policy, he would “do my best to spend a good bit of time” in a handful of strategically important Asian countries — Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand and Singapore — “to cement relationships and to help solve any impediments that would affect our relationships.”

“You can only do that by going over there and sitting down and listening and getting to know the

leadership and understanding the complexities of their domestic situations,” he says.

The Man to See

Webb’s relationships and expertise in Asia have made him a go-to figure for policy makers both in the United States and abroad. According to a senior Asian diplomat who asked not to be named, virtually every politician or industry leader from his country who comes to Washington wants to set up a meeting with Webb.

And on Capitol Hill, fellow senators have regularly followed Webb’s lead on Asia policies, whether they pertain to trade, politics or the military.

Those dynamics have made him a valuable partner for the Obama administration, particularly the State Department, with whom Webb has “extremely regular” communication on Asia, according to Kurt M. Campbell, assistant secretary of State for East Asian affairs.

“He’s been one of the strongest supporters of an American engagement strategy in the Pacific,” says Campbell, and his voice on Capitol Hill on that issue has been “indispensable.”

“I know the secretary of State has come to depend on his advice and counsel in a number of challenging circumstances,” Campbell adds.

Paal agrees that Webb’s role on the Hill has been significant, saying the Virginian has “breathed fresh air into his role” as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, a post he assumed in 2009.

Webb, says Paal, took over the subcommittee “in tandem with a new administration that wanted to take a new look” at the old assumptions about Asia and America’s relations there. “And he gave them encouragement. There had been a lot of discouragement from the Senate in the past.”

Deep Connections

Webb’s focus has been on both U.S. allies and adversaries. His ties to Vietnam, in particular, run deep: He fought there as a Marine and speaks fluent Vietnamese. His wife is Vietnamese-American.

He has tried to use his connections to help move bilateral relations beyond Vietnam War-era mistrust. That includes offering support for the Vietnamese government in several hot-button disputes with China over issues such as water rights in the Mekong Delta and sovereignty of the Paracels and Spratly Islands

in the South China Sea.

Japan is another country that Webb believes is key to the United States' strategic role in the region. That presence, however, is being threatened by a long-running dispute over the U.S. military bases on the island of Okinawa, which have been long opposed by islanders and become the center of bitter domestic politics in Japan. Of all the issues rearing up in the region, that is the most crucial for the United States to resolve in the near term, Webb says.

“The basing system in Japan is vital to the credibility of our military posture in Northeast Asia, and also as it connects to Southeast Asia,” he says. “Our leaders, because it hasn't exploded in their face, I don't think have fully understood the volatility of having this drag out.”

Webb, who first began working on basing issues in Asia as a military planner in the 1970s, has reviewed the issue over the course of multiple visits to Japan. In April, he brought along Senate Armed Services Chairman Carl Levin of Michigan to see what is at stake. When they returned, the two Democratic senators, along with John McCain of Arizona, ranking Republican on the Armed Services panel, wrote a letter to the Defense secretary outlining their concerns about the existing agreement between the United States and Japan. The three men attached language to the fiscal year 2012 Defense authorization bill requiring detailed updates on the cost and schedule of the plan and an alternative proposal.

Webb has also played a role in promoting some glimmers of hope for change in the repressive military junta that rules Myanmar, still commonly known as Burma. Senior State Department officials traveled to Myanmar at the beginning of November — one of several trips U.S. diplomats have made to the country since Webb's groundbreaking visit two years ago — following recent decisions by military leaders to ease political party restrictions and free some political prisoners.

Building on those tentative initial steps will require a delicate diplomatic dance with Myanmar's leaders, including both flexibility and firmness at different points. “It's a complicated message to send, and I thought Webb was in a good position to reinforce the administration's efforts” there, Paal says.

Asia experts are hard-pressed to come up with other lawmakers, particularly in the Senate, who have anywhere near the breadth and depth of knowledge on the region that Webb does, not to mention his willingness to prioritize the issues in his day-to-day work in Congress.

“All I can tell you is I think his role and his experience will not be replicated anytime soon,” Campbell says.

For his part, Webb says, “My connection with that part of the world has gone on for my entire adult

lifetime, and it's not going to end when I leave the Senate." But leaving government will certainly limit his ability to directly shape U.S. policy in the region. That's why, administration sources indicate, officials are actively considering trying to entice Webb to join the executive branch in some sort of Asia policy post if Obama wins a second term. Webb may be a hard sell, however. He has consistently maintained that he plans to return to the private sector when he leaves Congress just over a year from now.