

## The U.S. shutdown has a hefty international price tag

*This week, President Obama cancelled his appearance at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Bali, as well as some regional summits – a direct result of the U.S. government’s shutdown. [Peter Trubowitz](#) writes that domestic politics in America is constraining Obama’s ability to act on the international stage. If the deadlock over the government’s budget and the debt ceiling continues, then Washington may find that its previous efforts to ‘pivot’ towards Asia have been wasted.*



George Washington’s [Farewell Address](#) is usually remembered for its admonition to “steer clear of permanent alliances”. But Washington’s famous words contained a second warning too, one that is especially apt today: factionalism at home invites trouble abroad. Washington wrote at a time when international events threatened to destroy the young American republic. The titanic struggle between France and Britain forced Americans to choose sides: Jeffersonian Republicans aligned with Paris; Hamiltonian Federalists sided with London. The resulting factional infighting, Washington feared, would leave the country vulnerable to foreign coercion and intrigue.

Factionalism is once again rife in the US. The Republican-led shutdown of the federal government last week is but the latest in a series of politically orchestrated crises designed to erode Barack Obama’s domestic legitimacy. Whatever success Republicans achieve domestically, holding the federal government hostage to an extremist minority at home is not cost-free internationally.

Today, there is little danger of foreign coercion. Eighteenth century America was an international weakling, which is why George Washington worried about getting caught in France or Britain’s crosshairs. Yet even 21st century superpowers must worry about the kind of hyper-factionalism currently on display in the US. It sends a confusing, self-defeating message to foreign audiences. Nowhere is this clearer, or the risks to American interests greater, than in Asia.

Worries about America’s commitment to Asia are not new. Indeed, they have dogged Obama since he took office in 2009. Many Asian capitals viewed his efforts to scale back America’s presence in Iraq and Afghanistan as a harbinger of a broader strategic retrenchment. At a time when China’s regional ambitions seemed to be expanding, Obama’s preoccupation with domestic matters, however well intentioned, only fuelled fears in Japan and South Korea that China would take advantage of the opportunity to extend its geopolitical reach.



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Obama’s tour of Asia in 2010 was described with much fanfare as a “[pivot](#)” in US foreign policy. The trip was meant to reassure Japan, South Korea, and others in the region

that whatever the US did in the Middle East, Europe, or elsewhere, it remained committed to maintaining the region's geopolitical status quo and to the security of its longstanding allies. But the pivot (or what the White House now calls “[rebalancing](#)”) has not inspired the depth of support among allies and friends in the region the administration hoped for. One reason of course is that China has not sat idly by. Beijing has used its economic clout to parry Washington's plans for a Trans-Pacific Partnership by offering its neighbours generous lines of credit. Just this week Chinese leader Xi Jinping [proposed](#) to create a regional development bank to invest in infrastructure in Southeast Asia and pledged funding from China.

Partisanship in Washington has also taken its toll on the success of the pivot in Asia. America's inability to govern at home, as Secretary of State John Kerry [noted](#) over the weekend, raises doubts about America's ability to deliver and encourages others to make “mischief”. “I believe that those standing in the way [of a resolution]”, [Kerry warned](#), “need to think long and hard about the message that we send to the world when we can't get our own act together.”

What matters most to Asian leaders are not token troop deployments, joint military exercises, or regional port visits. It is whether their own domestic public deems America's gestures credible. This is why Obama's [decision](#) to cancel an appearance at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Bali this week has caused so much consternation in the region. It reinforces the view that Obama cannot deliver internationally – that the gap between what the President is promising in the way of focused US leadership and what a highly partisan Congress is willing to deliver has grown too wide.

Forced to choose between appearing indifferent to American voters and looking feckless to his Asian partners, Obama chose the latter. And therein lies the rub: domestic politics forced the president to trim his international sails.

To be sure, the fallout from the APEC meetings is containable. This is not the diplomatic fiasco some of Obama's critics are [making it out to be](#). But if the governance gap in Washington continues to worsen – a very real prospect with the October 17 [debt-ceiling deadline](#) looming – it will become harder politically for Asian leaders to consider the United States a strategic bulwark against China or a patron that can reliably outbid the Chinese in buying regional access and influence. Some Asian leaders may begin to look for ways to accommodate Beijing, rather than balance against it.

George Washington wrote that partisanship is America's “worst enemy”. He exaggerated. Strong, competitive parties are vital to a functioning democracy and to making rational and far-sighted foreign policy. But the kind of political dysfunction that is currently on display in Washington threatens its ability to lead abroad as well as its capacity to govern at home. America's first president must be turning in his grave.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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**About the author**

**Peter Trubowitz** – *LSE International Relations*

Peter Trubowitz is Professor of International Relations at the LSE. His main research interests are in the fields of international security and comparative foreign policy, with special focus on American grand strategy and foreign policy. He also writes and comments frequently on U.S. party politics and elections and how they shape and are shaped by America's changing place in the world.



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