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NEWS ANALYSIS

Obama's Pacific Trip Encounters Rough Waters

By [HELENE COOPER](#) and [MARTIN FACKLER](#)

SEOUL, South Korea — For all of [President Obama's](#) laying claim to the title of "America's first Pacific president," Asia was always going to be a tough nut for him to crack.

Without the first lady at his side, he would not have the kind of round-the-clock coverage the first couple got during their inaugural tour of Europe.

Without a popular gesture like elevating the plight of the [Palestinian](#) people to equal status of the Israelis, he would not be showered with the kind of praise he got for his speech to the Muslim world in Cairo.

And without a stop in Indonesia, his boyhood home, he would not bask in the kind of adulation he received in Accra, Ghana.

Instead, with the novelty of a visit as America's first black president having given way to the reality of having to plow through intractable issues like monetary policy (China), trade (Singapore, China, South Korea), security (Japan) and the 800-pound gorilla on the continent (China), Mr. Obama's Asia trip has been, in many ways, a long, uphill slog.

So it is no wonder that on the last day of the toughest part of his trip — the China part — Mr. Obama took a hike: a brisk, bracing 30-minute climb up the Great Wall. Around 3:30 Wednesday afternoon, Mr. Obama's mile-long motorcade arrived at the Badaling section of the Great Wall, which snakes over jagged, rocky mountains.

Visitors to that touristy section of the wall generally encounter a cacophonous melee of vendors, but on this day, the place was like a ghost town, courtesy of the Chinese authorities who had shut it down. (The same thing happened Tuesday when Mr. Obama sped through an empty-but-for-his-entourage Forbidden City.)

Even the two sightseeing trips did not offer a total respite, however, as they were prominent, well-publicized examples of what Mr. Obama did not do in China. He steered clear of public meetings with Chinese liberals, free press advocates and even average Chinese, with his aides citing scheduling conflicts. Mr. Obama did, though, give an interview on Wednesday morning to Southern Weekly, one of China's most popular newspapers, sometimes known for poking the authorities by breaking news on delicate subjects.

Still, for an American president who has tried to make openness a hallmark of his public persona, it was a departure, made more stark since Chinese authorities largely hijacked Mr. Obama's one other attempt at a give and take with Chinese students, a town hall meeting in Shanghai, by stuffing the auditorium with young

Communist Party aspirants.

A week ago, when Mr. Obama kicked off his trip in Japan, things were not so grim. Tokyo welcomed him as much as a celebrity as a world leader, with cries of "Obama-san!" from the people who gathered in the rain to watch his motorcade pass. Local newspapers gushed about how he told his Japanese hosts that he wanted to eat tuna and Kobe beef. Even the ballyhoo from right-wing bloggers back at home over Mr. Obama's deep bow to Emperor [Akihito](#) did not seem to dent Mr. Obama's image in Japan; his aides said he was unfazed by the criticism.

But Mr. Obama quickly discovered that popularity on the Asian streets did not necessarily translate into policy successes behind closed doors in the Kantei, the Japanese White House, let alone in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

Political analysts in Japan gave Mr. Obama high marks for what was one of his principal goals: improving communication with Japan's outspoken new leaders.

But the trip managed only to paper over some of the recent differences between the sides, like the contentious issue of the relocation of an unpopular Marine air base in Futenma, on the southern island of Okinawa. Mr. Obama and Prime Minister [Yukio Hatoyama](#) could not solve that issue, instead merely deferring a tough decision by agreeing to form a working group to look at the relocation problem.

One former Japanese diplomat praised the president for showing patience and avoiding mishaps that would have further tarnished the relationship. The former diplomat, Kunihiro Miyake, who now teaches international affairs at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, said the United States and Japan still did not see eye to eye on their single biggest bilateral issue: how to make their cold-war-era alliance relevant in a region where the balance of power had been upset by China's rise.

"The two countries are in the same bed, but dreaming different dreams," Mr. Miyake said. "The Americans want the alliance to be stronger, but the Japanese seem to want to do less."

Mr. Obama's next stop was Singapore for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference, best known for its quaint custom of making all the leaders wear the same style of colorful shirt, helpfully supplied by the host country. Mr. Obama, in blue, wore a brave grin in the group photo, flanked by the red-shirted Singaporean prime minister and an identical blue-shirted Indonesian president.

This year, APEC made headlines, though not the sort Mr. Obama might have liked. With a deadline looming for a big [climate change](#) conference in Copenhagen, the leaders convened a hastily called breakfast meeting to acknowledge that they would not be able to resolve entrenched differences in time.

And then, Mr. Obama departed for China, where the authorities stage-managed and restricted access to his town hall meeting in Shanghai. He did offer a nuanced, oblique critique of China's rigid controls and restrictions of the Internet and free speech without mentioning, let alone condemning, China's government.

Mr. Obama and President [Hu Jintao](#) presented their two days of talks as substantive, even though they did not appear to make much progress on issues like Iran, China's currency or human rights. [Robert Gibbs](#), the White House spokesman, took the unusual step of sending a statement to reporters — something he did not

do for either stop in Japan or Singapore — saying the China trip went well.

In Seoul, where Mr. Obama ends his trip, he will have perhaps his easiest leg. South Korea is a longtime ally that has been cooperating with the United States on vital issues like North Korea and does not appear to have any big ax to grind with the United States.

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