CONTAINING CHINA?

The Obama Administration’s top national security officials spent early November fanning out across the Pacific, visiting a host of nations both expected (Australia, China) and unusual (Tonga, Vietnam).

President Obama, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Michael G. Mullen, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton all went out. Clinton herself made calls in seven nations.

Two news events emerged from this burst of activity. Obama made a surprising, but largely symbolic, call to add India to the UN Security Council’s permanent membership.

More concrete were US and Australian agreements to increase military cooperation. Officials announced three new defense initiatives at annual ministerial meetings held Nov. 8 in Melbourne.

The first calls for more US military visits in Australia. The two nations “resolved to work collaboratively” to develop their force structures in the region. They will see increased manning at joint facilities, US military equipment pre-positioned in Australia, and additional training exercises.

The Pentagon is in the midst of a global force posture review that could have additional repercussions on US basing arrangements throughout the Pacific region. The door is open Down Under. The Australian government welcomes the US “making greater use of our ports and our training facilities, our test-firing ranges,” said Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd. Shared facilities are the order of the day: There are no plans for permanent or exclusively American bases on Australian soil.

The second initiative is an explicit call for greater cooperation on cyber operations. Washington and Canberra already work together closely in the shadowy world of cyber operations, but the plan is to pursue even greater synergy defending networks and identifying sources of cyber attacks.

Finally, the two nations announced plans to build a binational space monitoring facility in Australia. The nations share “a deep concern about the increasingly interdependent, congested, and contested nature of outer space,” read the ministerial meeting’s joint communiqué. Space situational awareness over the Southern Hemisphere is inadequate, so the facility will identify, catalog, and track orbiting objects.

This flurry of activity with Australia—and across the Pacific—comes with China as the unmistakable but often unmentioned backdrop. China has claimed international seas as national territory, is widely suspected as the state-sponsored source of cyber attacks on foreign military systems, and has used an anti-satellite weapon to destroy a spacecraft in orbit.

Top officials, when they mentioned the country at all, took pains to say US engagement across the region is not directed against China and is not an attempt to “contain” China.

“There are some in both countries who believe that China’s interests and ours are fundamentally at odds,” Clinton said in Honolulu just before leaving US soil for her Pacific tour. “They apply a zero-sum calculation, ... so whenever one of us succeeds, the other must fail. But that is not our view.”

Cooperation and integration are clearly US interests. China is now America’s No. 2 trading partner, second only to Canada.

Yet many Chinese “still believe that the US is bent on containing” their nation, Clinton continued. “I would simply point out that since the opening of diplomatic relations between our two countries, China has experienced breathtaking growth and development.”

This is true, but China has certainly acted as if it needed containment. The communist giant’s neighbors can be forgiven for seeking greater ties to the US because there are numerous recent examples of Chinese bullying on an international scale.

China this year protested a proposed sale of defensive weapons for Taiwan in its standard manner. It condemned the sale, reiterated its claim over the democratically governed island, and called off planned meetings with US military officials.

More recently, a Chinese vice foreign minister said nations had a “choice” regarding Nobel Peace Prize recipient Liu Xiaobo, whom China has ordered jailed for 11 years for advocating democracy. If nations “make a wrong choice” and recognize Liu’s award, “they have to bear the consequences,” the official said.

Also this fall, China coerced Japan into releasing the captain of a fishing boat that collided with Japanese Coast Guard ships in the East China Sea. Beijing did this by halting key exports to Japan until Tokyo caved.

Most egregiously, China declared the South China Sea—including vast swaths of international waters—to be a “core national interest.” This is essentially a territorial claim over the high seas.

These recurring attempts to pressure its neighbors leave aside a long-term Chinese military buildup which is poorly explained, increasingly centered on power projection, and is clearly designed to thwart US military capabilities. (See: “From ‘Curious’ to ‘Concerned,’” November, p. 48.)

In this context, the recent US military agreements with Australia appear to be a necessary but insufficient step. Washington should pursue similar agreements with its other allies and partners in the region—not to keep China in a box, but to secure American interests.

The US already has defense treaties with the Philippines and Thailand. They, and nations such as India, Indonesia, and Singapore, will probably all find a closer relationship with the US mutually beneficial.

Open and peaceful dealings with China are in America’s best interest, and China’s rise does not mean the US is in decline. Unfortunately, recent actions show Beijing will not always be a responsible international player.

Better relations in the Pacific will help the United States regardless of how China chooses to behave, and the nations in the region don’t have to put themselves at China’s mercy.

“We’re very anxious to make sure that no one thinks we’re walking away” from the Pacific, Mullen said last month, “because we’re not.”