United States President Barack Obama’s new national security team for his second term in office was finally put in place at the end of February. It is an impressive team of men who share Obama’s worldview and seem likely to accept the White House lead preferred by this president. The one woman, Susan Rice, added to the team as National Security Adviser in May reinforces the public image of foreign policy shaped by Obama. Their effectiveness, however, depends on more than their managerial abilities or collegiality, and the month-long unique and bruising battle in the Senate over the confirmation of defense secretary Chuck Hagel’s nomination revealed some of the difficulties they will face at home, to say nothing of obstacles abroad. We describe the team briefly, look at what the confirmation process tells us about a currently dysfunctional political system in the US, and ask what might be expected from them in the near future as problems surface in many parts of the world, including the Indo-Pacific region.

Former Democratic senator from Massachusetts (1985–2013) John F. Kerry (born 1943) was nominated to succeed secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton in December 2012. He was quickly approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he himself had chaired since 2009, and confirmed by a vote of 94 to 3 in the full Senate on January 29, 2013. Kerry had been the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party in 2004 and lost the election to George W. Bush. Kerry resumed his seat in the Senate that he first won in 1985 and was an early, strong, and visible supporter of Barack Obama’s candidacy in the presidential election of 2008. Though some expected Kerry to be made vice-president or secretary of state, Obama astutely chose his democratic rivals for the presidency—Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton—to fill those two important positions in his first term. Kerry’s choice as secretary of state in Obama’s second term was no surprise as his well-connected educational and social background and his substantial diplomatic experience as a senator are admirable qualifications for a foreign minister in dealing with foreign leaders. Kerry was a decorated veteran of the Vietnam War who became a spokesman for Veterans Against the Vietnam War and based his own 2004 presidential campaign on opposition to George W. Bush’s war in Iraq. Like President Obama, Kerry prefers diplomatic over military engagement on international issues.

Former Republican senator from Nebraska (1997–2009), Charles Timothy (Chuck) Hagel (born 1946) was nominated to succeed Leon Panetta as defense secretary in December 2012 but immediately encountered strong opposition from his former
party and try their utmost to embarrass a commander-in-chief they hate for ideological and probably racial reasons. A smear campaign against Hagel exaggerating past statements and questioning his patriotism and his commitment to Israel was well financed by super PACs (political action committees), organised by ultra-conservative as well as gay rights groups. Hagel’s performance when the Armed Forces Committee grilled him for more than seven hours on January 31, 2013 was disappointing, as was the Committee’s approval vote of 14 to 11. Worse was to follow when freshman Republican senator from Texas Ted Cruz launched a long filibuster on February 12 to prevent the full Senate from voting on the confirmation; it was the first time in US history that confirmation of a senior Cabinet nominee had been held up in this way. The Democratic majority in the Senate could not muster the 60 votes demanded to over-rule the filibuster and the senators went home for recess. They voted for closure on February 26 when they reassembled and confirmed Hagel’s nomination by a less than wide vote of 58 to 41 with the newly gained support of Republican senators John McCain of Arizona and Lindsay Graham of South Carolina. This distasteful episode reminded some people of 1940s and 1950s ‘McCarthyism’ when lies and half-lies were used to destroy the careers of persons seen as less than adequately anti-communist.

Chuck Hagel was also a veteran of the Vietnam War who became an opponent of it, but unlike Kerry, he had remained an enlisted man and not an officer for the duration. This is the first time that an enlisted man has been appointed to the highest office in the defense department and he is expected to pay special attention to the needs of soldiers, sailors and their families. After leaving the Senate Hagel had become Chairman of the Atlantic Council and a distinguished professor at Georgetown University. He is well regarded as an independent and moderate man whose advice the president valued as reinforcing his own preferred policies. However, Republican senator John Cornyn of Texas depicted Hagel’s supposedly ‘dovish’ views on military intervention and wasteful spending by the Pentagon as being ‘outside the mainstream’.1 Hagel was also accused of being anti-gay, anti-Israel, pro-Iran and taking money from ‘terrorists’, accusations he refuted. Many observers, including some respected Republicans such as governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, saw the failed attempt to deny or delay confirmation of an official essential to the conduct of national affairs as bringing ridicule and disrepute to the Republican Party as a whole. Indeed, the rise of extreme right wing groups such as the Tea Party in the electoral calculations of all Republican aspirants to office since 2009–2010 has created something of a crisis for the party as well as for governance; moderate or centrist elements have been shrunk, and so too the possibility of forging bipartisan approaches to the solution of pressing issues, financial and social, including gun control, health care and immigration.

Hagel took office with the weakest support of any modern US defense secretary and plunged straightaway into verbal collision with Afghan president Hamid Karzai on the behaviour of American troops in Afghanistan, and then into the painful exercise of implementing 15 per cent compulsory cuts in Pentagon spending. Automatic, across the board reductions known as ‘sequestration’ of all governmental expenditure came into effect on March 1, 2013 because despite more than one crisis termed ‘fiscal cliff’ and many rounds of negotiation between the president and congressional leaders Republicans and Democrats have still failed to draft a budget for the year ahead or reach agreement on how to reduce the US debt burden now exceeding five per cent of the total economy. Very simply put, Republicans seek to shrink the role of government
cation, health and social security while refusing to sanction any rise in taxes. President Obama and most Democrats see public programmes as essential for the well being of all Americans, especially those less than wealthy, and want a higher contribution in taxes from the well-protected top one per cent of the socio-economic scale. This apparently unbridgeable ideological divide has led to a gridlock between the White House and Congress, and also within the US Congress, on all important issues. Its impact on American foreign relations and national security is inevitable, if delayed. Obama recognises the fact, and often states it, that effective foreign policy depends on healthy domestic economics and politics. His team echoes him, but his opponents disagree so profoundly on the components of a successful economy that the US is still struggling to emerge from the recession brought on by collapse of the financial system in 2008. Hagel frankly warns his Department of Defense of further expenditure cuts to come on personnel as well as acquisition of new equipment. The effect of such cuts on hundreds of military bases abroad, on the proposed ‘pivot to Asia’, and on American ‘leadership’ in world affairs generally is yet to be seen.

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was created in 1947 as a successor to the World War II Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and charged with collecting foreign intelligence and ‘emergency operations’ as necessary. The CIA Director has been enormously influential always, being responsible directly to the President and since 2004 to the newly created Director of National Intelligence. Obama appointed warrior General David Petraeus of Iraq and Afghanistan fame as Director CIA in September 2011; in November 2012 he submitted his resignation and subsequently apologised publicly for conduct unbecoming to a man in his position. Obama then nominated his chief counterterrorism adviser John D. Brennan (born 1955) as CIA Director on January 7. The Senate Intelligence Committee approved the appointment on March 5 by a vote of 12 to 3 and despite a 13-hour filibuster by Republican senator Rand Paul of Kentucky. Brennan was sworn into office on March 8. He was an insider with 25 years experience who had been station chief in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and chief of staff to Bush’s CIA Director George Tenet when the decision to invade Iraq was taken. Brennan had been closely connected with the harsh interrogation methods used against alleged terrorists as well as the 2005 decision to destroy videotaped evidence of such practices properly termed ‘torture’. He was also the first to publicly acknowledge US drone attacks in East Africa, Pakistan and Yemen and argue in favour of the drone programme increasingly used in the endless and worldwide US war against ‘terror’. Senator Paul’s filibuster and sharp questions about drones from others were focused on their use against American citizens on US soil, not on their effectiveness (or not) as used elsewhere. Accounts showing how drone attacks increase Islamic militancy do not yet inform public discourse on the subject in the US, though questions are being raised on the conversion over the past decade or so of an intelligence agency into a paramilitary force directed to find, capture or kill since 9/11. Recent newspaper reports suggest, however, that capture of alleged terrorists is now preferred to killing them, and Obama’s original pledge to try them in civilian courts rather than military tribunals in the notorious Guantanamo Bay prison is being honoured. Brennan, therefore, can be counted among Obama policy supporters in trying to turn the page back from targeted killing to intelligence gathering.

What then can we expect from this team? Solidarity with each other and with the President is a reasonable assumption, free of egotistical turf battles that have marred some US Administrations in the past. An honest effort to avoid knee-jerk military
from the cautious extension of negotiations with Iran, attempts to persuade rather than pressure Israel and the Palestinians to return to peace talks, measured response to North Korea’s belligerent rhetoric, and avoidance to date of jumping into the Syrian civil war. But there is public pressure to take the lead in ousting Syrian President Assad, as there continues to be criticism of the US ‘leading from behind’ in the overthrow of Libya’s President Qaddafi. Militarism seems to be deeply interwoven with the American DNA, bolstered by the enormous military superiority over all others enjoyed since World War II. Some scholars see an intensification of this tendency since a disastrous war in Vietnam. Be that as it may, Obama and his team face demands to pay more attention to Europe, still mired in financial crisis, and to the Middle East where the ‘Arab Spring’ seems to have turned into an ‘Arab Winter.’ What then of China with its own new team of leaders, widely seen on both sides of the Pacific Ocean as rapidly catching up with, if not yet overtaking, the US in economic and diplomatic weight, and the much talked about ‘pivot to Asia’ led by Hillary Clinton and assistant secretary of state Kurt Campbell?

There is no doubt that the Obama team seeks a cooperative relationship with China, especially when dealing with a nuclear armed North Korea and in the UN Security Council, but is yet to find a reliable way of building such a relationship. The American media as well as the Chinese depicted Obama as a supplicant on his initial state visit to China in 2009, an intolerable image for him and his fellow Americans. Washington shows no inclination towards creating a kind of G-2 condominium of global management that Beijing might like and New Delhi fears. But neither does Washington accept the inevitability of conflict with a rising (or risen) China. China appears to read the US ‘pivot to Asia’ as an attempt to encircle China by a ‘league of democracies’ and effectively reminds everyone, including ASEAN, Australia, and Japan, of their economic interdependence with China as well as China’s growing naval clout in its own neighbourhood. US official statements seek to reassure Japan (and the Philippines and South Korea) about the reliability of its security commitments to allies while declaring neutrality on maritime and territorial claims. It is hard to predict what will happen if China and Japan refuse to draw back from confrontation. It is also hard to predict how far the new Obama team will be prepared to carry forward the strategic partnership with India earlier described as ‘a defining relationship’ and the ‘lynch pin’ of the US ‘pivot to Asia’. Secretary of state John Kerry may not have the same fondness for India that Hillary Clinton clearly did, but keeping Robert Blake on as assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia is a clear indication of continuity. Defense secretary Hagel articulates American reliance on friends and allies as partners in ensuring international security and is not about to overturn Leon Panetta’s efforts in India. US troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan and the value of India’s contributions to that country are recognised. But no one in the US or India seems to know how to deal with the troubling and failing states of Pakistan, either singly or together. Surely that should feature in the Indo–US strategic dialogue. The US and Indian navies cooperate in maintaining freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific Oceans and will surely continue to do so. Reports from influential think tanks such as the Asia Society and the Carnegie Endowment stress the importance of strengthening ties with India and recommend taking specific steps to do so, such as creating more expertise on South Asia within the bureaucracy, ensuring proper coordination between East Asian and South Asian policies, and even having President Obama make an unprecedented second visit to India. At the same time, there is general recognition that India, not the US, will set the pace
that at the moment India shows little evidence of activism, or even competence, on international issues where ‘shared values’ and ‘convergent interests’ are said to be the cement of partnership. In short, it is up to India to make the best of an encouraging situation in Obama’s second term, and the strategic dialogue scheduled in New Delhi for early this summer would be good place and time to do so.

Notes