BEIJING—President Barack Obama, trying to build a relationship with a China that is being newly wooed by Russia, sought to carve out some common ground with Beijing’s leaders and tread lightly on their domestic political problems.

The triangular relationship between the U.S., Russia and China came into focus as Mr. Obama outlined his vision for the region on Monday at a gathering of Pacific Rim leaders that is being hosted in Beijing by Chinese President Xi Jinping and includes Russian President Vladimir Putin.

It was the first time the American, Chinese and Russian leaders had shared the same world stage since the West began imposing sanctions on Russia for its involvement in Ukraine, a move that has isolated Mr. Putin and impelled him to invest more deeply in relations with Mr. Xi.

Presidents Obama and Xi will meet later this week to discuss a range of issues marked by cooperation and rivalry, including trade, climate change, cybersecurity and friction over Chinese claims in the East and South China Seas.

One new sore point: the pro-democracy demonstrations in the Chinese territory of Hong Kong that China’s state media accuse the U.S. of abetting.
Asking about Hong Kong on Monday, Mr. Obama sought to strike a balance between raising concerns about human-rights and not publicly offending his host. He offered a generic statement of support for human-rights freedoms, stressed the cooperation between China and the U.S. and urged Beijing and Hong Kong to avoid violence.

“We’re not going to stop speaking out on behalf of the things that we care about, recognizing that we also have a significant interest in business to do with China,” Mr. Obama said, “and recognizing that China is not in the same place in terms of their development, politically and economically as we are today.”
For the first time since a brief meeting in France in June, Mr. Obama and Mr. Putin traded greetings Monday but little more, a Kremlin spokesman said.

“There was no conversation,” spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, according to Russia’s Interfax news agency. “They exchanged greetings, a few sentences. They expect that the two of them...will have a chance to talk briefly on the sidelines in the coming days.”

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A request to not wear ties led to the current trend

The backdrop for the shifting diplomacy is the annual summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, or APEC, forum, which brings together the leaders of 19 nations. Presidents Putin and Xi met separately on the sidelines of the gathering Sunday.

Mr. Obama’s Beijing visit is part of a larger weeklong Asia trip that includes another regional gathering in Myanmar and a summit of the Group of 20 major economies in Australia. With two years left in his term, Mr. Obama hopes to build a more cooperative relationship with China and to consolidate U.S. influence in Asia, principally by strengthening trade and defense ties.

Mr. Obama called Monday for U.S.-China cooperation. He announced an agreement with Beijing to extend the length of tourist and business visas for each country’s citizens to 10 years, from the current one-year limit, and to extend student visas to
five years from one year.

“One country’s prosperity doesn’t have to come at the expense of another,” Mr. Obama said in a speech to business executives. “If China and the United States can work together, the world benefits,” he said. China, he noted, is the U.S.’s fastest-growing export market. One step China could take, he said, would be concluding an Information Technology Agreement that would lower tariffs on high-tech goods, which has so far been stuck in negotiations.

But Mr. Obama is also trying to enhance relations with China’s neighbors through a 12-nation trade pact that doesn’t include Beijing or Moscow. He met with the leaders involved in the pact, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, on Monday at the U.S. Embassy. “This has the potential to be a historic agreement,” Mr. Obama said afterward.

Mr. Obama’s goals are increasingly challenged by Mr. Xi’s own vision and the closer ties that the Chinese leader is forging with Mr. Putin. The two have developed a rapport, having met at least 10 times over the past two years, and are trying to build closer economic ties, through transport links and energy deals.

Over the weekend, Mr. Xi outlined his own plans to reshape the region through a network of railways, highways, ports and other infrastructure, financed by newly founded lending bodies dominated by China.

He has called for a new trade pact, the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific, and had hoped to launch formal negotiations during the APEC summit, but the U.S. blocked the Chinese efforts, according to people close to the matter.

Having signed a major gas supply deal earlier this year with China, Russian state gas giant Gazprom said Sunday it had signed a new framework agreement with the state-run China National Petroleum Corp, this time for delivery of Russian gas from fields in Western Siberia. The fields now supply Europe, but Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller said in a statement that “in mid-term perspective the overall volumes of gas exported to China might exceed supplies to Europe.”

Mr. Putin highlighted the pipeline plans in his address to APEC business executives on Monday, and said Russian and Chinese officials were discussing ways to boost Chinese investment in energy and other sectors.

“We are also examining possibilities for our Chinese partners to acquire stakes in some of our biggest production assets,” he said, according to a Kremlin transcript.
President Barack Obama arrives at Beijing’s international airport on Monday for the APEC summit. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

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