

## **POST-ELECTION U.S.: A NEW FOREIGN POLICY ERA?**

### **Presentation for Panel on “The New US after the Elections”**

By Charles E. Morrison

It is difficult to focus on the “new” U.S. after the elections without knowing who will lead the next administration. At the time of this writing, the national election is still more than five months away. This is a long time in American politics. Consider that the opening votes in this marathon election process came less than five months ago in the January 3 Iowa caucuses. In that contest, John McCain (who didn’t campaign in Iowa) came in fifth on the Republican side, well behind leader Mike Huckabee and even behind Ron Paul. Nationally, the Republican front-runners at the time were Rudy Giuliani, Mitt Romney, and Fred Thompson. On the Democratic side, Hillary Clinton was leading the national polls by twenty percentage points over Barack Obama, who first achieved real lift-off in Iowa.

This flashback reminds us that this has been and continues to be the most dynamic and exciting U.S. election in recent memory, as well as one of the longest. For the first time in many elections, there is no incumbent president or vice-president standing for office. A woman and a black are mainstream candidates for the first time in history. The internet has transformed fund-raising and electioneering, and young people and often marginalized groups are re-engaging in the political process, resulting in the highest participation rates in primary election history in many states. The primary process itself is significantly changed, with consequences that were largely unforeseen and almost certainly will require more reform. But for all the drama of the election and the freshness of the candidates, it is not at all certain that there will be in any fundamental sense a new America or a new U.S. foreign policy post-election.

#### **Certainties**

Let us then start with what we know for certain about the next administration. We know that the new president will have been a sitting senator for the first time since Jack Kennedy was elected in 1960 and for only the second time in US history. While this means that all the remaining candidates have at least some experience with national policies and issues, none has had significant broad executive management responsibilities. Americans have had a predilection for candidates with such experience, for example, the current president Bush, and former recent presidents Clinton, Reagan and Carter were all larger state governors.

Second, we know that the next president be an internationalist, at least by American standards. Unlike the current president, he or she will begin the presidency with considerable travel experience abroad and knowledge of most of the important world leaders by name and reputation if not personal acquaintance. McCain and Clinton have been well-known internationally for years. McCain and Obama have each resided several years in Southeast Asia, if under unusual circumstances in both cases.

Third, most Democratic and Republican analysts agree that whoever the president is, the next U.S. Congress will almost surely continue to have a Democratic majority, and probably, especially in the Senate, an increased Democratic majority. This assessment comes from both the larger number of retiring Republicans and the national polls indicating an overall preference for the Democratic Party. The Senate is currently divided with 49 Republicans, 49 Democrats, and 2 independents voting on leadership issues with the Democrats. Twenty-three Republican senators and 12 Democrat senators are up for election this year. Five of the Republicans are retiring, leaving the largest “open seat gap” between the parties in a half century, and only three of the 23 Republican seats are considered “safe,” compared to 8 of the 12 Democratic seats. On the House side, the Democrats enjoy a 37 seat advantage in the 435 seat body, and in special elections have recently won three seats in Republican oriented districts. Twenty-six Republicans have announced retirements (for good or to seek higher offices) compared to eight Democrats. Even if Republican John McCain is elected president, he is unlikely to have “coat-tails” that will significantly increase his party’s standing in the Congress.

Fourth, I think we can say for certain that, beginning on Day One, the new president will face more daunting challenges than any recent predecessor. According to analyst David Gergin, the challenges are equivalent to those confronted by depression era president Franklin Delano Roosevelt. These include, of course, the on-going conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the continuing threat of international terrorism, low international esteem for the United States and loss of moral authority, a demographic shift overhanging the viability of the pension and health care systems, a huge Federal budget deficit, and decisions about continuing Bush era tax cuts. While we hope that the current economic downturn will reach the trough in this quarter, there are significant downside risks and the next president arguably may be dealing with very serious and persistent problems of recession and inflation. Many of these issues, especially the budget, have not been much addressed in campaign debate so far. Moreover, the foreign policy issues require a fundamental accommodation to a world in which U.S. leadership is still needed, but must be exercised in a new and collaborative manner in tune with changing power realities. Sadly, the salient issues for an election are not necessarily the most important governance challenges in the post-election era.

Finally, and I hope this may be a little less certain, the longer-term political environment in the “new US” is unlikely to be any less competitive despite the public aspirations for a less partisan atmosphere. A Republican president will have to deal with a highly critical Democratic Congress, probably producing “a muddled foreign policy, with the president pulling in one direction and the Congress in the other.”<sup>1</sup> But Democratic president, especially if it is Barack Obama, will need to deal not only with vocal Republican opposition but also the older and entrenched powerbrokers within the Democratic Congress. Politics has rarely been kind to young presidents as the histories of both John Kennedy and Bill Clinton have amply demonstrated.

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<sup>1</sup> Special Report on America and the World, *The Economist*, 29 March 2008, p. 16.

## **II. Elections: Next Phase**

At the beginning of June, the primary season is virtually complete and the presumptive nominees are John McCain on the Republican side and Barack Obama on the Democratic side. The Republican race was probably inherently just as competitive as the Democratic one, but each party has its own delegate rules, and the proportionate representation system employed by the Democrats as compared to the Republican winner-takes-all system made it much more difficult for the Democrats to come to a resolution. That neither candidate could deliver a knock-out blow in the long and bruising Democratic primary has diminished both candidates. Obama seems to be backing into the nomination based on his past lead and momentum rather than any renewed strength. Some argue that the Democratic race is not over yet, and there is an outside chance that they're right.

McCain and Obama in fact are not formally the nominees until elected at the national party conventions, the Democratic one taking place near the end of August in Denver and the Republican one at the beginning of September in Minneapolis. Given the bitterness of the Democratic Party race and sometimes contentious relationship between McCain and many in the Republican establishment, there has been some question as to whether there will be significant controversy at these conventions and whether this would hurt one or both nominees.

There is a very small possibility that the Democratic convention will be forced to decide the nominee. However, the decision-making in recent years has rarely been at conventions, but during the primary season or in the period up to the convention. The conventions function today mainly as vehicles to unify and energize the parties and to promote their ideas, policies and candidates to a broader public. Both parties, and their candidates, have strong incentives to ensure that the conventions present their parties as unified. While the candidates that were unsuccessful during the primaries will still be nominated and given significant amounts of attention, this is to honor them and bring their supporters into the broader fold.

Despite the early wrap-up to the Republican race, the national convention may in the end prove a trickier challenge for John McCain than for Barack Obama, because polling suggests that the Republican nominee is considerably more popular than his party. Thus, McCain wants and needs to be warmly embraced by his party, but he also has to maintain a degree of separation to appeal to independent and disaffected Republican voters. This same problem holds in the case of his relations with his party's leader, President Bush, whose 27 percent approval rating is one of the lowest in U.S. history.

The next critical step, now that the primaries are virtually over, is the completion of the "ticket" with vice presidential nominees. These may not be known until just before the conventions themselves. These choices are not made through open contest, but are selected by the presidential candidates and their advisers. Vice presidents rarely bring many votes, except perhaps in their own states, and there is a downside risk of a vice presidential nominee embarrassing the presidential candidate and party. There may be

more attention paid to vice presidential candidates this year because of McCain's age (71) and the great concern about the security of candidates, especially Obama.

Each presidential candidate will be looking for individuals who will complement and benefit the ticket and be credible as potential presidents, but who will not overshadow the presidential nominee, or carry much risk of embarrassment. While there is currently a lot of public and press speculation about Hillary Clinton as the Democratic vice presidential candidate, she represents a state that is likely to go Democratic anyway and she comes with some high negatives among the independent voters that Obama (as well as McCain) must cultivate. She also comes as a former first lady with a former president attached, hardly easy for any new president. Moreover, the vice presidency may not be that attractive to her compared to her current, although still low in seniority, position in the Senate.

It is thus far more likely that Obama will seek a candidate with strong national security credentials from one of the larger states where the election is likely to be in contention. John McCain will also be looking for a vice presidential nominee from a different part of the country, with a young image, and with a different set of skills, for example, a governor with a strong economic background. One who comes to mind is Mitt Romney, a former businessman and governor of Massachusetts, who was probably McCain's most formidable rival during the primaries. Romney exited in a timely and graceful manner, but the prior relationship between Romney and McCain was frosty. And his state is likely to go Democratic.

There has also been some discussion that one or both candidates may choose an "independent" to complement the ticket. This would be a radical departure from tradition and risk offending party loyalists. Although not inconceivable, it is more probable that the vice presidential nominees will be party leaders, but less well known to international audiences as well as the American voters than the chief also-rans during the primary season.

To date, the electoral process has focused on personalities rather than issues, partly because the policy differences among the candidates within the two parties were not large. The next five and a half months will be somewhat more issue focused, as there are genuine issues that will divide McCain from either Democratic candidate. Each candidate will be seeking to define himself and the other candidate.

The presidency is decided on the basis of electoral votes, awarded to each state on a winner-take-all basis. Electoral votes are based on the state's number of senators (two for each) and representatives (varying by size of population). Since electoral votes rather than popular votes count in the end, the election from this point forward will be largely fought in "swing states," while taking for granted the states likely to have a strong existing leaning.<sup>2</sup> Some have said that this election, unlike the last one, is not about

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<sup>2</sup> Winners have rarely received less popular votes than losers, although this did happen recently in the year 2000 election. The winner-take-all national election system contrasts with the Democratic primaries, apportioning delegations by vote totals within states. Arguably the Obama campaign has probably won the

mobilizing the base, but about appealing to independent voters, with whom both candidates are popular. Thus to define the battleground more precisely, the election will be fought for swing votes in swing states.

The Republicans will focus on some of the upper mid-Western states (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio), while Democrats hope to cut into areas where there are significant numbers of independent voters and where Obama's ability to turn out younger or black voters in high numbers may work to his advantage. These include Virginia and possibly Georgia. Should either candidate succeed in decisively winning in swing states, or simply winning in states thought to be solidly in the other camp, this would amount to a significant redrawing of the "red state/blue state" electoral map of recent elections.

At this point toward the end of the primary season, it is impossible to make a firm prediction regarding the final result. McCain seems to currently enjoy a slight edge in some but not all national polls, but this is quite meaningless except to show his general appeal. In a close elections fought for independent votes, a slip in a debate can be devastating. McCain's advantages are his image as a patriotic, honest, independent maverick. His experience and age (a stark contrast in this election as he was born in the same year as Obama's father and several years before Obama's mother) play well with older voters, but is a disadvantage with younger voters and those seeking change. He has a reputation for having a hot temper (although this is not necessarily a disadvantage with some voters) and making occasional misstatements. He is strong on national security issues and regarded as weak on his understanding of the economy. Although the Democrats will seek to tie him to President Bush, he has had well-publicized personal differences with Bush as well as policy differences on such issues as global warming, torture, and the Iraq war (where he will emphasize his differences with former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and criticism of the low number of troops used in the initial stages of the war).

Obama's strengths are his rhetorical skills and his outside-Washington image. He has been very popular with younger and more educated voters of all races. Compared to McCain or Clinton, he ran a very successful campaign organization, seemingly making an easy transition from a state-wide to a national-level campaign despite less experience than either of these rivals. His vulnerabilities include his image as a "policy wonk" (he was criticized by Clinton as "an elitist" with some considerable effect), and his relatively lack of national policy experience, particularly on national security issues. As illustrated in the primary elections, Obama's half-black, half-white parentage make him overwhelmingly attractive to black voters, but there are mixed reactions among the majority white voters. While his aspiration is to overcome ideological and racial divisions, his association with a polarizing black minister diminished his appeal with some mainstream voters. Voting along racial lines has been a major feature of some Democratic primaries, and this is likely to continue into the general election.

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nomination by astutely understanding and taking advantage of the primary rules, building up credible delegate totals even in states where Obama came in second. Clinton's team has been criticized as having been much less prepared for a long-drawn out 50-state campaign.

### **III. U.S. Foreign Policy in the Next Administration**

There is an obvious weariness in the world and with the American public with the current U.S. administration, and this leads to high anticipation of change, no matter who wins. Almost 80 percent of the American public believes the country is going “in the wrong direction.” The Republican as well as Democratic candidates are running against “Washington,” with “change” a central theme. While change is often an election motif and certainly some change will come, it is important to remember the reasons for the strong continuities in the American political process and in foreign policy. Because of these continuities, debate about foreign policy often is muted during an election year. Most foreign policy issues that interest the foreign policy elite find very little public interest, one reason why Asian issues were almost entirely absent from the 2004 presidential debate on foreign policy nor have surfaced in the 2008 primaries.

What are the reasons for a high degree of policy continuity? First, there is a broad consensus around the main features of American foreign policy, which is rooted in national interests and values. McCain, Obama, and Clinton all share in the consensus around the central objectives of foreign policy, including the alliance system, an open trading system, and a commitment to democracy, human rights, and humanitarian and development aid. All candidates are committed to fight terrorists and protect Israel, with the differences on methods and not basic objectives.

Second, despite the apparent power residing in the U.S. presidency, the American constitution is characterized by “checks and balances” that significantly limit presidential authority. On each candidate’s website, or in their articles earlier this year in Foreign Affairs, are statements that give signals as to disposition, direction, and keywords used or avoided, but they should not be taken as new U.S. policy positions once the president has been elected. Policy is a consequence of old continuities and new circumstances, and many competing groups have a direct or indirect influence, including foreign interests. No one would have predicted at the beginning of their administrations that President Nixon would be opening doors to China or that President George W. Bush would be enmeshed in nation-building efforts in the Middle East.

Third, it needs to also be remembered that no U.S. administration has been very successful in foreign policy “multi-tasking.” Terrorism and the “greater Middle East” have absorbed the efforts of the current administration, and the new president and team begins its tenure with deep dilemmas over its direction in that region of the world. The “greater Middle East” includes a variety of very complex issues – the future of the current U.S. military and political efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the continued effort against al Qaeda, the Israel-Palestinian issue and the stability of neighboring countries such as Lebanon, aging leadership and political systems in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the Iranian’s nuclear program, the humanitarian and political problems of Sudan and Somalia, and hardly least, the future of Pakistan.

Just to list these issues makes it clear by it is so difficult to get priority attention for Asia, despite the fact its huge population base, rapid growing economies, and increasing

importance for the United States and the world. While I am hopeful that this may be different in the new Administration, the American political attention is typically directed toward immediate threats rather than toward longer-term challenges and opportunities.

But nonetheless, every new administration, whether there is a party change or not, provides opportunities for new beginnings and, indeed, demands changes. These come in part from the need to justify the results of the past election and in part from the natural desire of each administration and new set of office holders to differentiate themselves and set new goals. There is also a vacuum of international leadership and, I believe, a strong reservoir of hope that the new U.S. president will have the temperament, capability, and strength to step up to the plate.

### **Atmospherics**

The atmospherics of foreign policy will change before there are actual policy shifts. It is almost certain that the new president will enjoy some honeymoon at home and abroad. At home, this depends upon on size of the victory and the ability of the winner to present him or herself as a unifying figure post-election. Abroad, it will depend in part on the demeanor and statements of the new president. Since both presumptive nominees have a more experience and demonstrated interest in foreign policy than had George W. Bush on coming into office, it is likely that the new president will have a stronger ability to appeal to international audiences.

It is widely assumed that a Barack Obama administration would change the image of the United States more than would a John McCain administration because of the change in party leadership, the generational leadership shift, and coming into office of the first African-American U.S. president. Some pundits have posited that the mere election of Obama would have a huge impact on how the United States is perceived abroad.<sup>3</sup> If so, this also carries the danger that such expectations would be dashed. Both candidates have experienced foreign policy advisers, but with less personal experience, Obama may begin more cautiously and his inclination will be to move toward the U.S. political center. McCain is more likely to begin with confidence and strong views of this own, but with conflicting foreign policy advice from centrists and conservatives within his own team.

The longer-term domestic atmospherics surrounding foreign policy in Washington look far from rosy. An Obama administration would face the vocal and shrill criticism from some conservative think tanks and groups that has been muted during most of the Bush administration out of respect for the conservative president and his administration. There have already been signs of a re-emergence of this kind of criticism, especially in the case of U.S. North Korea policy. A McCain administration would face a Democratic majority in Congress and be subjected to tough criticism of and a persistent legislative struggle over its Iraq and economic policies.

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<sup>3</sup> "His election would destroy immediately half of the massive anti-Americanism in the world," according to Kishore Mahbubani.

## Policies

Finally, let us turn to some policy areas that may be of interest to this audience.

**Iraq.** The most significant, some would say only really foreign policy issue in the election is the Iraq war. Obama has promised an early pull-out of American forces, and McCain has promised to stay in until the job is done. Despite this huge rhetorical difference, in fact any new administration will have to begin with an assessment and full study of the consequences of any U.S. pull-out. For Obama a withdrawal is a campaign commitment and one that he would need in some fashion to honor, however, Iraqi realities may force him to back off somewhat.<sup>4</sup> No first-term president will want to withdraw fully if this further ignites internal violence in Iraq or is seen as a humiliating retreat.

**The War on Terrorism.** There will be no change in basic approach toward this issue, as Americans remain deeply concerned about the potential of future terrorist attacks and would not forgive laxness on the part of any future administration. However, the rhetoric and prosecution of this effort will change. All candidates have vowed to close the Guantanamo Bay facility, arguing that it has done more harm than good.

**Dealing with hostile regimes.** McCain, like Clinton, has argued that Obama is naïve in believing that talks with the Iranian and other hostile governments can help resolve differences while protecting U.S. national interests. Obama has continued to qualify his original almost off-the-cuff statement on this subject, made in a debate, to emphasize the importance of preparations and the prospect of results. The differences here in practice are probably much less than meet the eye. The next president will be a first term, and will have to calculate the political risks and potential foreign policy gains of such efforts. Certainly any such meetings would come only after previous efforts at lower levels. While some have emphasized that President Reagan met with Gorbachev and President Nixon with Mao, these were leaders of big, powerful foreign countries, and the argument that such meetings somehow gave legitimacy to the foreign partner were not very credible. The leaders of Iran, Syria, North Korea, Cuba, or Venezuela, for example, are not comparable figures, and I doubt that any U.S. president would consent to a bilateral meeting with such individuals unless there were prior foreign commitments that would justify these meetings to the American public.

**Global warming.** There has been a significant change in public opinion on this issue and all the candidates have criticized the current administration position and have cap and trade proposals for long-term declines in carbon output. But whoever the victor in the election is, the big challenge remains that of fashioning a policy that is not only political saleable at home, but also brings in other large greenhouse gas producing countries and potential polluters.

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<sup>4</sup> While the scale is not comparable in scale, President Jimmy Carter had to back away from a campaign pledge to withdraw U.S. forces from the Korean peninsula, and several presidents in office have retreated from promises of harsher policies toward China.



**China.** U.S. relations with China are based on broad geostrategic and economic realities, and thus virtually every administration, no matter its starting point, has sought to develop an effective working relationship with the Chinese. The one-China policy is an essential element of any administration's policy. The "responsible stakeholder" approach and some form of strategic economic dialogue can be expected to continue as can concern and criticism about China's military expenditures, domestic minority and international human rights issues, global economic surpluses. These criticisms may become even more vocal in the Congress, especially if there is a continued economic downturn.

**Trade.** There is a clear difference in rhetoric on this issue rooted in the different constituencies of the two parties. John McCain is a staunch advocate of freer trade, and Obama and Clinton have both promised to review NAFTA, one of the central pillars of U.S. trade policy. Neither Democrat is likely to be as protectionist as their Ohio and Pennsylvania primary rhetoric suggests, but still not in a position to move courageous forward on liberalized trade. McCain would have great difficulty in getting new trade authority from a Democratic Congress. While the free trade agreements already negotiated may go forward after the election, one can probably expect a hiatus following since there is little public appetite for more trade liberation in the public.

### **Conclusion – Future of Asia Policy**

What about Asian relations and Asia policy, beyond the China relationship? The broad policy outline of the Asia policy pursued by the Bush administration has had a relatively strong base of bipartisan support, and the administration is proud to claim that it is the first to forge simultaneously good relations with Japan and China. Aside from some specific issues, like the response to the North Korean nuclear program, currently under attack from the right, and the Chinese current account surplus, long under attack from Democrats in Congress, the main criticisms have been a lack of vision and attentiveness to many of the relationships and to the multilateral organizations.

One would hope for strategic vision rooted in an understanding of new realities in Asia, on increased attention to and participation in the multilateral institutions that have become important symbols of the 21<sup>st</sup> century international relations of the region, and a much enhanced public diplomacy effort recognizing the increasingly central role that Asia plays in all aspect of international society.<sup>5</sup> Whether a post-election U.S. will give much stronger attention to Asia and Asia-Pacific relations will depend on the disposition of the new president and especially on his/her personnel choices.

For willing leadership, there are significant opportunities for the United States to develop a new Asia initiative, particularly continuing strong economic and security connections with East Asia and given its forthcoming turn at APEC leadership in 2011. But the requirements of rebuilding strong relationships with Asia go beyond Asia policy. They also include the need for global policies that restore a robust measure of moral authority

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<sup>5</sup> Charles E. Morrison and Peter A. Petri, "Renewing the Pacific Partnership, East-West Dialogue, East-West Center, September 2007.

for the United States. And this will require a level of sustained level of effort that may ultimately make the campaign for becoming president look small in comparison. It remains to be seen whether any candidate has the stamina and leadership abilities to take on this massive task in the face of so many other challenges facing the new president.