

OBAMA AND U.S.A.¹

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The U.S. is a very lucky country. When crises and malaise happened, the US has the leaders she needs.

On the verge of a civil war in the mid 19th century there was President Abraham Lincoln who pursued and ended the War in order to preserve the Union. When they experienced economic chaos at the end of the 19th century, they had President Ted Roosevelt who restored some balance. When in the 1930's the extremism of Fascism/Nazi-ism and Communism happened in Europe, while the economic depression was at its deepest, President FDR was elected. He not only introduced the New Deal policies to overcome the economic crisis but was also able to overcome the mood of pacifism and participated in World War II to defeat Nazi-ism/Fascism. When the Cold War started in 1947, Truman was there to complete and consolidate the efforts by FDR on the Atlantic Charter and established the necessary security institutions to face the USSR and to stop the Comintern to save Western Europe, including through the Marshall plan.

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When political malaise happened at the end of President Eisenhower's second term at the end of the 1950's, a young enlightened President Kennedy emerged and gave hope again to a new generation. This happened again when President Reagan replaced a tired President Carter and proclaimed it was "morning" again in the U.S. He contributed to the collapse of the USSR in 1989 through the heightened competition with the USSR until the latter's economy could no more bear it.

So is the election of President Obama to be interpreted after a "depressed" period of eight years under President George W. Bush, partly due to the trauma of September 11, but also because Karl Rove, his political advisor, made the dominance of the Republican Party a longer term objective by using the post September 11 trauma as the main vehicle. That had worsened the unilateral tendencies and the triumphalism of the Bush-Cheney Administration, and in foreign as well as domestic policies it created an isolated U.S.A. and a deeply divided nation.

President Obama changed that situation fundamentally. His personality and leadership is exactly what is needed for the 21st century, where the U.S. is still the *primus inter pares* among nations. Her leadership is still very much needed, whether in overcoming the economic/financial crisis or the Middle East and Iran situation or the Pakistan-Afghanistan which is in a very precarious situation. But President Obama also is acknowledging and accepting the fact that the U.S. can no longer do it alone. This is also true in our region where the danger of proliferation in East Asia due to the North Korean

nuclear weapons has been mainly to be overcome only through the Six Party Talks. Obama has shaped his outlook and personality because of his exposure to different cultures and values, living in Indonesia and Hawaii in an environment of diversity and differences; having an African father and an Indonesian stepfather, and a strict but loving American mother and grandmother.

He is naturally inclined to be open to and is willing to listen and having a discourse with other cultures. However, he also strengthened himself and put a lot of self-discipline to achieve what he has become. That is why he is inclined to be multilateralist in his approach as he has shown to be able to do so during his trips abroad, but also to be strong enough to make decisions when needed as he has done in overcoming the financial crisis. And more than that to correct the past mistakes and clean up the mess left by the previous administration, particularly on human rights and the rule of law in relation to policies to fight terrorism. He also laid down the basis to further his ideals and policies in health-care, education and alternative energy as shown in his budget proposal to Congress.

His personality and attitudes has already changed a lot of perceptions about the U.S. in the world. This is most fortunate for the U.S. that is faced with a severe economic crisis that requires global cooperation and global solutions. The stigma of a “rogue” state employing unilaterist policies has started to be reversed and the U.S. is looked upon more sympathetically now. Many in the world are willing to give the U.S. and President Obama time to implement the change and a willingness to help solve some of the problems that have hurt them. Especially for Muslims the Israel-Palestine relations are of

paramount importance and the expectation is that the U.S. will become more evenhanded and will be able to put pressures on Israel to accept a two-state solution, starting with halting the West-bank settlements by Israel on Palestine territories. Appointing Senator George Mitchell as a special envoy is the right thing to do and hopefully the two sides are gradually willing to compromise if the conditions are being met.

But President Obama's limitations should also be recognized. Yes, he has a very high popularity rating of over 66% and he has been willing to use it. But so far the Republicans in Congress have not been willing to be bi-partisan and in many cases concerning the economy and on human rights/rule of law problems he has been questioned by the left wing within his own Democratic Party.

His problems are ample, but he is willing to face them. If he does not pay attention and start with his long term policies such as on healthcare, education and alternative energy now, it will be more difficult for him to start later when he might not be in such a strong position in public opinion. Because of the crisis he could and should put them in his program now, since Congress and the public are willing to deal with them as well.

But he also needs to show early successes, especially in stabilizing the financial sector, and to move on to resolving the housing crisis, so that the downturn can be arrested in the second quarter of 2009 and to create a turnaround in the third quarter to achieving even a small growth to boost the morale of the American people. Only then can he move forward on the programs that he has prepared in the many other fields.

He also needs success stories overseas and the support of friends and allies, so that the burden and guilt it not felt by America alone. If we really think that American leadership is important, then we should do our part in solving the problems that we could do.

In East Asian countries, there is trust again from the public in the U.S. and its policies. Obama has reached out to the region by sending Secretary Clinton first to East Asia, had PM Aso as the first guest, met President Hu Yintao and President Lee from the Republic of Korea in the G-20 London Summit. He is also preparing and looking forward to his first trip to East Asia by attending the APEC Summit in Singapore, and around that time he is going to visit Indonesia and China.

His presidency has been received with great enthusiasm in Indonesia, where he is seen to be the closest to Indonesia that a U.S. president could be, since he lived in Jakarta for four years during his youth. Indonesia is preparing to make the visit the beginning of an upgraded bilateral relationship with the U.S.A. by taking the initiative to establish a comprehensive partnership in various important fields: political dialogues and consultations, education, trade and development, military to military relations etc.

To predict his policies on East Asia, one needs to know that he believes that East Asia is and will become a more important player in the global arena, economically as well as politically. The solution of the economic crisis will depend in part on East Asia, particularly China as well as their two allies, Japan, Korea, and also cooperation with

ASEAN and India. Many issues, including in the political and security field, depend among others on the relationship with China besides U.S. allies. The North Korean nuclear issue is a clear example.

However, this does not mean that a formal G-2 relationship will be established at this stage. There are many instruments for the two countries to deal with each others, while a formal G-2 would only create problems for the Japan-U.S. relations. Closer U.S.-China policy dialogues could for instance be important to deal with climate change and energy security. And the bilateral relations between the two will be important for dealing with other issues at the global level such as Darfur, Iran and the Middle East.

A G-3 that includes Japan has also been mentioned as a possibility to deal with particular issues such as climate change and energy security. The problem of North Korean nuclear weapons and future problems of proliferation in East Asia is becoming important in the region and China's role could be even more important in this case because if in the next three to five years nothing could be done in regard to North Korea's nuclear weapons program, then a possible proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region could happen as countries like Japan and South Korea could do it almost "overnight" if they are forced to do so for self defense and deterrence.

For China it is not so simple about their willingness to pressure the DPRK. They do not like to have a neighbor with nuclear weapons. But they also are worried about an "implosion" in North Korea if there is going to be regime change, especially if

undertaken by force from the outside, since a few million North Koreans could flee into China. Moreover, having a one Korea with nuclear weapons in the future is also not exciting to them. The situation in North Korea today appears to be at a critical juncture, since there might be a change of leadership due to Kim Jong-il's health. Whether the son might replace him and be acceptable to the elite, including the military elite, is a real question.

The cross-straits relations between China and Taiwan are improving very fast causing tensions to decrease in the future. In fact Bush Jr. has been doing very well on this relationship, and that is why China at the beginning was less enthusiastic about an Obama presidency. But after the London meeting with Hu Jintao and the recognition on both sides about the importance of the bilateral relationship, for the region and the globe, it has been going well between the two. Not only is the economic strategic dialogue going to be continued under Secretary Geithner but a political one will also be established under Secretary Clinton.

The Clinton visit to Jakarta was not only a recognition of the successful democratization of Indonesia with a majority of Muslims (and a country with the largest Muslim population) but also a recognition of ASEAN and its importance for South East Asia's peace and development. Secretary Clinton made a pledge at the ASEAN Secretariat that the U.S. is preparing and studying the possibility of embrace the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) as a sign of U.S. support for ASEAN's regional order. Whether the U.S. will apply to become a member the EAS will be decided later.

Since East Asian regional institution building has started about a decade ago as a consequence of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, the effectiveness of the APT and EAS are still limited, and therefore in facing crises, especially huge ones such as the current financial crisis, it should be recognized that bigger institutions, such as APEC and PECC, could be the more effective ones if they are properly improved with a new agenda and more effective leadership. Trade liberalization has been the main agenda of APEC/PECC and has been to a large extent implemented, but finance remains mostly outside it. And it will need to be brought to the center stage. The push for change of APEC/PECC has become a real possibility because four like minded countries would like to strengthen the process and they are going to be chairing APEC in the next five years: 2009 Singapore, 2010 Japan, 2011 U.S.A., and 2013 Indonesia, and in APEC the role of the chair is the most important mover. APEC/PECC has the networking, intellectual resources, and hopefully also the leadership to move this process.

In the meantime, the crisis has elevated the role of the G20. This group has nine members from APEC (including India that yet has to be accepted as an APEC member): six from East Asia (Australia, China, Indonesia, Japan and Korea, plus India) and three from the Americas (Canada, Mexico and the U.S.). These nine countries could form a caucus for pushing the necessary new ideas, policies, rules and institutions in the new global governance, starting with the financial sector, to replace the G-7 or G-8.

Later, if it works, the Asia Pacific Caucus could expand its attention to include cooperation in the Asia Pacific in general, where hopefully the East Asians will be better organized as a regional group.

In conclusion it can be said that President Obama has not only change the image of the U.S. in the world, including in East Asia, but he has already started to implement his new approach to international relations with his initiative to rectify the ways of the Bush administration on the rule of law and human rights, in closing the Guantanamo prison and forbidding abuses in interrogation techniques, taking a new initiative on negotiations between Israel and Palestine, and reaching out to Iran. In principle his approach is first diplomatic, while military approaches will only be a last resort.

But most importantly by putting his priority on overcoming the crisis, he has changed so many U.S. policies that have been considered negative. He will have problems with the Republicans and his left wing of his own party on some of his policies, but so far because of his popularity, he could overcome most of the constraints and criticism, and he has shown that he can be pragmatic in order to get results. Since his problems are huge and many we in East Asia should be patient and at the same time do what we can to help him.

On his relations with and policies towards Islam and the Muslims he has personally experienced and was exposed to them in Indonesia and therefore, he understands their diversity. That is what he has demonstrated when he gave an interview to al Arabiya TV, which is a first for a U.S. president. That is also why he would like to push for a two-state

solution to the Palestine-Israel conflict, and push for bigger aid to Gaza, and starting to push the Israel Government, and to reach out to Iran.

On terrorism, he understands that Guantanamo prison has been a shame for U.S. principles and ideals, and therefore he has decided to close it down before 2010. Also treatments towards terrorist suspect are going to be in accordance with U.S. laws and respect to human rights while abusive methods for interrogation has been stopped.

The appeal towards Islam and Muslims will be based on respect and goodwill. Therefore, while military means are still present, it will not be used except as a last resort. The big mistakes to dump all Muslims together as anti-U.S. or anti-West or terrorist will no more happen under President Obama. The ideological and religious aspects of the relationship are considered as important as the other aspects, and that is a very healthy approach towards the relationship with Islam and the Muslims.