

The US Presidential Election: What Happened? Why and What Implications for East Asia

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1. What Happened and Why?

-A landslide victory for Barak Obama: even support regardless of sex, age, race, and education: bandwagon spiral without Bradley effect, underlying the maturity and triumph of American democracy; people's hope for change worked.

-Throughout his election campaign, Senator Obama has enjoyed an unprecedented degree of acceptance by the global community. This support represents a referendum of America's deteriorating image under the Bush administration and the key themes which have defined it, namely the supremacy of American values couched in moral absolutism, the propensity for unilateralism, and the primacy of military action over diplomacy in resolving world problems. An Obama administration will definitely improve American image in the world by its promise to reject these underlying philosophies.

-Obama possesses a cross-cultural sensitivity that contrasts sharply with Bush's moral absolutism. His respect and willingness to listen to other cultures will be central to preventing a potential clash of civilizations and enables him to pursue co-existence and harmony. He has also exhibited a greater appreciation for multilateral cooperation with other countries. This will become critical to future American leadership as the nature of today's concerns become increasingly globally integrated, be it with respect to finance, economy, security or the environment. Lastly, he has shown his inclination to use diplomacy over military action in dealing with international events. These characteristics of the Obama administration foreshadow a more prudent American leadership in the

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world. The world will not only appreciate this transformed image of America, but more importantly that it will reciprocate with action to help achieve the hope that has been promised.

-Obama won the presidential election for the combination of several factors: the worsening financial crisis, a wrong war in Iraq and a stalemate in war against terrorism including that in Afghanistan, personal charm and superb campaign strategy, and a widespread people's fatigue over eight-years' republican rule.

2. Bush Legacies and Constraints on Obama's Foreign Policy

-Negative impacts of Bush legacies: lingering boomerang effects of the Bush doctrine (i.e., moral absolutism, hegemonic unilateralism, and offensive realism)/ waning legitimacy of American hegemonic leadership all around the world: mandate of cross-cultural sensitivity, multilateralism, and prudent realism.

-Re-ordering national priorities: coping with financial crisis, promoting energy independence, reforming the medical sector, and revamping the welfare and educational sector/ lowering of national security agenda and fear of new isolationism.

-Fiscal austerity and impacts on national security: popular anger over defense budget (\$600 billion plus \$100 billion for Iraq and Afghanistan)/ in light of financial crisis, reduction in defense spending seems unavoidable, starting with overseas' bases and missile defense items.

-On a positive note, democratic majority in both Senate and House will help the Obama administration steer its foreign and national security policy.

3. Foreign Policy under the Obama Leadership: Basic Direction and Action Programs

[Basic Directions]

-Deter and even eradicate non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction

(WMD)/ winning the war against terrorism/ prevent terrorists from acquiring WMD, especially nuclear materials such as highly enriched uranium.

-Pursuit of tough, direct diplomacy without preconditions: Primacy of diplomacy over force/ Iran is the first target for a tough and direct diplomacy, to be followed by North Korea.

-Renew American diplomacy to meet the challenges of the 21st century by rebuilding American alliances and willing to meet with all nations, friend and foe, to advance American interests.

-Bi-partisanship and openness: relying on bi-partisan consultative group/ getting politics out of intelligence and changing the culture of secrecy/ engaging the American people on foreign policy.

[Action Programs]

-Getting off the wrong battlefield in Iraq and taking the fight to the terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan: pulling out American forces from Iraq within sixteen months and ending the war in Iraq responsibly.

-New surge in Afghanistan by deploying two additional brigades to Afghanistan to reinforce counter-terrorism operations and support NATO's efforts to fight the Taliban/ increasing non-military aid to Afghanistan by \$1 billion and demanding more from Pakistan.

-Nurturing new military and intelligence capabilities to meet 21st century threats.

-Restoring American values by ending the use of torture and extreme rendition, closing the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center, revising the Patriot Act, and eliminating warrantless wiretaps.

4. Implications for East Asia

-The East Asian region is likely to draw a lesser policy attention because of the Obama administration's preoccupation with Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, and the

Middle East.

-Departing from Bush administration's emphasis on Japan, the Obama administration is likely to give a greater emphasis on China. Revival of 'Japan passing' in the second Clinton administration cannot be ruled out, and China-U.S. bigemonic policy coordination could become more visible.

-Bilateral alliance with Japan and South Korea could encounter some challenges (e.g., reworking of 'value alliance,' disputes over defense cost sharing, bilateral allies' reluctance in extending combat and non-combat help in other parts of the world, and the future of MD).

-Tilt toward multilateralism and sharing burden of creating new collective goods in regional security and economic architecture. Existing multilateral architecture such as ARF, the Six party Talks Process, and the East Asian summit could draw Obama's attention.

- The advent of the Obama administration could be a blessing for the resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem. But North Korea's failure to reciprocate Obama's 'tough and direct' diplomacy could aggravate overall security situation on the Korean peninsula.

-The liberal Obama government and conservative counterparts in Japan and South Korea could precipitate diplomatic discords in Northeast Asia.

-The advent of the Obama administration can serve as a positive factor in enhancing American image and status in the region. Nevertheless, its overall performance is yet to be seen.