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Obama and McCain: Different visions for Asia

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November 4, 2008 may well signal more than just the day the next American president is elected. It may be the new benchmark for how the US and key Asian states forge their security relations well into the twenty-first century.

THE UPCOMING United States presidential election matters to Asia because how the two candidates view the world are starkly at odds. Democrat Barack Obama wants the US to get more comfortable with multilateralism and to strike an effective balance between pragmatism and idealism. Republican John McCain envisions a world of multipolarity and geopolitical competition. The stakes for regional security in Asia could not be higher.

Obama's Shared Security Partnership Programme

Advisers for both candidates have recently delivered a series of definitive briefings at the US State Department and elsewhere on the campaign trail spelling out the basic security outlooks of their respective leaders. Aides for Obama have painted a picture of an incoming Democratic administration more inclined to 'listen' to other countries and less ready to lecture them about values and threats than was George W. Bush and his cronies. Yet Obama's supporters likewise insist that this approach will enable the US to restore its 'moral authority' in a more egalitarian world because other states will be willing to engage in 'frank talks' with the US about policy differences.

An Obama presidency would prioritise the withdrawal of US forces in Iraq, redouble counter-terrorism efforts in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other terrorist hotspots under the guise of a 'Shared Security Partnership Programme', and champion the causes of nuclear non-proliferation and energy security. The intricate details of how an Obama Administration might implement such plans, however, remain open-ended questions.

A peculiar combination of pragmatism and idealism appears to shape the Obama camp's thinking about Asian security. Cooperating with China on energy security, climate change and in neutralising the North Korean nuclear threat are clear priorities. Calling Beijing into account for its human rights

transgressions or slow pace of democratization are not so important. Obama shares US Congressional apprehensions that free trade agreements with Asian partners may not give the US sufficient access to their markets to compensate for projected US job losses in a more globalised economy.

The current financial crisis only accentuates such concerns. Obama would strengthen relations with US allies and friends by reinvigorating American cultural and diplomatic acumen or ‘soft power’ in the region. Apart from relying on his evident popularity in foreign countries, however, he has – again – offered little in the way of specifics of how this would be done.

McCain’s grand design and Asia

As he constantly reminds American voters, John McCain knows Asia well, having served as a prisoner of war in Vietnam for more than five years. In many ways, his policies overlap Obama’s. Like the Democrats, McCain would maintain a greater US force presence in Afghanistan, would demand more support from NATO allies in that country and throughout Central Asia and the Middle East. This expectation would arise from the realization that the US no longer can afford to underwrite Iraqi security indefinitely even as McCain insists American forces will not withdraw from that troubled country. Calls for greater allied support also stem from the dawning realization that Russia will constitute a greater geopolitical threat to its peripheries (such as the Ukraine and the Baltic states) than anyone thought was possible just a few years ago.

McCain, however, plans to envelop Asia into a bigger grand design for advancing democratization, American-style, around the world. His ‘League of Democracies’ proposal envisions uniting Asian allies with other democratic nations to respond more readily to humanitarian crises that the UN Security Council will not touch. The League would also confront rogue states and face down other transnational threats. It is not yet clear how this vision specifically inter-relates with existing US bilateral security arrangements in Asia.

This proposal is hardly an exclusively Republican initiative. Some Obama supporters such as Ivo Daalder at the Brookings Institution and Anthony Lake, President Bill Clinton’s former National Security Advisor, support this idea. Underlying it are several key assumptions. Russia’s strategic resurgence and China’s growing power are unwelcome developments in the absence of commensurate domestic political reform in those countries and should therefore be counterbalanced or even contested.

NATO’s eastward expansion into Central Asia should proceed, notwithstanding risking Russian hostility in the process. Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons should be checked at all costs. Iraq should enjoy long-term US security guarantees. The US war against Al-Qaeda and other forms of international terrorism should be viewed an open-ended conflict with world domination at stake.

Revolutionary Geopolitical Agenda

This revolutionary and ideologically-laden geopolitical agenda departs sharply from the more traditional and time-proven US role as a benign and largely reactive pivot player in both the European and East Asian balances of power. The League of Democracy asserts US values to an extent that the much vaunted ‘breathing space’ that ASEAN has derived from such a traditional American posture for leading the creation of a future Asian multilateral regional security order would be overwhelmed. It is bound to antagonize Russia and China and put at risk improved security ties with India. And it plays into the hands of a small but increasingly assertive right-wing political movement in Japan.

A League of Democracy would assign little credence to the value of negotiating patiently with a North Korea that may be about to change its national political leadership and behave more erratically during the interim out of feelings of heightened vulnerability. The agenda – and presumably the extension of

unconditional US security guarantees and sales of sophisticated arms to Taiwan -- may reignite a China-Taiwan security dilemma that otherwise shows every sign of cooling down.

Real foreign policy debate unfortunately remains an elusive commodity in modern US presidential elections. Employing catch-phrases such as 'Shared Security Partnership' or the 'League of Democracies' reflects this trend. It contributes little substance to a comprehensive and painful foreign policy debate that America now has to have.

Asia is a region that shapes much of America's strategic identity as a maritime trading state and tests its ability to be a purveyor of diplomatic and cultural influence that combines to generate 'soft power'. How Asia fits into this equation will be a key component of any such debate. November 4, 2008 may well signal more than just the day the next American president is elected. It may be the new benchmark for how the US and key Asian states forge their security relations well into the twenty-first century.

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