

**Prospects for President Elect Obama's Foreign Policy
An Assessment**

By

Professor C. Kenneth Quinones, Ph.D.

**Dean of Research and Professor of Global Studies
Akita International University – Japan**

November 2008

INTRODUCITON

President elect Barack Obama's domestic and foreign policy priorities will be defined by his predecessor President Bush's legacy and the reality that now confronts him. His personal philosophy and preferences will have little if any impact on these priorities, at least in the early months of his administration, but surely will account for the approaches he is expect to employ to deal with the problems he is inheriting.

Obviously this means he will have to first deal with the global financial crisis and the faltering state of the American economy. Given the extensive globalization of the United States economy, its domestic economic woes cannot be resolved without addressing the global economic problems.

Nevertheless, Obama's strategic priority must, like President Bush, remain ensuring the nation's security. This is a fundamental responsibility of any American president as assigned him by the constitution. Currently this means continuing the global effort against international terrorism, an integral aspect of which is dealing with the wars Obama has inherited: Iraq and Afghanistan. Linked to securing the nation's defense and defending against international terrorism is halting the proliferation of so-called "weapons of mass destructions" (WMD) which includes nuclear weapons and related technology, and ballistic missile development and deployment.

Geographically, the Middle East will remain the United States' priority area of concern both because of the challenges it presents to national defense and the US need for access to the region's crude oil. Also influencing this decision is the continuing Israeli-Palestinian dispute that threatens to erupt into war, Iran's nuclear ambitions and North Korea's military links to Iran and Syria.

East Asia will share second priority with Europe. Economic factors largely account for this. East Asia's importance to the United States has changed because of the Cold War's end and the region's economic dynamism. President Elect Obama will need access to East Asia's abundant capital, relatively prosperous markets for America's high technology goods and services, and moderately priced light industrial goods upon which America's consumers rely heavily. As for Europe, Washington's concerns are likely to concentrate on Russia's renewed assertiveness in foreign policy and growing economic vitality because of its energy resources.

Other areas of the world will receive attention as time and resources permit. But President Obama is quite likely to rely on allies, particularly NATO, Japan and South Korea, to fund humanitarian and economic development programs in Africa and South America.

Multilateralism Instead of Unilateralism

The greatest difference between the President Elect and his predecessor's approach to addressing America's foreign policy priorities is likely to be in the area of methods. Both Bush and Obama are internationalists who oppose isolationism. They believe it essential that the United States play a leading role in world affairs and oppose any retreat of American power and influence back to the pre-World War II situation. But here they part company.

Obama will rely on multilateralism to assert America's foreign policy priorities. This is the opposite of President Bush who saw the United States as the world's most formidable power, economically and militarily, and thus preferred unilateralism. Rather than telling the world, as Bush did, "Either you are with or against us," Obama can be expected to emphasize the need for partnership. Consequently we should expect the United States to play an increasingly active role in international organization such as the United Nations (UN) and its affiliated organizations. Rather than considering organizations like the UN Security Council and World Bank extensions of the United States bureaucracy, Obama will view these organizations as vital fora in which to rally international support for his global priorities such as addressing global warming, promoting international prosperity and improving health around the world.

Multilateralism accents diplomacy first and views reliance on coercive methods such as economic sanctions and military power as last resorts when all else has failed. Obama is confident that by treating America's allies and friends as respected equals, he can rally their diplomatic support and focus their energies to resolve peacefully common concerns.

Pragmatism Instead of Ideology

Obama's pragmatism is defined by his multi-ethnic and multi-cultural background, but it is tempered by his education in law. President Bush during his first term in office frequently proclaimed that God had defined his policy priorities. This gave him a sense of assertive self confidence that bordered on religious righteousness. Altering his point of view often proved futile because he saw himself as "doing God's work." He divided the world into "good verse evil," and assigned himself, as the leader of the United States, and the United States as the world's foremost authority on defining right verse wrong. Consequently he declare his invasion of Iraq a "crusade," a most unfortunate choice of words in the minds of the people of the Middle East. Bush placed his judgment above that of international law and thus rationalized the use of torture and marginalizing of the Geneva Conventions that outlawed torture. He disregarded the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as the international instrument best equipped to deal with nuclear proliferation and instead preferred a unilateral US approach. He labeled his enemies the "axis of evil" and threatened to destroy them with nuclear weapons. At the same time he argued that they were "evil" because they were pursuing the development of nuclear weapons. Only late in his eight years in office did he seem to realize the folly of his self righteous point of view and begin to moderate his attitudes and methods.

President Elect Obama will confront Bush's legacy with pragmatism rather than Christian self righteousness and American arrogance. Through his actions, words and deeds he must first erase Bush's legacy. Obama will rely on advisers with preferences similar to his. A prominent example of this is his selection of Senator Joseph Biden as his vice president. Biden also is a pragmatist who prefers assessing problems on their own merits rather than in terms of Christian principles. He, like Obama, will seek a multilateral solution that takes into consideration the concerns of allies and friends. The men's shared pragmatism is likely to reinforce their preference for multilateral diplomacy and nurturing cooperation just as Bush and Chaney's

shared views reinforced each one's commitment to unilateralism and right leaning idealism.

The US Military Role

The United States will continue to strive to maintain military supremacy around the world, but Obama believes that first the US economy must be restored to its previous vigor. Also, he clearly opposes the unilateral deployment of US military force. He will rely on armed might only as a last resort and after having engaged allies and friends in a substantive dialogue about how to proceed. In this regard, Obama considers US military power an implement of self-defense and quite likely will discard the Bush Doctrine of "pre-emptive" conventional or nuclear attack on any nation or group the United States president deems a threat. Here, however, Obama has accented a single exception: Al Qaeda leader Osama ben Laden. If and when he is found, President Obama intends to deal with him decisively using force.

The new president will maintain the highest concentration of US military might in the Middle East because of its role as the area of priority concern. He has already made clear his intention to reduce the US military presence in Iraq while increasing the number of US forces in Afghanistan. At the same time Obama can be expected to emphasize two additional endeavors:

- expand the US effort to rebuild the economies and to improve the quality of life for the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, and
- urge allies, particularly NATO, Japan and South Korea to invest greater economic and possibly military resources in Afghanistan.

US Defense Commitment to East Asia

Simultaneously we should anticipate the continued reduction of US military forces in East Asia, particularly South Korea and Japan. This is not a new trend. Actually it dates from the end of the Cold War when the United States ceased viewing China and Russia as potent military threats. First in 1991 the Defense Department developed a plan for the phased withdrawal of US forces from Korea and Japan. The plan was a logical continuation of the US military withdrawal from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and from the Philippines in the 1980s. North Korea's nuclear ambitions, however, postponed the plan's implementation.

Instead in the 1990s, the United States urged its allies Japan and South Korea to shoulder an increasing portion of the defense burden in East Asia. Both nations agreed to increase their "host nation support," the amount of money, material and personnel they contribute to the region's overall defense and thus reduce the burden on the US. This included providing financial support for implementation of the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework designed to halt North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Additionally the United States and Japan in 1998 agreed to the "Expanded US-Japan Defense Guidelines" that significantly increased Japan's defense contribution in the event of a second Korean War.

The Bush Legacy

President Bush (43) initially called on Japan and South Korea to contribute militarily and financially to the so-called “war on terrorism.” This came to include the dispatching of troops and other resources to support the US military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But in his second term, President Bush resumed implementation of the long shelved plan to reduce US military forces in Northeast Asia. He began in South Korea by transferring major portions of the US 2nd Infantry Division to Iraq. The US then pressed South Korea to fund the withdrawal of US ground forces from north to south of Seoul and to pay for the building of a new major US military base far south of the capital. South Korea reluctantly came to accept Washington’s terms. But in return, Seoul demand that it be given “command control” over all military forces designated to defend against a North Korean attack, including US ground forces. Surprisingly Washington agreed. Since no where in the world do US forces serve under a foreign commander, it seems likely that the Defense Department’s plan is to continue the withdrawal of US military forces from the Korean Peninsula. Whether the Obama Administration will implement this latter agreement remains to be determined.

The Bush Administration dealt similarly with Japan. Again rather reluctantly the Japanese government agreed to pay for the withdrawal of US marines from Okinawa to the US territory of Guam. Like South Korea, Japan agreed to pay the cost of this relocation. Also like the deal with Seoul, Tokyo will receive advance weapons systems including anti-ballistic missile defense equipment and technology.

Future Prospects

Ultimately this suggests that the Obama Administration will continue the long time trend of a US military phased withdrawal from Northeast Asia. The pace will depend in part on whether North Korea will end its nuclear weapons program and the extent to which the United States needs its military forces in other areas of the world. But Obama’s priority of repairing the US domestic economy, to balance the US budget and to establish a national health care system suggest that he will have to fund these priorities by making cuts in the US defense budget that do not adversely affect US priorities in the Middle East.

The bottom line is that quite likely the Obama Administration will expect its two East Asian allies to increase their defense commitment both in Northeast Asia and probably also in the Middle East. At the same time, Japan will have to adjust to the new reality that the end of the Cold War and shift of US priority concerns to the Middle East is and most likely will continue to diminish the significant of the US-Japan alliance, at least in Washington.

Priorities in East Asia

Sustaining peace and stability in East Asia have long been and will most likely remain the US priority in East Asia. The region’s relative stability and prosperity, especially when compared to the Middle East, mean that the United States is less concerned about East Asia from a strategic military point of view except for the potential

instability rooted in the Korean Peninsula's division and North Korea's quest for a self-reliant defense based on nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

Despite concerns about the Korean Peninsula, the Obama Administration will probably focus its diplomacy on continuing to improve relations with China while at the same time re-assuring Japan and South Korea that they remain vital and trusted partners. Washington's efforts to sustain good relations with China will probably require accenting some priorities over others. Pursuing good commercial ties will temper urges in Washington to press Beijing on issues such as respecting international labor standards and reducing its emission of hot house gases. Similarly, concerns in Washington over the Chinese government's lack of concern about human rights most likely will take a back seat to working together to end North Korea's nuclear program.

Maintaining peace and deterring war on the Korean Peninsula will remain Washington's strategic priority in the region. Deterrence will continue to be the cornerstone of US defense strategy in Northeast Asia, but with some significant changes as suggested above. Washington will strive to maintain its nuclear deterrence supremacy while reassuring China that its main concern is North Korea. Washington can be expected to increasingly rely on South Korea and Japan to maintain conventional military force deterrence.

Diplomatically, the "North Korean problem" will remain central to US diplomacy in East Asia. The Obama Administration will rely consistently on a multilateral approach that would emphasize coordinated diplomacy and inducements. Washington would continue reliance on the Six Party Talks process as the best way to achieve North Korea's nuclear disarmament. It could mean a return to emphasizing trilateral cooperation between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul (TICOG). Within the Six Party talks, the US might play a more cooperative role. Instead of striving to use China as a hammer to pound North Korea into submission, Washington could adopt China's preferred method of persuasion – inducing Pyongyang's cooperation using economic incentives. Actually the Bush Administration initiated such a transition at the beginning of 2007 but vacillated in its implementation.

If Obama accents inducements to entice Pyongyang into ending its nuclear weapons programs, Washington first would have to convince Tokyo and Seoul to shift their current stances away from emphasis on sanctions toward a more conciliatory posture that also accents inducements rather than coercive pressure.

The range of inducements could also be expanded to include:

- again allowing North Korean officials to enter Washington, D.C.
- the opening of liaison offices in both nations' capitals,
- the resumption of education exchanges
- relatively free travel for North Koreans within the USA,
- the eventual phasing out of selected economic sanctions,
- expanding trade opportunities, etc.

US-DPRK Summit

Eventually, if there is real progress toward ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program, President Obama could convene a summit with North Korea's leader, who

ever that may be. As Obama repeatedly made clear during the presidential campaign, he will do so only after careful preparation.

Such a summit is highly unlikely in the near future. First the new US president will concentrate on dealing with the world's financial problems and his domestic agenda. Meanwhile, he can be expected to rely on the Department of State to engage North Korea in extensive negotiations both within the Six Party Talks and bilaterally. Also to be emphasized is North Korea's willingness to engage South Korea in consistent and constructive dialogue and negotiations aimed at further tension reduction on the Korean Peninsula. All the while the potential for a US-North Korea summit will serve as an enticing inducement for North Korea to adopt a more cooperative and conciliatory posture than is now the case. If this happens, a summit would become possible with one or two years.

Ballistic Missile Negotiations

North Korea's development of nuclear weapons will become a potent threat to the region's peace and stability only if North Korea is able to web a nuclear warhead to a ballistic missile. It now has the ability to produce nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles but apparently has not yet developed the ability to bring them together. The Bush Administration's response to their potential threat was the development of a global anti-ballistic missile defense system that combined both global and regional "theater" defense systems. No effort was invested in convincing North Korea to join the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), a multilateral agreement to curb the sale and export of ballistic missiles.

Previous US Administrations had strongly advocated membership in the MTCR as well as the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The Bush Administration ended this, preferring instead to rely on its own unilateral resources. Thus India was able to win US approval for its developing both nuclear weapons and peaceful nuclear power without joining the NPT. At the same time, the Bush Administration insisted that North Korea had to join the NPT. As for ballistic missiles, the Bush Administration opted to equip Japan with the anti-ballistic SM-3 missile rather than to press Pyongyang to join the MTCR.

The Obama Administration might continue developing theater ballistic missile defense in Northeast Asia but at the same time resume negotiations with North Korea aimed at inducing it to join the MTCH. This would enable Washington to ease tensions with Russia by halting the building of a US theater missile defense system in Poland and elsewhere in central Europe.

Change in US Relations With Northeast Asia

Candidate Obama campaigned on a theme of "change." He concluded many of his speeches with the phrase, "You and I working together change the world." Clearly change in the US relationship with Northeast Asia is already under way. The only thing to be clarified is the pace and extent of change the new US administration will attempt to achieve. As Washington shifts its military forces out of Northeast Asia to the Middle East, the importance of the traditional military alliance structure will wane. Instead, Washington will look to Tokyo and Seoul as partners in a global effort to end

the threat of international terrorism, to repair the global financial system and to address the problems of global warming.

Personnel

Obama's agenda is indeed ambitious, both regarding the United States and the world. Obviously, as he has recognized, he cannot hope to achieve such much change by himself. As president, he must assume the role of a manager of policy rather than its formulator and implementer. His ability to select persons of high caliber to assistant must match his impressive intelligence and rhetorical skills. While he prioritizes and inspires, his assists must quickly demonstrate impressive skill in achieving concrete and positive results.

This suggests he will seek out:

- politically knowledgeable and respected individuals as members of his cabinet. Many are likely to come from the US Congress and former administrations, Democratic and Republican.
- He will accent diversity by selecting men and women from multiple ethnic backgrounds and from across the United States.
- He will reward some campaign staff with appointments to the executive branch of government, and like past administrations appoint some campaign contributors to ambassadorships. Nevertheless, his first criteria will be an individuals demonstrated ability to work with people and to achieve results.

Expectations

President Elect Obama has raised expectations around the world as to what the United States can accomplish and the extent to which it can promote change to improve the state of the human race. The time to accomplish this is very short because people's frustrations with the recent past as intense. Impatience is exceeded only by expectation and hope. But if President Obama fails to achieve significant results early in his first year in the White House, he will disappoint not only Americans but the human race. Rarely has a single individual assumed such a heavy burden.

Author's Comment: This assessment reflects extensive reading of publicly available materials such as speeches delivered by President Elect Obama and policy position papers developed by his foreign policy advisers. None of the views expressed here have been reviewed or approved by anyone closely affiliated with President Elect Obama.

List of References

Chosun Ilbo, "U.S. Presidential Debate Touches on Two Koreas." (September 28, 2008) Napsnet Daily Report September 30, 2008, napsnet@nautilus.org.

Obama, Barack, "The American Moment: Remarks to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs," (April 23, 2007) www.barackobama.com.

Obama, Barack and Joe Biden, "Protecting U.S. Interests and Advancing American Values in our Relationship with China." www.barackobama.com.

"Obama verse McCain on Foreign Policy," barackobama.com.

Obama, Barack, "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: A New Beginning," (October 2, 2007) www.barackobama.com

Obama, Barack, "Strengthening our Common Security by Investing in our Common Humanity," www.barackobama.com.

Obama, Barack, "The Change We Need – Foreign Policy," www.barackobama.com.

Rogin, Josh, "Emerging Asian Power: A Diplomatic Challenge," *Congressional Quarterly* (October 19, 2008) www.cqpolitics.com.

Satoh, Yukio, "Japan Needs to Talk About What it Will Do for Itself," *AJISS-Commentary No. 49 J* (October 21, 2008) Japan Institute of International Affairs.

"U.S. Presidential Candidates' Views on Relations with Asia," *Comparative Connections* (October 2008)