



Obama and Asia

by Roger Svensson

The support in the United States for President Obama has fallen dramatically in the last six months. His job approval rate is now below 50 per cent and there is every indication that the Democrats will lose Senate and House seats in the November mid-term elections. This will spell trouble for the administration on domestic policy, but might very well strengthen Obama's hand when it comes to foreign policy. In foreign policy he can get bi-partisan support for the strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, for dealing with an assertive China, and to some extent, for the Iranian issue. But do not expect foreign policy to play a major role in the November election. "It's the economy, stupid" all over again.

A Dysfunctional Washington - Maybe So, But Not Necessarily in Foreign Policy

To state the obvious: Obama is President of the United States of America. However, while his slightly academic but powerful rhetoric appeals to most Europeans; his world outlook is American, not European. His successes or failures on domestic issues and especially the upcoming mid-term elections, cannot be separated from his administration's handling of foreign policy. Since the end of last year there has been a dramatic change in the US political scene. The most telling events are, of course, the Democrats losing two gubernatorial elections and also the race for the Senate seat, held for more than forty years by the late Edward Kennedy. Now the Democrats have lost their filibuster-proof super-majority in the Senate.

Having lived in the United States for four months at the end of last year, it was palpably clear how much political oxygen was consumed, first by health reform but increasingly by unemployment and deficit spending. "It's the economy, stupid!" was the rallying cry of Bill Clinton's presidential campaign against George Bush senior in the early nineties. Current US political discourse is very much reminiscent of that period. Tea party populism from the right is combining with creeping neo-isolationism, this time from the Democratic left. There is every indication of a political pendulum swing and it will of course affect US foreign policy – but not necessarily the way we might assume.

The latest indication of how much domestic policy is the overriding concern was evident in the President's State of the Union Address in January this year. He spent less than ten minutes, out of some forty, on foreign policy.

But make no mistake; Obama is probably the most global, multilateral, non-ideological and pragmatic President that the United States ever had and his foreign policy priorities are not too difficult to discern. At an international gathering last year, a very well placed former State Department official (Democrat) listed them. First and foremost, the focus is on the wider Middle East with an emphasis on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Secondly, they take into account a rising and more assertive China, and thirdly, they acknowledge the risk involved with a declining Russia. Iraq is no longer a pressing foreign policy concern and the seemingly successful elections will keep the lid on this. In the same context, the Obama presidency will be definitely challenging for Europe, troops and trainers for Afghanistan being the obvious example.

The US foreign policy debates started for real last fall with the report by the US Commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal. He suggested a substantial (said to be 40 000) increase in troops in Afghanistan – modelled on the Iraqi surge ordered by President Bush – as well as a change in strategy and tactics.

The fact that the Afghanistan war, a "war of choice" as Obama, the Presidential candidate, declared, is a top foreign policy priority goes without saying. The difference between the Bush administration and the Obama administration could be said to be more in style than in sub-



stance. While President Bush often said that his gut feelings were important, President Obama is very deliberative, so much so that he has been criticised as wallowing. The decision on the Afghan surge is a striking example. The President convened his advisors a dozen times to listen to different views – and different views there were. You could read about them in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*!

Vice President Biden – frequently a “loose cannon” in the administration – was among those who favoured a more limited approach. An approach that favoured the use of special-forces and the deployment of drones to kill insurgents in the border regions with Pakistan, as well as in Pakistan – a view reminiscent of former DoD Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s ideas about how modern, effective wars could be fought. The two heavy weights in the Obama administration, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and DoD Secretary Robert Gates are said to have been united in their view that the plan presented by General McChrystal had to be followed. It should be noted that team playing by the Secretary of State and the DoD Secretary is a rather rare occurrence in Washington.

The US debate around Afghanistan, where especially former Vice President Dick Cheney was extremely critical, became comical when the President was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize – an accolade the President certainly did not need or want. His, as usual, brilliant acceptance speech in Oslo was clearly for American consumption (while the speech by the Chair of the Prize Committee was largely defensive – not to say embarrassing).

The decision by the President announced at West Point, the military academy, took the wind out of much of the severe criticism from the Republicans, but made the liberal wing of the Democrats very uneasy. The war in Afghanistan is becoming increasingly unpopular and the casualty rate is rising with increased activity from the Afghan insurgents and more aggressive involvement of the US and ISAF forces. While American casualties in Iraq in December were the lowest since the invasion, US casualties in Afghanistan in 2009 were the highest ever, over 300 and an additional 200 from other nations, mainly the UK and Canada.

However, Robert Kagan argues in the March issue of *Foreign Policy* that we are in for a “bipartisan spring” in US foreign policy: “Washington may be deeply polarized on domestic matters, but when it comes to foreign affairs, a

remarkable consensus”, he says. This prophesy is, of course, in line with Kagan’s oft stated argument that there is a distinct continuum in US foreign policy.

Congressional job approval is extremely low: 75 per cent disapprove. Facing the mid-term election, the Democrats are running scared and the Republicans will benefit from a populist, anti-Washington sentiment in the nation. The economy, the budget deficit, un-employment, Wall Street vs Main Street will be the script for success. It is very likely that foreign policy will be more or less absent in the run-up to the November elections.

How Important Is Asia?

In November and in the midst of heated discussions on health reform and troops for Afghanistan, the President took off for an eight day Asia trip, visiting Japan, Singapore (summit of the Asia-Pacific Co-operation Forum), China and South Korea. In general terms the issues were the expected ones: security, economy, energy and climate. In slightly more concrete terms the questions were nuclear North Korea, China’s hold on US debt and US forces in Japan. As the *New York Times* stated, “for all of President Obama’s laying claim to the title of ‘America’s first Pacific president,’ Asia was always going to be a tough nut for him to crack.[and] Mr. Obama’s Asia trip has been, in many ways, a long, uphill slog.”

The fact that the President did not visit India, the world’s largest democracy, was certainly noted in Delhi. Secretary Clinton’s statements on the role of human rights in US foreign policy, as well as the postponement of a meeting between the President and the Dalai Lama seemed part of the same picture. Ludicrous criticism of the President bowing when meeting the Japanese emperor became, in US media, mixed with outrage that his meeting with Chinese students was a staged and monitored event. Later on, at the Copenhagen climate conference, Chinese Premier Wen Jaibao skipped a high level meeting with the President of the United States and sent an envoy to scold the United States for its hypocritical stand on carbon emissions.

But this year events are combining to provide the image of a more assertive President Obama. He has met with the Dalai Lama (in the White House Map Room, not the Oval Office!) during the Tibetan leader’s Washington visit. The US will follow through on the arms deal with



Taiwan. Secretary Clinton has been very clear in her criticism of the “cyber attacks” purportedly coming from China as well as the Google issue. In military terms, President Obama has ordered far more drone attacks on terrorists in Pakistan than his predecessor ever did.

In early February, President Obama raised what is probably the most important issue in US–China relations; the economy. In not very oblique terms, Obama urged China to stop manipulating its currency to keep it at a low price. This should also be seen in the context of US domestic policy and the mid-term elections. With double digit unemployment looming, the pressure on the administration to take measures is increasing. The neo-isolationism mentioned earlier can very well be combined with protectionism, where Obama, or at least the Democrats, are less reliable than the Bush administration. In the same vein, the Chinese are very concerned about the US budget deficit and fear that the US will start printing money, which will lead to a sharp decline in the value of the dollar.

Despite the “ritual” Chinese reactions to the President’s meeting with the Dalai Lama and the Taiwan arms deal, there are signs that US–Chinese relations might enter a more constructive phase. In preparation for his recent visit to Beijing, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg introduced the term “strategic reassurance”. He welcomed a rising China but stressed that a global power must assume global responsibilities. The lack of transparency and the rapid increase in Chinese military spending “is causing some to question China’s intentions”. China’s engagement with regimes in Sudan, Burma, and Zimbabwe raises the questions in the US and elsewhere to what extent it is interested in regional stability “and humanitarian goals”.

As previously mentioned, President Obama did not visit India. However, the first state dinner of his presidency was held for Manmohan Singh, the Indian Prime Minister right after Obama’s Asia trip. The prevailing notion among the Indian commentariat is, however, that India is taken for granted by the US, as well as constantly being pressured to sort out its problems with Pakistan over terrorists and Kashmir.

So, how important is Asia to the United States and the current administration? The answers have to be country specific. The obvious top priority is Af/Pak, the acronym in itself an indication of how intertwined the two countries are, both with a downside risk of becoming dysfunc-

tional, if not failed, states. China comes second but mainly for economic reasons. Iran, maybe not seen as an Asian country, has the possibility of becoming a make or break issue for the Obama presidency. North Korea is anyone’s guess but it constitutes an opportunity for Beijing and Washington to work together.

The democratic giants of Asia, Japan and India, will most likely continue to sulk for not being paid much attention to.

In the November election the Democratic Party will undoubtedly lose a number of seats in the Senate and in the House. This will spell trouble for Obama in domestic politics but it will make his foreign policy agenda easier to handle. The bipartisan spring that Robert Kagan sees coming, could very well be the beginning of stronger bipartisan support for President Obama’s foreign policy – support that might last for the rest of his first period.

Roger Svensson is a Senior Fellow with the Institute for Security and Development Policy. Before joining ISDP, he served for 15 years as Executive Director of the STINT Foundation.

The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.

The Institute for Security & Development Policy

Västra Finnbodavägen 2, SE-13130 Stockholm - Nacka

E-mail: info@isdp.eu / Tel: +46(0)8-41056953

Website: www.isdp.eu

Directors:

Svante E. Cornell & Niklas L.P. Swanström

Chairman, Advisory Council:

S. Frederick Starr

Deputy Directors:

Robert Nilsson & Johanna Popjanevski