

**The New Obama Administration and Foreign
Policy Toward Northeast Asia**

By

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Has President elect Barack Obama promised more change than he can deliver? It is certain that he cannot change the realities that will greet him when he takes office on January 20, 2009. Also certain is that he will inherit numerous serious problems from his predecessor George Bush. Obama must begin by establishing clear priorities. He has begun by selecting the new people who will make U.S. policy. Working with them, he must then prioritize the problems to be solved and their remedies. Here we focus on his likely foreign policy, particularly toward East Asia.

Regardless of the world's respect for Obama, Vice President Biden's extensive foreign affairs experience, global admiration for Hilroy Clinton, and their personal philosophies, world realities more than personalities and personal preferences will define the Obama Administration's foreign policy. Two options are not open to him: economic protectionism and diplomatic isolationism. But Obama will replace Bush's emphasis on unilateralism with multilateralism and Bush's preference for ideology with pragmatism. The extensive globalization of the United States' economy will compel Obama to seek a multilateral solution to the United States' economic problems. He must also continue to maintain an extensive network of allies and military alliances. Only then can he respond effectively to every American president's foremost foreign policy priority - ensuring the security of the United States. Today this means continuing the global effort against international terrorism, halting nuclear proliferation and improving defenses against a possible ballistic missile attack.

Within these broad priorities, President Obama will have to determine the strategic importance of the world's major geographical regions. The continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan make the Middle East strategically the most important area to the United States. This is further emphasized by the ongoing Israeli-Palestine conflict, Iran's pursuit of a nuclear arsenal, and the search for Osama bin Laden in northern Pakistan. Europe will take second priority, largely because of Russia's renewed assertiveness. This assigns third priority to East Asia.

Militarily, the United States will continue to strive for global supremacy, but Obama recognizes that this first requires repairing the US economy. Obama will oppose unilateral deployment of US military force as Bush did in Iraq and most likely will end the Bush Doctrine of "pre-emptive" attack on any nation deemed a threat to the United States. Instead, given his preference for multilateral diplomacy and diplomatic negotiations, he will use his "military option" only as a last resort.

These changes will benefit East Asian nations' shared preference to pursue prosperity while minimizing confrontation. It means that the United States will be less prone to excite tensions by threatening North Korea with force unless it complies with Washington's demands to end its nuclear programs. President Obama can be expected to continue reliance on the Six Party Talks to negotiate an end to North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Toward this end, his administration may revert to some of the diplomatic tactics employed by the former Clinton Administration such as allowing North Korean officials to again visit Washington, possibly opening a liaison office in Pyongyang and engaging in the exchange of high level visits.

Obama will maintain the current alliances but treat Japan and South Korea more as partners. Now that the Cold War has ended and the United States no longer perceives China as a major military threat, US concerns in the region have shifted from military to economic ones. East Asia's economic dynamism also accounts for this shift. Obama will need continuing access to East Asia's abundant capital, relatively prosperous markets for America's high technology goods and services and moderately priced light industrial goods to deal effectively with the United States' economic problems.

At the same time, Washington will be less prone to view the US-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of US security in East Asia. Instead, because of US economic concerns and China's increasing economic power, the Obama Administration appears intent upon assigning priority in East Asia to maintaining good relations with China followed by resolution of the Korean nuclear issue. After all, Washington needs Beijing's cooperation to bring Pyongyang into compliance with its prior promises at the Six Party Talks.

To deal more effectively with the wars in the Middle East, Obama most likely will quicken two trends begun during the Bush Administration:

- the transfer of US military forces from the East Asia to the Middle East while calling on Japan and South Korea to shoulder a greater portion of their defense, and
- call on Japan and South Korea to increase their military contributions to the war in Afghanistan while expanding their economic aid to Iraq and Afghanistan.

President Obama is not likely to visit East Asia for sometime. First he must address the American people's expectations that he will improve their economic prospects, address their desires for an improved health system and initiate a phasing out of the US military presence in Iraq while more effectively dealing with Taliban and Al Qaeda threats in Afghanistan. Only then would it be realistic for him to consider a visit to China, Japan and Korea. If North Korea initiates sustained progress toward ending its nuclear programs, President Obama might even make a visit to Pyongyang. But given North Korea's current attitude toward South Korea and the Six party Talks, such a visit remains, at least for the foreseeable future, a very distant prospect.