

OBAMA'S CHANGE AND AMERICA'S RELATIONS WITH THE WORLD

Barack Obama won the election of 4 November because he communicated effectively to the Americans that he is the candidate of change. Indeed in all major respects Obama could not be more different from the outgoing and unpopular President Bush. Unlike Bush, Obama is a man of humble origins, brought up outside mainstream America: in Indonesia and Hawaii. With his past experience as a community organiser in economically deprived neighbourhoods of Chicago, Obama is more socially liberal than he chose to emphasise during the campaign. And then, there is his foreign policy, where he distinguished himself by being the only heavy-weight candidate in the Democratic field who opposed the war in Iraq from the beginning. But as the election fever settles, the question on the mind of many is whether Obama will deliver change, what kind of change it will be and what it will mean for the rest of the world.

One essential change is already underway, which was set in motion by the sheer fact of Obama's victory. By electing a person of African-American origin, America has again demonstrated that it is the most progressive nation in the western hemisphere and as demonstrated by the images of crowds cheering in Kenya, Japan, the Middle East and many other places, the rest of the world took notice. Watching Barack Obama being elected the 44th President of the US it is difficult to imagine that the Voting Rights Act (prior to which many African-Americans could not even vote) was adopted only 40 years ago. America has just demonstrated that its capacity to adapt and change remains astounding and that is a model for the rest of the world. After eight years of Bush, during which America saw a dramatic erosion of its 'soft power', the United States is again perceived as a beacon of hope.

On the other hand, the expectations are so great that Barack Obama is almost bound to disappoint at least some of his supporters around the world. Those who



Democratic presidential candidate Obama speaking with former President Bill Clinton during Early Vote for Change Rally, Kissimmee, Florida, 29 October 2008.

expect a revolution in America's foreign policy will almost certainly complain in a few months time. The magnet of Obama's appeal was not 'change' alone, but a mixture of 'change' and 'pragmatism'. In foreign policy this means that Obama would not depart from all aspects of Bush's foreign policy just because they are unpopular. For example, whilst Obama criticised Bush's inaction on climate change, he is unlikely to sign a post-Kyoto agreement that would exempt major polluters, China and India, from the obligations that the US and others would need to abide by. The President-elect spoke about the need to work with other nations and pursue a more multilateral approach but he also stressed repeatedly that protecting America would not be the subject of a decision of any international organisation. Obama criticised Bush's doctrine of pre-emption, but his argument was always about the improper use of this doctrine in Iraq rather than its ideological substance. As Obama's tough words on Pakistan and even Iran indicate, he would not shy away from using force, if necessary, also in a pre-emptive manner.

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So what might Obama change in American foreign policy in the years to come? The biggest and potentially dramatic departure from Bush's policy would be in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama stressed that these two wars are connected and require a combined strategy. The emphasis will shift away from Iraq to Afghanistan, which Obama repeatedly referred to as the 'central front in the war against terror'. The President-elect promised to pull out all combat troops from Iraq at the speed of 2-3 brigades monthly, and completing the pull-out within 16 months. At the same time he will boost the US presence in Afghanistan, immediately by adding 2-3 brigades and eventually by doubling the number of US troops there. Afghanistan will also receive more aid and development assistance and also more support with reconstruction. However, the current government of Karzai, which was criticised by Obama, will no longer be propped up by the US administration, which could mean a change in Kabul. Obama will also review policy towards Pakistan. He threatened to discontinue the \$10 billion aid package to this country if co-operation on fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda remained unsatisfactory, as Obama claimed it has been. Moreover, appearing more hawkish than either Bush or McCain, the President-elect threatened to hit terrorist targets on the Pakistani side of the Afghan border, if Karachi did not do it itself.

The second biggest change will come from pursuing more active diplomacy. After his pull-out plan for Iraq, Obama's idea of speaking with the Iranians, North Koreans and other so-called rogue regimes, was the most controversial proposal of the campaign. It was heavily criticised by McCain but also by Obama's democratic opponents, especially Hilary Clinton. Yet, Obama never dropped or even diluted the idea and repeatedly stressed that he would be prepared to talk to the Iranians with no preconditions. This may still not happen, not least because the Iranian regime may decide that it prefers to stay aloof, but Obama's administration will remain open. The President-elect has also promised an invigorated diplomatic engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although he distanced himself from the pro-Palestinian agenda there.

In other areas Obama's change is more likely to come from his personal style than a clear set of ideas. There

is for example, little indication of a change in relations with China and India. In the first instance, Obama differentiated himself from Bush by advocating a more protectionist agenda but this is quite typical for presidential candidates, especially in the Democratic field, and should not be taken too seriously. On India, Obama like McCain supported the energy bill that exempts Delhi from some NPT obligations, pursued by the Bush administration, and will continue the line of drawing India closer to the US.

On Russia, Obama distinguished himself from John McCain (who is a clear Russia-hawk) but not so much from President Bush. Like Bush, Obama's initial reaction to the war in Georgia was to urge restraint and avoid a confrontational tone with the Russians. Later on Obama sharpened his tone but spoke against isolating Russia – on both accounts there was little difference between the outgoing and incoming Presidents. It is possible that Obama may not continue the missile defence projects in Poland and the Czech Republic, which were set in motion towards the end of the Bush Presidency, and which have antagonised Russia. Obama was always sceptical about missile defence, arguing that it must be proved to be workable before investment is done, and the economic crisis will force the President-elect to review the projects left on his table. Recently, Bush's Secretary of Defence Robert Gates admitted that the future president, whoever it would be, would need to have another look at the missile defence deals in Central Europe.

As banal as it may now sound, the most important aspect of Obama's change is not about concrete policies but about hope. In the last eight years the world saw the US as an arrogant and divisive power led by an administration that divided the rest of the world into those who were with them or against them. With the election of Barack Obama, the world's biggest power will be led by someone who looks at the world in an embracing way. He wants to talk to anybody, including the bad guys, he recognises that the US cannot shape the international rules all by itself and he knows that the war against the terrorists would never succeed without the rest of the world being on the same side as the US. America's choice on 4 November has already changed the way the world views it and as a result it has increased the power of the US.