

A McCain Administration and Asia

By Michael J. Green

THE WORLD HAS BEEN CAPTIVATED by the American presidential race. The personal stories of John McCain and Barak Obama are inspiring, and both candidates demonstrated true grit as they overcame the odds to win tough primary races. Now people are beginning to anticipate how they might govern. *Nikkei Shimbun*, the Japanese newspaper, asked me to give my personal views on the likely Asia strategy of a McCain administration, and I am sharing them with the readers of *Global Asia*. The US position in Asia is relatively strong and I suspect that either candidate would bring more continuity than change in his approach to the region. Nevertheless, there are some important differences between the candidates on key aspects of Asia policy. More importantly, I believe that John McCain would bring significantly greater experience, judgment and credibility to the presidency and to the execution of US strategy in Asia.

The next American administration will face many challenges around the world, particularly in the Middle East, and there will be little time for on-the-job training or experimentation with respect to Asia. Throughout more than two decades of service in the US Congress, John McCain has been a consistent and principled voice on US policy towards Asia. His family and personal ties to Asia are strong. His father and grandfather both held major commands in the Pacific, and his own heroism in the Vietnam War is legendary. John McCain knows that in Asia and around the world the United States must stand with our allies, for free trade and free people, and against the threats to peace.

1 First and foremost, a McCain administration's Asia strategy would be centered on America's allies. The future of China is the most important variable in Asia, but Senator Hillary Clinton was wrong when she wrote in *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year that China is the most important bilateral relationship for the United States. The United States and China have many overlapping layers of mutual interests, but do not share common values or strategic trust. Expanding those areas of common interest and working towards strategic trust must be a central goal of the next administration. But that will only be possible if China understands that our alliances are based on shared interests and values that define how we and other key players like Japan expect China to behave in the international system. Sacrificing our allies' interests in the pursuit of better ties with China would only undermine that goal. There will be no Japan-passing with John McCain.

2 Second, a McCain administration would stand for free trade and full economic engagement with Asia. Senator Obama opposes the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS). Senator McCain supports KORUS because he understands that it will create billions of dollars of new economic growth, and position the United States to lead with nations like Japan in building an open and inclusive Asian economic architecture. In that respect, Senator McCain represents the continuation of a bipartisan consensus for free trade that has existed since the end of the Second World War. He knows that it would be politically easier to appeal to protectionist sentiments as his Democratic counterparts have, but that leadership and national interest require a clear message on the benefits of free trade for the American people and the world. He knows that

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turning our backs on agreements like KORUS will undermine the United States' ability to advance an open and inclusive regional architecture in Asia.

3 Third, a McCain administration would press for denuclearization of North Korea based on close alliance coordination and a tried and tested realism about Kim Jong Il's intentions. Senator Obama said a number of times during the primary debates that he would meet personally with leaders like Kim Jong Il without conditions. His intention was probably to demonstrate a more flexible policy and confidence towards rogue states, but even his supporters know he went too far. Now they qualify his earlier statements by asserting that a Presidential summit would only happen after "preparations," and that the diplomacy would be "tough" and "principled." What they almost never mention is that there would be pressure. This reveals a faith in diplomacy that appears to confuse ends with means.

The reality is that Kim Jong Il does not want to abandon his nuclear weapons and no amount of diplomacy will convince him to do so, unless it is backed by real pressure and real accountability. If Kim Jong Il assumes there are no consequences for testing nuclear weapons, transferring nuclear technology abroad, cheating on previous agreements, and kidnapping innocent Japanese and South Koreans — and if he comes to believe that these actions might actually lead to a summit with the American President — then he will only continue escalating the threat. The Democrats will argue in this race that John McCain is against diplomacy because he is critical of Senator Obama's proposal to meet directly with Kim Jong Il, but the fact is that John McCain understands what it takes to make diplomacy effective.

4 Fourth, a McCain administration would recognize the centrality of democracy, human rights, and rule of law to our alliance with Japan and the US position in Asia overall. Senators McCain and Obama have both been outspoken on human rights abuses in places like Tibet and Burma, and both would certainly continue that focus as President. But John McCain has taken a stronger stance about the need for democracies to work in concert — not to replace existing institutions like the United Nations — but to push for collective action in crises like Darfur and Burma, where action in the existing international institutions is being blocked by China or Russia. John McCain knows that coordination among like-minded democracies is also important in Asia to ensure that regional "community-building" is open and inclusive and based on universal values and rule of law, rather than outmoded concepts such as non-interference-in-internal-affairs.

To be fair, thoughtful advisors to Senator Obama have made similar arguments on the need for a "concert of Democracies," but the Democratic candidate has not yet embraced the concept. I suspect this is because the left wing of the Democratic Party has turned against democracy promotion in their furious rejection of everything President Bush ever championed. In fact, like free trade, democracy-promotion represents a bipartisan tradition in US foreign policy going back centuries, and John McCain stands squarely in that tradition.

5 Finally, a McCain administration would focus on Asian security in its totality. This is probably the greatest difference between the two candidates. Senator Obama and his team argue that an early and unconditional withdrawal of US forces from Iraq will improve America's image around the world

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and free up US resources and attention to focus on other regions like Asia. John McCain knows that this is a fallacy. He has been perfectly willing to criticize the conduct of the war in Iraq, and it was his urging that led to the current surge strategy, which has dramatically reduced violence and empowered the Iraqi government and economy. But a rapid and unconditional retreat from Iraq (“redeployment” is the preferred term of the other side) would wreck havoc on the Middle East and ultimately Asia as well. Allies would question the American commitment in their own dangerous neighborhoods, and the rush of Iran and Al Qaeda into the resulting vacuum would destabilize the broader Middle East, threaten oil supplies to Asia, and ultimately require even more investment of US resources and possibly lives in the Middle East. And it has to be noted that the US reputation in Asia is not as battered as critics of the Iraq War maintain, certainly not in Northeast Asia where polls show higher approval for the United States in Japan, China and Korea than before the Iraq War, nor in terms of soft power where a recent Chicago World Affairs Council poll shows great resilience for America's image in Asia.

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