

## **Picking the US winner - a question of hope or glory**

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There is a disconnect in Australia between popular and elite views on the implications of the US presidential election for Australia's national interests.

The 2008 Lowy Institute Poll revealed Australians favour Barack Obama over John McCain by nearly five to one. On the other hand, many prominent foreign policy experts appear not to like the cut of Obama's jib, and have come close to endorsing his rival.

One reason for this may be the depth of the candidates' personal connections to this country. McCain has deeper familial connections, which mirror the shared military history of our two countries. Some of his advisers, such as Richard Armitage, are extremely well known here. These links can be important in the competitive Washington environment.

But there is a tendency in our debate to over-analyse a candidate's encounters with Australia for deeper meaning. If a country has global interests and aspires to play in global debates, it needs to take a broader view of where its interests lie.

Would our interests be better served by an Obama or a McCain victory? There are a number of questions of particular relevance to Australia to be considered - as well as another, more general, issue.

Contrary to public perception, McCain is the more alliance-focused of the candidates, at least when it comes to the Asia-Pacific. Alliances are at the centre of his Asia vision. In discussing the region, he typically starts with Washington's alliances with countries such as Japan, South Korea and Australia.

McCain also draws a bright line between treaty allies and other Asian powers, emphasising that alliances are not only guided by interests but "rooted in the norms and values we hold in common", whereas Obama sometimes brackets alliances with other, less intimate relationships. McCain would probably afford extra attention to Asia-Pacific allies, including Australia, but he may well also demand more of them.

The candidates differ on China. McCain and Obama hold to the "Spiderman doctrine" - that with China's great power comes great responsibility - and they call Beijing on bad behaviour in the Security Council and elsewhere.

Both argue for a US strategy that combines engagement and balancing, but McCain's distrust of non-democracies and his concern with the regional distribution of power would restrict the level of engagement. A McCain administration would be warier of Beijing than an Obama administration, which would be closer to the engagement end of the spectrum.

Obama's knowledge of and interest in Indonesia is highly unusual among American politicians: he devotes much of his foreign policy chapter in *The Audacity of Hope* to a rich description of a country that he has said "was for me, as a young boy, a magical place". Given that Australian governments of both colours have tried over many years to get Washington to pay proper attention to Jakarta, this presents Canberra with an opportunity.

McCain and Obama would probably adopt different stances on the development of new regional institutions, a topic close to Kevin Rudd's heart. McCain has said nice things about Rudd's plan for an inclusive Asia-Pacific Community, but Obama's emphasis on interests over values may make him a more enthusiastic supporter of the idea.

As Australian observers have noted, McCain is a more consistent free trader than Obama. But although Obama's free-market rhetoric has slipped during the race, it is hard to paint him as a protectionist. Everything we know about him - his comfort with globalisation, his preference for multilateralism, the identity of his economic advisers - points in the opposite direction.

Furthermore, given the importance of Congress on trade, the operative question is not really which candidate is purer, but rather who would be in a better position to tone down the protectionist impulses of the next Congress, which is likely to be strongly Democratic.

The final question is, in many ways, the most important: what kind of global grand strategy would these candidates run as president? Perhaps Australia's fortunes do not exactly rise and fall with America's, but there is a strong connection between the two - not least because a century of diplomatic and military practice says that Australia is likely to be entangled in any major military actions ordered by the next administration.

McCain would be more aggressive in the propagation of American values than Obama. He would be more unilateral, readier to confront US adversaries, more focused on interstate competition and probably more likely to use force. Temperamentally, Obama is deliberate and conciliatory whereas McCain is bold and unpredictable. The election of either man would shift international perceptions of the US, but Obama would shift them more.

Obama offers hope and McCain offers glory. After eight years of the Bush Administration, most Australians would, if they had a vote, cast it for hope.

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