

Interview series: *China and the US election*

What the financial crisis means for US-China relations



Part 1: Interview with China-expert BATES GILL, Director at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, by JONAS PARELLO-PLESNER, member of RÆSON's editorial board.

CHINA has often played a role in the US elections; ranging from Reagan's campaign rhetoric about reestablishing relations with Taiwan in 1980 to Clinton's negative comments about the 'butchers of Beijing' as a reaction to Tiananmen in 1989 and latest Bush Junior campaign talk in 2000 about China as a 'strategic competitor'.

Yet China is currently conspicuously absent in the campaign. That is puzzling in so far as the US is the world's superpower and China is a rising power in all fields. The relations between the two countries are seen as the most important bilateral relations in the world in the 21st Century. On that background it is important to understand what role China relations plays in the current campaign and what Obama and McCain think about this issue. Equally interesting is how China and the Chinese people perceive the US elections and who they would like to see win the race for the White House. RÆSON aims to shed light on these questions in a series of interviews with leading researchers and practitioners in the USA and in China.



In this first round, RÆSON has posed five questions about China in the US presidential elections to Director at Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Bates Gill. Gill has followed China's foreign policy and relations with the US for decades. He previously held the position as Freeman Chair in China Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC as well as positions at the Brookings Institution, where he was the inaugural Director of the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies. His most recent book, published in February 2007, is entitled *Rising Star: China's New Security Diplomacy* (Brookings Press).

What role does China play in the coming American elections?

In the early part of the election period, China didn't seem to play much role at all. But now that the economic issues have come so strongly to the forefront with the US domestic economic problems that reminds everybody about the challenge China presents the US in economic and trade terms.

As the race intensifies and stays close in certain swing states - especially in the Midwest and North like Wisconsin, Michigan and Ohio, where manufacturing jobs are under threat - I suspect China will become a somewhat larger issue. It will still not be the central issue.

Is there any real difference between Obama and McCain on China?

Yes, I think there would be once either one of them is in office. I suspect that an Obama presidency will once in office tend to forget about a lot of the populist rhetoric that they have been using targeting China on the economic issue and would settle back into a somewhat more centrist position. Basically, it would not be really that far from the George W. Bush administration's policy of pragmatic engagement with China.

Now McCain is slightly different. It could be that the more neo-Conservative elements of the Republican Party are able to position themselves in a coming McCain-administration. If that happened, we could see more criticism of China and higher concern about Chinese military modernisation and the significance for American military forces in the Western Pacific. Finally, McCain has been quite vocal on the idea of establishing a sort of 'league of democracies' if he becomes President. Obviously, such an initiative too will target China and not be seen very well in Beijing.

So there are and may be some shades of difference between the two. Much depends on whatever or not in a McCain administration, the neo-conservatives are able to reassert their authority within the Republican Party.

Europeans are in general for Obama. Which presidential candidate would the Chinese prefer?

The Chinese have tended to prefer the devil they know versus the devil they don't know. There has also been a tendency to prefer Republicans over Democrats over the past 30 or 40 years. Largely because of the belief that Republicans are all going to be like Nixon, that is to say sort of pragmatic, strategic, and long-term realist.

But I think that the Chinese don't understand that there is this strong neo-conservative element in

the Republican Party that has the potential for being much more critical towards China on human rights, on Taiwan, and on China's military build-up.

But I guess the short answer is that the Chinese would slightly prefer McCain toward Obama simply because they will expect McCain to largely follow the policies of George W. Bush.

The Chinese don't understand that there is this strong neo-conservative element in the Republican Party that has the potential for being much more critical towards China on human rights, on Taiwan, and on China's military build-up.

What does the Chinese think of the American presidential campaign-style?

I am sure they look upon it as much of the rest of the world does it with a mixture of horror, humour and some respect. The Chinese will of course never in any near term scenario have such an electoral process; so, well they do at least look upon it as a kind of remarkable feature, which somehow in despite of its messiness has allowed a country like the US to achieve what it has achieved.

But I think the Chinese understand very clearly that it's not for them. I think they see the whole process as too chaotic, too messy, too unpredictable and unfortunately sometimes driving ideas and policy solutions towards the short-term answer rather than the long-term solution.

What will be the most difficult issue in China-US relations, which either candidate will have to face as president?

I think a lot of that will depend on what happens in the next several months with the on-going financial crisis in the US and the world. The economic issues have been manageable in recent years, but in a serious down term and even more serious for the US, I think China will be seen as a growing problem and even as an economical threat.

I suspect that the economic issues will rise over the next year or so to be a much much bigger problem for US China relations.

The Chinese look upon the campaign-style as much of the rest of the world does it - with a mixture of horror, humour and some respect.

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