

Interviewseries: China and the American election - pt. II

Advisor to McCain: McCain will not be influenced by the neoconservatives



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Interview with Randall Schriver, advisor to John McCain, by JONAS PARELLO-PLESNER, member of RÆSON's editorial board

China and the US election. 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.



This week it is with Randall G. Schriver who is advisor to the McCain presidential campaign on Asia foreign policy issues. Randall Schriver is a founding partner of Armitage International LLC, a consulting firm that specializes in international business development and strategies. He is also a Senior Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Until 2005, he served in the Bush-administration as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs also responsible for China. Prior to that Randall Schriver held positions in the Pentagon and in the Navy as serving officer. See: <http://www.armitageinternational.com/team/member.php?id=5>

Q. What role does China play in the coming American elections? China is not a major issue. That's the financial crisis and on foreign policy it is Afghanistan and Iraq. There is not enough bandwidth. China is squeezed out. The campaign logic tends to focus on issues where there are major divergences. China is relatively uncontroversial between the two candidates. Still there are differences.

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Q. So what is the real difference between Obama and McCain on China? If you look at their records, McCain has a long foreign policy track record including on China. McCain has experience. Obama has little record on foreign policy. So McCain probably has greater affinity dealing with China also as a rising military power. That is a fundamental difference; simply experience versus inexperience.

There is a difference on trade where Obama has a more protectionist streak. During the primaries, Obama was against giving permanent

normal trading relations (PMTR) to China which he criticised Hillary Clinton for supporting. Obama himself was even not in Congress at the time. On the other hand, McCain has a clear and consistent free-trade approach on China.

Bates Gill said in his interview with RÆSON that an internal an undetermined struggle between neo-conservatives and realists in the Republican party made it hard to predict McCain's future policy on China. I disagree. McCain is not a mystery. He is not a novice in foreign policy like Bush was when he entered office in 2000 and was under influence by neo-conservative advisors. McCain is not someone who will change by influence of his advisors. Obama might be more likely to have such characteristics since he is a novice.

In reality, McCain has a consistent policy on China as a traditional realist. It is a solid combination of engagement and of necessary hedging. The US should seek out common interest and be problem-solving in working with China. Simultaneously, McCain is clear on strengthening the traditional US security alliances in Asia with notably Japan and South Korea.

Q. Can this difference be seen in the candidates' reaction to Bush' authorisation of arms sale to Taiwan? Both candidates gave statements on endorsement to President Bush's authorisation of arms sale to Taiwan. McCain went further and supported adding aircrafts and submarines to the list of items allowed. Obama was silent on this issue more specific issue. Yet still it is not an issue where one can infer a major difference on how the two would generally deal with China-Taiwan relations.

Q. Europeans are in general for Obama. Which presidential candidate would the Chinese prefer? The Chinese would have preferred to give Bush four more years. China is probably one of the few countries that is genuinely sad to see Bush leave the White House. The Chinese are risk averse. They worry about Obama on trade relations and about McCain's proposal for a league of democracies and its impact on US-China relations. With both of them, China probably worries about their insistence on curbing climate change where Bush was much less insistent and less inclined to take action.

China works in building leadership-relationship and they have managed to establish a really good working relation with Bush as they also ended up having with Clinton. They are probably just frustrated that they partly have to start all over every four years. The Chinese like to work in long-term relations.

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Q. What will be the most difficult issue in China-US relations, which either candidate will have to face as president? China is for good a global player. Every important issue will have a China component to it; be it a solution in Sudan or Iran or the financial crisis. So any new president will have to deal with many difficult issues and add the China factor to the equation every time.

I'm mostly worried about a lack of effective crisis management in the coming Presidency. Look back at the Belgrade bombing of the Chinese Embassy in 1999. There was a hotline established yet the Chinese didn't answer it when Clinton called. Another example: the EP-3 spy plane crash in 2001. In that case, there was also a clear agreement on how to proceed yet it didn't work in practice. The Pentagon now also has a hotline with China. It is all very good. Yet I can fear that US and China still do not have the right tools for solving an unforeseen situation; and that the systems in place aren't effective if there is a real unexpected event. That could be in the Taiwan Strait or elsewhere.



Jonas Parello-Plesner is member of the board of editors of RÆSON and works as senior Advisor for the Danish Government. He has been contributing articles to newspapers, magazines and academic revues. He holds a Msc from London School of Economics (LSE), a diploma from Ecole Nationale d'administration (ENA) and a Msc from University of Copenhagen. He contributes to Ræson in his own capacity.

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