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Either president may disappoint us

The McCain-Palin ticket may have stolen the headlines and taken the lead from Obama-Biden in the US. But a new BBC survey shows that Barack Obama overwhelms John McCain in global opinion by a four-to-one margin.

Australia ranks as the fourth most pro-Obama of the 22 countries polled, behind only the homeland of Obama's father, Kenya, and Europe's anti-Bush bastions, France and Italy. Almost two-thirds of Australians polled believe America's global relations would improve under a president Obama. Only one in five believe things would get better under a McCain administration.

These dramatic differences reflect a clear mismatch between what Americans and the rest of the world want from the next US president. The world may be disappointed by whoever wins.

McCain must be an even-money bet to win the White House, ushering in what much of the world would perceive as nothing more than a third Bush term. If Obama recaptures his momentum and goes on to a historic November victory, the real and pressing challenges facing the US will make it almost impossible for him to meet the world's sky-high hopes for his transformative global leadership.

Amid the deepest economic downturn in a generation and still haunted by the attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans today are anxious about their future at home and abroad – a far cry from the supremely confident country that elected George Bush eight years ago.

Like people around the world, many

Americans are excited by Obama. But they haven't yet convinced themselves that now is the time to risk putting the presidency in his untested, even if inspiring, hands. There may be lots of warts on McCain, but Americans think they know McCain, an experienced leader who will come through in a crisis.

Much of the world wants to turn the page on the Bush years, embracing Obama as the anti-Bush. McCain's strident and unwavering support of the Iraq war tars him with the Bush brush. Selecting a cute-but-feisty and socially conservative attack dog from Alaska as his running mate, and claiming the mantle of change from Obama, is working wonders for McCain in the US. But it is testing the bounds of credulity elsewhere.

The election will not end the mismatch between American and global perspectives. It may even exacerbate them.

The world would embrace US leadership under Obama, but only grudgingly accept it under McCain. Either way, the harsh realities of the challenges facing the US mean that the differences between Obama's global feel-good and McCain's ho-hum sameness will dissipate, leaving only frustration and disappointment.

Whoever is the next US president will have simply no choice but to make his highest priorities expanding the scope of the war on terrorism and turning around the US economy in a way that calms middle America's anxieties.

An elite US consensus is emerging on the way forward in Iraq: a South Korea-style long-term garrison rather than a hasty Vietnam-style retreat. Less Iraq, more Afghanistan will happen under

either Obama or McCain. But victory in Afghanistan will be at least as hard to achieve as it has proved in Iraq, and will involve a new focus on unstable and increasingly anti-American Pakistan. The US will also have to confront the spectre of a nuclear Iran as a regional threat to Israel and American interests.

The challenge of Islamic extremism will be different in 2009 but no less of a priority for the next American president. His country's friends and allies, including Australia, will again be faced with important and difficult decisions regarding when and how to support it.

The next president may not be able to do much about an economy affected more by global markets, technology and the Federal Reserve than anything he can do. But he will have a crisis hurting Main Street as much as Wall Street.

Thus the US cannot be expected to champion global economic integration or a global deal on climate change in 2009. It will look inward, focusing on energy independence rather than reducing greenhouse gases, and protecting the middle class rather than reducing barriers to global trade and investment.

The world might expect these sober realities from McCain but they will probably have to accept them under Obama.

The world is clamouring for a new America in 2009. What they are likely to find is a new president struggling with the same, enduring problems.

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