



High hopes, new realities

Australians will welcome an Obama presidency, but they will have to adjust some of their expectations, **PHILIP DORLING** writes

Predicting American politics can be a tricky business. But if United States opinion polls are to be believed, then Democrat candidate Senator Barack Obama will be elected next Tuesday to serve as the 44th president of the United States.

And if Australian opinion polls can also be relied upon, an emphatic majority of Australians will be celebrating an Obama win.

A survey of attitudes towards America released this week by Sydney University's United States Studies Centre found that no less than 76 per cent of people surveyed said they would support Obama if they had a vote in next week's presidential election. Just 13 per cent said they would back Republican Senator John McCain.

Another poll conducted in July for the foreign policy think-tank The Lowy Institute produced similarly unequivocal results, with Obama favoured by 73 per cent of Australians.

The Australian polls may say more about outgoing Republican President George W. Bush's unpopularity, a consistent theme of Australian opinion since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, than they do about anything else. According to the Sydney University survey, 69 per cent of Australians feel anger towards or are ashamed of the United States because of "things America has done".

That said, Australians do appear to have warmed to the Democratic presidential candidate to a remarkable degree. We certainly think he'll be good for Australia.

The Sydney University poll shows that almost half – 49 per cent – of the Australians think Obama will make a better President "in terms of Australia's interests". Only 11 per cent said McCain would be better for Australia.

In recent speeches Obama has declared his ambition to be nothing less than to "change the world".

But what will an Obama win mean for Australia?

The implications of an Obama presidency have been occupying foreign policy analysts and think-tanks for many months, but the truth is, no one quite knows.

After all, when considering any presidential candidate's foreign pol-

icy promises, it's important to remember that what candidates say is, at best, an imperfect guide to their actions in office.

A one-time foreign policy adviser to President Bill Clinton, Richard Holbrooke nicely underlined this point in a recent essay in the journal *Foreign Affairs* by simply recalling historical examples, including Franklin Roosevelt's 1940 promise to "not send your boys ... into any foreign wars", Lyndon Johnson's 1964 promises that he wouldn't send ground troops to Vietnam, Richard Nixon's 1968 references to a non-existent secret plan to get out of Vietnam, Bill Clinton's 1992 promises to stand up to the "butchers of Beijing" and George W. Bush's 2000 call for a "more humble" foreign policy.

No doubt, like his predecessors, Obama may find some of his soaring campaign rhetoric and carefully nuanced policy positions tested by the circumstances of office.

He will certainly face huge challenges, both at home and abroad. Indeed, Holbrooke contends "the next president will inherit a more difficult opening-day set of international problems than any of his predecessors have since at least the end of World War II".

"He will have to reshape policies on the widest imaginable range of challenges, domestic and international. He will need to rebuild productive working relationships with friends and allies. He must revitalise a flagging economy; tame a budget awash with red ink; reduce energy dependence and turn the corner on the truly existential issue of climate change; tackle the growing danger of nuclear proliferation; improve the defence of the homeland against global terrorists while putting more pressure on al-Qaeda, especially in Pakistan; and, of course, manage two wars simultaneously."

It's enough to keep anyone busy, even someone with Obama's considerable energy. But don't be surprised if amidst all this there are some policy adjustments, indeed backflips.

Still, Obama's statements and rhetoric do provide a guide to the likely directions and priorities of a new Democrat administration.

In an election dominated by America's domestic economic crisis, the single most important foreign

policy campaign issue has undoubtedly been the war in Iraq.

Obama opposed the war from the beginning. In 2002, as conventional thinking in Washington was lining up with President Bush in support of the invasion, he spoke strongly against the war and warned of "an occupation of undetermined length, with undetermined costs, and undetermined consequences". He hasn't wavered since and clearly derives a strong sense of vindication from events.

Obama says he will progressively withdraw United States combat troops from Iraq within 16 months – that is by mid 2010. This, he argues, will put pressure on Iraq's fractious politicians to reach the compromises necessary to stabilise the country.

At the same time Obama is calling for an all-out diplomatic offensive to engage Iraq's neighbours, including without preconditions Iran, in a regional diplomatic and political effort to stabilise the country. Like all politicians and diplomats, Obama has left himself some wriggle room, saying that the troop redeployment could be temporarily suspended if circumstances required, but there appears to be little doubt about his determination to proceed.

Successfully managing a phased withdrawal from Iraq will be the single biggest foreign policy and military preoccupation of an Obama presidency. The stakes are huge. As other former imperial powers can testify, disengagement and withdrawal can be the most tricky of diplomatic and military enterprises.

The political imperative to press on with the withdrawal regardless of difficult realities on the ground will be overwhelming. But if Iraq slides again into deeper violence, or neighbouring countries take up new opportunities to destabilise the country, it will be a diplomatic and strategic disaster for the United States, and for Obama's presidency. So Obama just can't afford to get this wrong.

At the same time, of course, Obama is pledged to put more effort into Afghanistan, where military efforts to deal with a resurgent guerrilla campaign by the Taliban and al-Qaeda have effectively stalled.

As with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Obama has balanced calls for a withdrawal from Iraq with a greater



commitment to go after terrorists in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Democrat candidate has canvassed the option of attacking al-Qaeda bases in Pakistan and it is certain he will commit further American military resources in Afghanistan, possibly with as many as 20,000 additional troops being sent there.

There will be limits, however, to how far Obama will go. As the chief executive of the United States Studies Centre, Geoffrey Garrett, has observed, don't expect an Obama administration to throw the United States into Afghanistan in 2009 in the same way as President Bush did in Iraq in 2003.

"Right now the American public is blissfully ignorant of the enormous commitment required to win in Afghanistan, especially as the conflict increasingly bleeds into unstable and already nuclear Pakistan," Garrett says. "As the grim realities become clearer, Americans won't tolerate another war based on an indefinite commitment and no exit strategy on top of the trillions spent, thousands of lives lost and relentless troop rotations in Iraq."

Consequently Obama will be looking to America's allies to do more in Afghanistan. The focus will initially be on NATO members that have failed to deliver promised troops or else insisted that their soldiers be deployed to places where the risks are least. Prime Minister Rudd and Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon have also complained sharply about NATO's poor effort, but sooner or later it can be expected that the White House will again come knocking on Australia's door, even though Australia is already making the largest contribution of any non-NATO country.

Here political difficulties will begin to emerge, because recent polling shows that Australian opposition to the war in Afghanistan has grown significantly.

In the July Lowy Institute poll, 56 per cent of respondents opposed Australia's military commitment. Asked why Australia was involved, only 17 per cent said the aim was to support a democratic Afghan Government.

Given that just about everyone warns that no clear military victory in Afghanistan is in sight, or indeed is achievable, these figures are unlikely to improve. Over time Afghanistan may well become a political albatross for both Obama and Rudd.

Iran is another point where an Obama administration may confront Australian policy-makers with difficult choices. Obama's position on Iran has been carefully nuanced,

emphasising that the United States has not exhausted non-military options for dealing with Iran's nuclear program and support for militias inside Iraq. The Democrat candidate advocates "tough presidential diplomacy with Iran without preconditions". But there is no certainty that serious talks with Iran, let alone a satisfactory outcome, can be achieved. And if diplomacy doesn't work, what then?

One way or another, the current standoff between Iran and the United States and its allies is likely to come to a head during the first term of an Obama presidency. And if it comes to a shooting match in the Strait of Hormuz, then it is hard to imagine that the Rudd Labor Government will do anything other than support the United States militarily.

Beyond the Middle East an Obama administration will give significantly greater commitment to working with allies and working through multilateral forums to find solutions to global problems.

Obama's rhetoric is certainly closer to the Democrat traditions of Wilsonian idealism than many of his predecessors, and far removed from the outlook of President Bush's neocon advisers.

But internationalist rhetoric won't be enough, and the reality is that Obama's overwhelming preoccupation will be fixing America's domestic economy. In these circumstances, giving global leadership on issues such as climate change may well fall foul of domestic imperatives. Nor should it be forgotten that energy security ranks much higher in American political priorities than curbing greenhouse gas emissions.

Pumping more oil from North American sources is still going to be politically easier for an Obama administration than negotiating a new truly global deal on climate change and persuading American consumers and companies to cut their carbon emissions.

For Australia, however, the policy choices of most enduring significance will relate to how an Obama administration deals with China's economic rise and likely challenge to American strategic primacy in the Asia-Pacific. Speaking in Canberra earlier this week, one of Australia's leading strategic thinkers, Australian National University Professor Hugh White, highlighted China's rise as a geopolitical shift of immense proportions for Australia, and indeed global security.

"The eclipse of Western maritime primacy in Asia [will be] a very big event in our national history", White said. "If United States primacy [in

Asia] fades, we will face higher risks of conflict with a major Asian power either in the company of the United States or alone."

However, as White has pointed out, the issue of China has barely featured in the presidential election campaign. Obama has said that China's rise "may pose one of the most important foreign policy challenges to the United States in coming years". But throughout the long presidential election campaign there has been much less engagement with this looming question than with the immediate preoccupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, or even the challenges posed by a newly assertive Russia.

Obama has spoken of the importance of a constructive relationship with China and the importance of drawing Beijing further into the international system in order to work together on shared political, economic and security objectives. Obama is certainly aware of the importance of China to current efforts to stabilise the global financial system, but there is very little detail and much less political commitment.

Kevin Rudd will certainly be looking to engage Obama on how to manage relations with Beijing, but it will be a real challenge to get a newly elected President to focus on the longer-term when the immediate crush of issues, domestic and international, will be quite overwhelming.

For Australia the risk will be that United States policy towards China may drift, certainly in the early part of an Obama presidency, and that long-term strategic decisions may be made by default.

More generally, notwithstanding the broad philosophical affinity between the Rudd Labor Government and a new Democrat administration, Australia may find itself with somewhat less influence in the White House than was the case when former prime minister John Howard forged a close personal relationship with President Bush.

This won't be because Rudd and Obama won't get on, rather that, with so many other leaders and countries clamouring for access and influence, Australia will often be just one more voice at a crowded table.

Expectations for Obama are huge, but his priorities will not necessarily be Australia's, nor will America's interests be congruent with our own.

There will be quite a few champagne corks popping if Obama wins as expected, but reality checks come quickly in the often harsh world of international affairs.



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