

Choosing the best U.S. president for the world

Special to The Asahi Shimbun

The American presidential election is fundamentally undemocratic. The franchise is limited to U.S. citizens, but the unique combination of American power and the willingness to use it makes the U.S. commander-in-chief the closest thing the planet has to a global leader.

In Japan's case, the entire architecture of its security policy depends on the United States. In some ways, the U.S. president is still Japan's commander-in-chief. Beyond Northeast Asia, American actions throughout the world shape the world in which the Japanese people exist.

Given these facts, what should Japan want from the next U.S. president?

Issues that pertain directly to Japan are not salient in this election. All the three top candidates, namely Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton, John McCain and Barack Obama show no indication that they would deviate from the policies of the (Bill) Clinton and Bush administrations of strengthening the alliance and upholding the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. They would also seek to avoid conflict with China while hedging against possible Chinese threats.

Therefore, the question is which candidate would best improve the global environment in which Japan operates.

The George W. Bush administration, backed by many Democrats in Congress, has severely undermined

American primacy. The combination of the attack against Iraq, the mis-handled response to al-Qaida, the legalization of torture and a Leninist "you are either with us or against us" posture has undermined the capacity of the United States to uphold and develop a world order that serves its interests and those of its allies.

The next president will first have to remove U.S. troops from Iraq. Liquidating the Iraqi enterprise will require courage. The president will be accused of "giving in to terrorists." It would be politically more expedient, though worse for everybody, to follow Richard Nixon's course in Vietnam, that is, to continue the war for years until defeat appears even more inevitable.

Second, he or she will have to rethink the strategy to confront al-Qaida and its offshoots, and more broadly U.S. policy toward Southwest Asia. This will also be difficult. In particular, opening a dialogue with Iran and pushing Israelis and Palestinians toward a compromise will generate strong opposition within the United States without a guarantee of success.

Third, the United States derives its strength partly from the power of its ideals. The future U.S. president will have to rebuild America's image in the world, especially in Europe and Southwest Asia, after years of self-inflicted damage.

Fourth, the U.S. president will have to foster world trade liberalization while fighting protectionist pressures

at home.

Therefore, how do the three contenders for the White House rate in their ability to perform as president? The American system allows individuals with no federal executive branch experience to assume office, making it particularly hard to guess how they will perform after they take the oath of office. Nevertheless, we can make a few educated guesses.

John McCain is by far the most experienced of the three, especially in foreign and defense policy. He deserves respect as one of the few major U.S. politicians of either party to vigorously oppose the administration's use of torture.

Unfortunately, his passionate support for the war in Iraq raises questions about his capacity to lead America out of this catastrophic adventure. It is possible that, upon assuming the presidency, he would alter his views, but there is no indication that this will be the case.

On the Democratic side, despite attempts by both camps to highlight the differences between Clinton and Obama, both senators are, in political terms, fairly similar, which makes it hard to predict how their policies would diverge were they elected.

Obama does have, however, a few



Robert Dujarric

advantages. First and foremost, he showed better judgment than Clinton by opposing the Iraq invasion from the start. Having grown up in Indonesia and then in Hawaii, he has a more personal connection to the world outside the continental United States than Clinton. Finally, his being African-American would have an enormous symbolic impact overseas on America's image.

Though Japanese cannot vote, the Japanese government can take actions that would help steer the next president on the right path. The most important ones relate to trade. Democratic candidates, pandering to misconceptions about international economics, are sounding protectionist.

Obama is calling for renegotiating NAFTA and opposes the free trade agreement with South Korea, while Clinton laments "jobs lost to China." Though it is possible that if elected they would abandon of their campaign rhetoric, this is not certain. Japan itself is not immune to protectionism.

If the Japanese government made a major push to dismantle trade barriers, especially in agriculture, and to foster a better climate for foreign investment, it could help start a virtuous circle of trade liberalization and avoid the real risk of a vicious circle of protectionism.

The author is director of the Institute of Contemporary Japanese Studies at Temple University Japan.