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## OBAMA II, FROM AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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**T**he coinciding of the North American presidential elections with the ascent to power of the “fifth generation” of Chinese leaders represents a milestone in the configuration of a new international order centered on the Indo-Pacific Basin with China and the U.S. as its protagonists. The moment appears crucial and problematic. Neither Washington nor Beijing seems to have a very clear view of how to handle a bilateral relationship that has become visibly rarefied over the past two years.

The Chinese analysts have followed with some concern the tone with which questions relating to China have been treated during the U.S. electoral campaign. Both candidates promised the voters a firm hand with a country they characterized as an increasingly aggressive and manipulator of the foreign exchange market. A perception that appears to be taking hold in Washington. The new Chinese leaders will have probably received Obama’s reelection with relief, as it appears, a priori, to simplify the reestablishment of a fluid dialogue. Nevertheless, the Asian pivot launched by his administration with an eye to reinforcing the role of the U.S. in the Asian Pacific, poses a complicated scenario from Beijing’s perspective.

China appears to be developing its own “Monroe Doctrine” in its territorial disputes in the Southern and Eastern Seas. In fact, for the first time since the start of its dizzying ascent in 1978, some Chinese strategists seems to be questioning the appropriateness of maintaining a low and prudent international profile. At least in their own backyard, where Beijing is showing a growing willingness to enforce its interests, by military means, if necessary, in what it considers to be “Chinese maritime territories.” And a good number of these conflicts is maintained with such U.S. allies as Japan, the Philippines, or Vietnam. A collision with Washington hence seems dangerously possible.

What line this new generation of leaders will adopt is still unknown, but everything appears to indicate a prevailing continuity in this more assertive focus. In fact, rather than what Xi Jiping or Li Keqiang might do, probably more concern should be directed at what they cannot do. Or, what amounts to the same thing, at the difficulties facing the Chinese Government in the containment of an aggressive nationalism, promoted from the halls of power, which has taken on a

life of its own among sectors of the army and the population. The new leaders will most likely be more the captives than the guardians of the nationalist rhetoric.

In the evolution of the Sino-U.S. equation the interaction of both powers with India will play an important role. Together with Washington and Beijing, New Delhi forms the strategic triangle around which the Asian geopolitical order of the 21st century is being forged. Though indeed, in contrast with the space occupied by China, New Delhi hardly received any attention during the U.S. electoral campaign, a question of concern for the Indian strategic community. The bilateral relationship has also cooled in the last two years. Though, in the case of India, it does not respond to a growing clash of interests, but, fundamentally, to Washington's frustration with what it sees as a lack of determination by Delhi to apply economic reforms and take a more active role on the international stage. The paralysis that has characterized the government of Manmohan Singh over the past few months is taking a toll internally and externally. With about a year and a half remaining before the elections, the political cycle appears to be exhausted and India runs the risk of having a lessened influence in the Asian scenario.

Among Indian analysts there is a certain consensus with regard to a greater sensitivity of the Republican Party to the geopolitical aspirations of New Delhi. If any country was favored by the administration of Bush, Jr., it was, without a doubt, India, with the agreements on cooperation in matters of defense and civil nuclear energy, reached in March 2005. Nevertheless, the victory of Obama, who generates the same fascination in India as in the rest of the world, has been well received. The Obama's Asian pivot helps, as the rapprochement between India and the US is very much based in their common concern about the rise of China. The temptation to conceptualize a new cold war in Asia is thus evident.

Nevertheless, there is no ideological challenge, nor will countries align themselves in closed blocs of mutual confrontation. The U.S. fears a China capable of defying its world leadership, though, probably, more in the long term than in the mid-term; much as India fears the Chinese projection over the Indian Sea, all the more so if it is produced through neighbors as unfavorable to India as Pakistan or Bangladesh. In any case, though, shared interests are many and the surge in commercial relations and, in the Chinese-U.S. case, the economic interdependence, pose a much more complex and uncertain panorama. Competition and ruptures will be combined, inevitably, with cooperation and agreements.

Not to mention that the positions and options are not all that evident. The forging of an Indo-U.S. alliance, for example, is plagued with difficulties and, from the perspective of New Delhi, risks. India is the weaker party in this strategic triangle and an excessive dependence on the U.S. agenda could oblige it to assume important costs. In the last months, for example, there are those, and they are not few, who advocate for exhorting India while making concessions to Pakistan as a way of achieving a certain stability in post-withdrawal Afghanistan. And it is doubtful that a "reward" for the covering of Islamabad of terrorism and Islamist extremism will contribute to India's security in the middle and long term.

Everything therefore points to a fluid and open Asian scenario, though increasingly unstable and conflict-ridden. In truth, the fact that conflicting blocs are not emerging does not mean that the U.S.-China-India triangle could not evolve toward a greater confrontation or that tensions will not explode in determined hot spots, with unforeseeable consequences and evolution for the global economy and global stability.