



# THE POTENTIAL POLITICAL IMPLICATION OF OBAMA'S CHINA VISIT

*The Obama model and why the Chinese Communist Party should worry about it.*

By Giovanni Navarria

One of the highlights in the international political agenda of November 2009 was the nine-day trip to Asia of the US President Barack Obama. The president visited Japan, Singapore, China, and South Korea. The purpose of the Asian trip was to strengthen US leadership and economic competitiveness in the region, both of which have been hit by the economic downturn over the last 12 months. In this respect, the visit to China was of particular importance. The economic ties between China and the US are quite strong. The Chinese government is an important stakeholder in the US economy. According to data released by the US Federal Reserve in September, the Chinese government has invested about \$800 billion dollars [about RMB 5.5 trillion] in US Treasury securities alone. When we add Hong Kong's stake of \$132 billion to that amount then China is the second main creditor of the US government – the top of the list belongs to the Federal Reserve system of banks and other US intra-governmental holdings that together account for over \$4.7 trillion in US Treasury debt. Thus, China, the most important rising economy in the world, holds a crucial and significant portion of America's national debt.

Before the arrival of Obama in Shanghai (16 November), the *New York Times* (NYT) warned that the nature of the economic ties between China (the lender) and the US (the debtor) would inevitably influence the nature of Obama's trip. To some

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extent the NYT was right. Obama's first visit to China was different to that of his immediate predecessors. Bill Clinton and George W Bush had 'publicly pushed and prodded China to follow the Western model and become more open politically and economically'. Obama instead spent more time avoiding contrast, while attempting to strike a conciliatory note with the Chinese leadership. 'The United States does not seek to contain China,' he said during a speech in Tokyo. 'On the contrary, the rise of a strong, prosperous China can be a source of strength for the community of nations.'

The surprise, however, came from the way in which Chinese officials handled Obama's three-day visit to China: they behaved

in an utterly different way than with his predecessors. Consider the differences between Obama's trip and Bill Clinton's visit in 1998. Clinton was interviewed on national television; his public meetings with Chinese students and with President Jiang Zemin were given live coverage in the national media, and journalists were allowed to ask questions. Obama's visit was handled more carefully. For instance Obama's town hall meeting with young Chinese students in Shanghai was broadcast only by the local television network; the majority of the country could not watch Obama answering questions on Taiwan or talking of Internet censorship. True, the event was available on the Internet, but the quality of the Chinese webcast was oddly quite poor and it was left online only for a short time; moreover, no questions were allowed during the press conference with President Hu Jintao. With hindsight, the Chinese leadership seemed almost reluctant to show Obama to its people. As *The Economist* put it: Chinese leaders were 'keen to encourage Mr Obama's friendly approach and his willingness to recognise China as a fellow great power.' Yet they were 'clearly nervous of a charismatic young president far better than China's standoffish leaders at appealing to ordinary citizens.'



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Perhaps that was the reason why, as some sources pointed out, many of the youthful faces crowding the town hall meeting in Shanghai were carefully chosen by Party officials, with some of them being active members of the Communist party. This could also explain why Obama's exposure to the media was rather limited. When asked, the day after Obama's question and answer session, many of the students at Beijing University objected that they were unaware of Obama's meetings in Shanghai.

Was Obama's charisma and youthful charm all that concerned the Chinese government? Or was there something else? I would suggest that we expand that perspective by adding two extra elements. Since he was sworn in, last January, and even before his victory on 4 November 2008, Obama has been the carrier of a message of change that crosses over the US borders. But Obama's presence in China was also an important reminder to the Communist party's leaders of the transforming effects that new communication media, such as the Internet, can have on the political process of a technologically advanced society. These two elements combined to represent a long-term threat to the political status of China. This threat, however, is



nothing that the Chinese people should worry about unless they are active and ambitious members of the Communist party.

The roots of such a threat lie deep within the ambivalent, if not wholly conflictual relationship that the Chinese government has always had with new communication media such as the Internet. On the one hand the Chinese government has strongly supported the development of a technologically advanced society in China, one which currently can count on over 600 million mobile-phone users and more than 300 million surfers of the World Wide Web. On the other hand Beijing officials have increasingly attempted to control the use of that technology, to make sure that its spread within society brings only that which they deem beneficial, but does not hinder the foundations of the state of the People's Republic of China.

**China and the Web: a conflictual relationship**

The Chinese relationship with the Internet dates back to the late 1980s. On 20 September 1987 professor Quian Tianbai sent the first e-mail out from China. The text of the message read: 'Across the Great Wall we can reach every corner in the world'. Since then the growth of the Internet in China has been continuous, and the country is now a recognised presence on the Internet. China has the largest number of active users of the Internet in the world (338 million as of July 2009); the US, the second in the list, lags far behind. Analysts predict that the total number of users will approach the 500 million mark by 2012, if not sooner. More astonishingly, nearly 95% of all Chinese users of the Internet have a high-speed connection. This is certainly good news for business. Not surprisingly, by 2008 the size of China's digital marketplace had increased to over \$290 billion (in 2000 that amount was merely \$9 billion). The number of online shoppers has now reached 87 million and continues to rise.

The growth of the Internet, however, has put the Chinese authorities on alert. The rising number of Web users means new and unexpected challenges to the government's firm grip on political power. Authorities are openly concerned by the social impact that the Internet has on Chinese society. If not firmly controlled, this new communication device can be used to mobilise citizens to challenge openly the State's policies. That is, to undermine the social stability of the country. In January 2007, speaking to the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, President

Hu Jintao stated clearly that coping with the Internet is a matter of crucial importance for the country. This is because what happens on the Web 'affects the development of socialist culture, the security of information, and the stability of the state.' The president therefore urged Chinese officials 'at all levels' to work hard on improving all those mechanisms (i.e. new rules and new technologies) that help the government to spread 'healthy information', control website content, and monitor online activities. And this is exactly what the authorities have done.

To defend its social stability from the challenges spawned by the rapid growth of the Internet, since the late 1990s the Chinese government has adopted two main strategies of control: the authorities monitor the information flow of the Internet and actively promote self-censorship among users. To put these strategies in practise the government relies on four cardinal elements: a state-of-the-art technological infrastructure that filters all the incoming traffic of the Chinese Web; a growing number of laws that regulate what the users can and cannot do on the Web; a wide range of punitive actions for those who break the rules (ranging from considerable monetary fines to several years of imprisonment); and the cooperation of international companies operating in China. However this system of control is by no means perfect. Even though, thanks to the application of these strategies in the past decade, many real, or often simply suspected, dissidents have been caught in the web of the Chinese Internet police, many others have escaped it. The crimes of these alleged dissidents range from circulating e-mails with so-called top-secret information, to posting messages on Web forums that criticise Beijing's policy; from viewing forbidden websites, to using the Web to advocate the need for a more open and democratic society.

**The Obama problem**

The US president can not be considered a direct threat to China's status quo, nevertheless what he represents could become, in the long run, a painful thorn in the side of China's existing political infrastructure.

The strength of Obama's presidency and that of the Chinese leadership are strongly intertwined with the way in which both administrations use communication media to exercise and maintain power. However the two positions are, to say the least, antithetic. Chinese media is controlled (censored) by state officials. Obama is instead the product of a much less regulated media landscape. Moreover, the case of Obama's triumphal

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victory in 2008 is evidence of how powerful the possibility of change can be when people are given the means to enact that change, despite any pressure from established power holders and their big, fat donors, their means, and their media.

In 2008, an estimated 221 million Americans used the Internet regularly either from work or home. On average they spent more than 19 hours per week browsing the Web, with 55% of them using broadband – fast internet connection is crucial when a user accesses websites that heavily rely on media content such as streaming videos or audio files. That year a survey conducted by the PEW Research Centre reported that the percent of people who got most of their campaign news from the Internet had tripled in just a few years, from 10% in 2004 to 33% in 2008. Unsurprisingly, throughout the 2008 US presidential race, the Web was very influential in sustaining the campaigns of the candidates. But, more importantly, the Web proved to be a formidable instrument to enact political change from below by allowing people to raise funds for their candidates and take an active part in the campaign process. With hindsight it is perhaps only logical that at the end of that race the electorate rewarded Obama, the candidate who more than anyone else advocated a politics of change in Washington DC and used extensively the new communication media throughout his entire campaign. Thanks largely to the Internet and the mobile-phone networks, during the campaign Obama's strategists were able to establish a thriving grassroots movement of many millions of people whose influence on the election was unparalleled by supporters groups of any of the other contenders. Through the official campaign

website (mybarackobama.com) and social network websites such as Facebook, Obama's supporters were able to make a difference. They created local support groups to attend rallies, organised door-to-door canvassing to register voters, arranged fund-raising house parties, and made millions of phone calls to potential Obama voters to remind them to vote on election day. They also fought back negative smears from political opponents, created and distributed a wide range of campaign promotional material (videos, posters, flyers, etc), watched over 14 million hours of official campaign videos on youtube.com, and helped Obama raise a staggering sum of over \$740 million in support of the presidential bid. All this effort paid off on 4 November when Obama was the winner of a historical race that ended with 'an improbable candidate fulfilling a once-impossible dream': the American people sending to the White House the first Afro-American president.

For this reason, Obama, more than others, represents a dangerous model that if imitated within China could change the Chinese political landscape. Obama is a new kind of politician. To a certain extent he represents the outsider that finally breaks the political status quo by winning against more experienced and richer candidates; but the way he did it last year is perhaps more worrying, if seen from the Chinese communist party's perspective. The example of Obama shows what kind of impact uncensored access to new communication media has on a political system. He reinforces that very old and dangerous idea that politics should never be just the product of an untouchable leadership, but a more complex set of dynamics between those who vote and those who govern on their behalf. To each citizen

within this system it becomes clear that political power is always contingent and those who exercise it must be accountable for their actions to those whom they represent. This is a truth applicable both to a democratic system as well as to a one-party state.

Chinese people could only benefit from applying Obama's model to China. However, the Party's historical firm hold on power is unlikely to survive in such new environment. ○

