

Nov 04, 2016 by *Adam Clayton Powell, III*

Why Obama Is Less Popular in Asia ^[1]

Much that is written about public diplomacy focuses on Europe and the Muslim world. National news media in the US, headquartered in New York and Washington, equates foreign opinion with approving editorials in *The Guardian* and large crowds in Berlin. By those criteria, President-elect Barack Obama is wildly popular. Just elect Obama, the thinking goes, and America's public diplomacy problems are solved.

Not quite: The data indicate Obama was never as popular in Asia as in Europe. And it turns out President Bush was never as unpopular in Asia as he was in Europe.

This was documented by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, which found Obama's popularity much higher in Europe than in the rest of the world. Surveying publics in 24 countries, Pew researchers asked whether respondents had more confidence in Obama or McCain to serve as the next president of the United States.

In Europe, Obama was enormously popular: In France, Obama had a 51-percentage point lead over McCain, in Germany it was 49 percentage points and in Spain it was 53 percentage points. (Obama also had a 20-point advantage in European countries over Hillary Clinton.)

But in the Arab world, Obama's advantage was much narrower, leading McCain by just eight points in Egypt, four points in Pakistan and a single percentage point in Jordan.

And in Asia, Obama's approval edged McCain by just five percentage points in the two largest countries in the world, China and India.

What is going on?

And why should Americans care?

Taking the second question first, the answer is quite simple: America runs on Asian money. The U.S. deficit is funded by Asia – and especially by China.

Almost four years ago in this space, Peter Herford wrote that China was less critical of the U.S. than other countries, and that was not unrelated to its role as America's banker.

Today's economic crisis has only increased America's financial dependency on Asia, so what Herford wrote is even truer now. Remember, European economies are in recession – Europe's economies are actually shrinking. But in Asia, the financial crisis means China's economy may only grow by eight percent.

Does Washington need \$700 billion to bail out U.S. banks? Washington is out of money; go to

the cash windows in China.

Does GM need federal funds to avert bankruptcy? Send loan requests from the Midwest to the Middle Kingdom.

Do Democrats want to expand health care benefits? They will have to send the doctors' bills to Beijing.

Think of it as China's version of the Marshall Plan. Our historic "special relationship" across the Atlantic with Britain has shifted to a new financial special relationship across the Pacific, to our wealthy partners in China.

And in an echo of the Marshall Plan and the 1940s, there is even a similar motive: Just as the U.S. rebuilt bankrupt Europe in part as a bulwark against Stalin and Soviet power, China has an interest in keeping a strong U.S. as a bulwark against Putin and an expansionist Russia. After Russian tanks moved into Georgia last summer, China made it clear it did not approve. Western Europe, reliant on Russian gas exports to heat its homes, was more equivocal.

This can be quite explicit: For an American visiting Asia this year, it was common to hear praise, albeit highly qualified, for U.S. perseverance in Iraq. The war was unpopular in Asia as in Europe, but in China, over and over again one could hear variations on the theme that the only thing worse than going to war in Iraq would be to go to war in Iraq – and lose.

(This could explain some of McCain's support in the Arab world: Maybe it's better, after all, to have the U.S. surge and to have American help to stop Al Qaeda – certainly while Al Qaeda is on the run.)

Look at the "hard power" global calculus. There are only three countries in the world that can project significant military power far beyond their national borders: the U.S., Russia and China. China doesn't want America to go into retreat, leaving Moscow free to expand its sphere of influence into Europe – or Asia.

But this does not entirely explain Obama's lack of appeal. Other factors are at work, including one major consideration for China that is little noted in the U.S.: race.

David Bachman of the University of Washington discussed this last week in a lecture at the USC US-China Institute.

"Obama's election challenges China's racial views," Bachman said. "Obama's election challenges China's propaganda about bourgeois democracy."

"Even informed Chinese," he added, may not be able to reconcile Obama's rise from "an outcast social group" to leader of the world's number one power.

"Obama will fundamentally challenge China," predicted Bachman, "in a way that makes it very difficult for the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] to respond."

Looking in the other direction, the President-elect has had little to say about China, which receded as a campaign issue this year. But an Obama administration will encounter policy differences that will be unavoidable. One of those differences that could surface early in the new administration is human rights.

"Violations of human rights are not acceptable" to Obama, said Bachman, who said that could become a flash point for U.S.-Chinese relations.

And this friction comes just as China may have less willingness to keep paying America's bills: Beijing's currency reserves are estimated at just under \$2 trillion. Last month alone the U.S. needed one tenth of that amount to stay afloat. Meanwhile, Beijing has just announced a huge stimulus package for the Chinese economy, which will also require drawing on those huge reserves. So just as the U.S. demand for more borrowing is increasing, the Beijing government is starting to invest hundreds of billions inside its own borders.

Of course, it is not in China's economic interest for the U.S. to suffer financially because Beijing has already invested so much in the U.S. But with Washington running record deficits – and therefore needing more and more money from overseas – President-elect Obama and his administration will need to focus all of the soft power they can to tend to America's new special relationship – across the Pacific.
