

James Fallows on China in the Election

A follower of China and the US election shares his perspective

By Josh Gartner



COURTESY OF JAMES FALLOWS

James Fallows of *The Atlantic Monthly*

James Fallows of *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine is uniquely qualified to discuss China's role in the 2008 election. He is based in Beijing and has been watching the candidates closely from abroad. For an August article he went through the thankless—and probably painful—task of watching every debate from both the Democratic and Republican primaries. He sat down with *China Brief* to discuss the role of China in the campaigns and the likely trajectory of an administration under each candidate.

CB To get a sense of what the next administration will face in terms of its relationship with China,

can you talk a little bit about developments under the Bush Administration. Which would you deem as the most important and significant?

JF I think the most surprising, impressive and positive aspect of the Bush administration's approach to China is how successful and un-dramatic it has been. In most other aspects of US relations with the world, the Bush Administration has really overturned the tables and taken, in some cases, radically different approaches. In China there has been more continuity with past US policy than has been the case in other areas and I think that has been beneficial to both sides.

On the positive side, the most important development has probably been the Strategic Dialogue which recognizes the fact that the US and China have a tremendous number of complex interactions which are not going away. So it's a way to discuss those coherently.

On the negative side, the two most important developments both involved 9-11 in a sense. One was prior when there was preparation for a strategic or military showdown by some members of the Republican team, which got aborted by 9-11. After that I think there was, in a sense, a free pass given to China on matters of its own internal security because of its membership in the global war on terror. If China was willing to support the global war on terror, as defined by the Bush Administration, then the US would countenance any internal issue in China that China defined

as part of the anti-terrorist struggle.

The main point is that China has been the most successful part of the Bush Administration's foreign policy, I would say, and successful because it recognizes the entirety of US-China relations which range from military to human rights, and all of those have been on the table all the time.

CB One of the main achievements that you mentioned was the Strategic Dialogue. Would this be the area that you would advise the next administration to focus on most, or would you suggest something else?

JF In the reality of US politics, the Strategic Dialogues are not going to be continued if the Democrats win. It is so much a signature policy of the Bush Administration that a Democratic administration would probably change the name and format, but something like that will continue. I think if the Democrats win, there will be a greater focus on environmental issues as part of the overall US-China relationship. There will still be financial, investment and human rights discussions, but probably the main change for Democrats will be a greater share of the emphasis on the potential for cooperation on environmental considerations.

If the Republicans were to win, perhaps you would have some continuity of the actual name "Strategic Economic Dialogue" and, at least from the get-go, not necessarily a change in their

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emphasis. There would probably be more continuity with the Bush Administration.

CB You just talked about changes from a predictive standpoint. What, if any, changes from the Bush Administration would you advocate under either a McCain or an Obama administration?

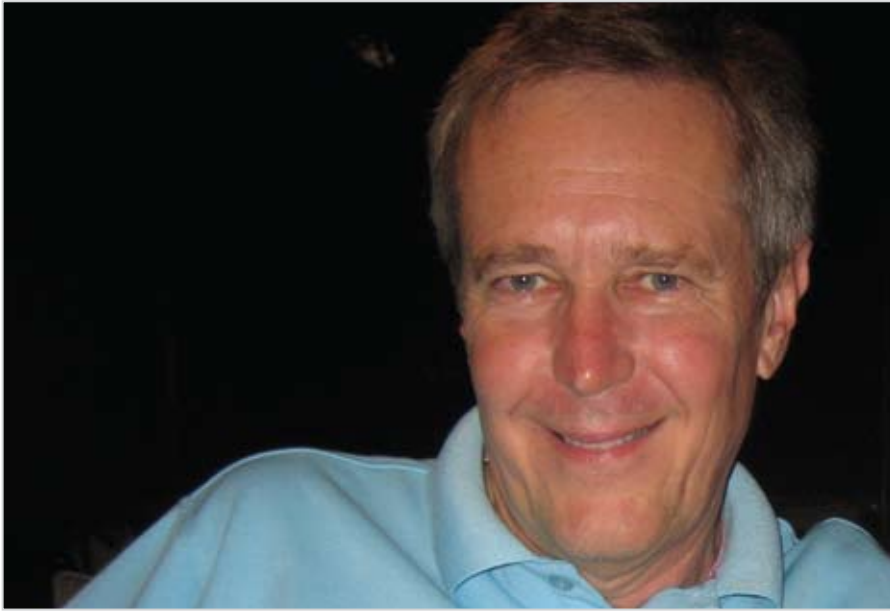
JF The greatest challenge in US policy toward China that would be faced by either administration coming in is that the natural tendency of US politics is to radically oversimplify its view of China. Either China is our friend or China is our enemy. And either China is a supplier of poisonous goods or it is a gigantic market.

The truth is, of course, it is all of those things. All of those things about the US-China relationship are true. It is simultaneously a competitor and a partner and a challenge. This is a very familiar line of argument to AmCham members, but all of those things are true. Each administration that comes into office, with the possible exception the first Bush, who had been in China in the 1970s and probably had a deeper sense of the goods and bads, has had to go through the process of understanding how complicated the situation is. In all of their campaigns, they have had to over-simplify. And in office, all of them have to expand. The question of how long that takes is always the crucial one.

In terms of what should change, I personally, would have them preparing from this moment for their transition team to recognize that there are 100 different items that will be on the agenda for the next administration, and the one after that, and the one after that. It is important to find some way to avoid thinking that it's all about the *Renminbi* (RMB), the over-emphasis on which has probably been the most foolish aspect of US politics over the last four to five years. It's about the RMB and it's about visas on the US side and it's also about carbon emissions and it's also about rule of law and it's also about everything else. I would recommend a shift in tone to talk all the time about the entire range of often contradictory engagements that these two big powers have.

CB You've touched on the environment, security issues in the context of 9-11 and of course economics. Given that they are all inter-related, which of these do you anticipate being most in the forefront of a new administration's agenda?

JF Granted that they are all inter-related and granted that any administration will deal with all of them—this a predictive statement about the difference between the two of them—if Obama wins and the Democrats come in, I think you will see three issues get relatively more importance than they've had under Bush. They are the familiar ones. First, human rights rule of law will be stressed more. That doesn't necessarily mean stridency of the sort many Chinese people



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James Fallows was a speechwriter for President Carter

would be afraid of, but relatively more emphasis on this.

As a side note, when the current President Bush has discussed this issue it has almost always been as a religious issue, like before the Olympics when he gave a speech in Bangkok about how freedom of worship is the most important thing. I think Democrats would broaden that somewhat.

A second thing there will be relatively more of with Democrats would probably be fair trade issues, making sure labor laws are enforced in China. There would probably not be tariffs or things of that sort that Chinese industries would fear, because American industries fear that too, but probably more emphasis on issues like labor laws.

The final issue that would probably get relatively more emphasis under a Democratic administration would be the environment generally. I think that would be more in the partnership mode than the challenge mode. You can see that many, many Democrats—and you see this in Tom Friedman’s work, not saying he’s a Democrat, but he’s argued this an imperative for the US—that China has to be part of a solution to any world environmental challenge. There are things that the US and China can do together better than either of them can do separately. So I think that would be the biggest difference.

If the Republicans win all of those things will be part of the mix, but probably there will be a greater relative emphasis on security issues. There is a

larger section of the Republican coalition that’s more concerned with Taiwan, and more nervous about Chinese military power. I think that’s the main difference: more emphasis on environment from the Democrats and more emphasis on security from the Republicans.

CB You recently went through the unenviable task of watching and listening to all of the primary debates for your article in the August issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. The only reference in the article to China was that Obama “seemed to be reading from cue cards” when he answered China questions in the debate. To what do you attribute the lack of focus on China in the campaigns?

JF First of all, I’ll say the reason I referred only once to China in the article is that it came up rarely in the debates and usually just in the context of food safety issues. So it was striking that this major aspect of US international relations was not really a primary debate topic.

As for Obama’s relative inexpressiveness and subtlety on China, I think this just reflects the fact that this is not an area where he has spent a lot of time thinking. If you ask him about the Islamic world, the future in Iraq, relationships in Europe and the power balance there, or relationships within the Americas, he has quite well-thought

out answers to give. He does not seem to have that yet about China.

The main expectation is that if he becomes president, he is clearly a smart enough person with a deep enough team of advisors that he recognize this is an area he needs to get briefed up on.

CB On the Republican side, John McCain has made foreign policy experience a central message of his campaign. Usually this refers to areas of military conflict like Iraq or the Georgia-Russia conflict. How does the foreign policy experience argument translate to China?

JF It’s striking that in his political platform as you see it online, as you hear it in his speeches, as you hear it in the debate performances, it’s about as abbreviated as Obama is. Both of them say, of course, Taiwan security is important, the One-China Policy is important and they talk about product safety issues. But the experience that McCain has had in the Senate has mainly been in areas other than China. Since the US has fortunately had its military engagements in areas other than China for the entirety of McCain’s career, he’s learned more about the Middle East, Central Asia and all the rest.

It’s an open question how his experience and instincts would lead if he were president. I don’t think they would reflexively be either for a military showdown in China or against that. This is one area where both he and Obama would be educated fairly quickly by their staffs, who are generally familiar people to China. Whatever the China policy is, it will not be a radical change, no matter who becomes president.

CB Thank you very much and we look forward to your upcoming book.

*James Fallows, now based in Beijing, has reported on China for the last two years for *The Atlantic Monthly*. His next book, "Postcards from Tomorrow Square," is based on those reports. He has worked in politics, as Jimmy Carter’s chief speechwriter for two years in the White House.*