

The Role of National Leaders in Foreign Policy

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, NOV 7 2012

For the last two years, worldwide audiences have been exposed to the saga that was the American election. While much of the discussion focused on the US economy, health care, binders full of women, and Paul Ryan's body fat index, quite a bit of attention was given to foreign policy issues as well. Through the Republican primaries, foreign policy played a role in just how powerful each candidate was perceived, or in some cases, their level of insanity as evidenced by Newt Gingrich's promise of an American base on the moon. Scholarly articles, blogs, media editorials and public commentaries all made various assertions about the nature of American foreign policy and how each candidate would affect the world around them if they were victorious in the presidential race.

It has become an increasingly common assumption that individual leaders create and implement their own foreign policies. Mitt Romney promised to be far tougher with Iran and to reassert American power in various corners of the world that he felt Obama had let slip during his first term in office. Of course, perceptions about leader-influenced foreign policy are not unique to the United States. Candidates in various nations for president's or prime minister's often contend they can repair a nation's image, restore or increase its relative power position, or assume leadership roles in international institutions. In this, there are two key issues that should be highlighted:

1. People really do not understand foreign policy or international affairs and therefore easily subscribe to ridiculous claims about foreign relations by politicians;
2. Individual leaders rarely have the ability to actually change anything about a nation's foreign policy.

In all honesty, foreign policy is not going to determine the outcome of an election campaign in the western world. Perhaps the most obvious example would be the reelection of George W. Bush in 2004 as he was very successfully driving the US into the ground. John Kerry's campaign had actually presented a semi-coherent foreign policy approach to correct some of the blunders of Bush's first term, but the American people still favoured Bush when they went to the polls. Public debates about Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria or anything else outside of one's own state is likely to fall on deaf ears for one major reason – people only care about themselves. Unless there is a fear, as there certainly was during the Cold War, that Syria or Libya were going to bomb or invade the United States, those issues were not going to be the determining factor in the American election. Further, foreign policy is extremely complex because of the wide array of variables it encompasses. Unless a person is a global politics junky (which most are not), they will only want to hear how a candidate will protect their sovereignty and interests.

Much ink has been spilled about an Obama foreign policy versus that of Romney. In the debate dedicated to foreign policy, Obama's handling of Libya, Syria and Iran were criticized heavily for not being strong enough. Though his tune on Iran softened as time went on, Romney was firm that the United States needed to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power, and that he would be capable of preventing such an eventuality. Depending on which political party or ideology a candidate in any western state subscribes to, they will propose a vision for their place in the world and how other nations will come to see their brilliance. Sadly (for them), reality would contradict their claims.

Foreign policies of states may change slightly with a given leader, but ultimately, the polarity and stability of the international system will dictate how they will behave. Foreign policy debates in minor or middle powers are virtually unnecessary because their policies are influenced more by who they are allied with and their bandwagoning

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preferences, rather than a given leader's belief system. States that are classified as major or great powers have greater flexibility in their ability to change the course of world events in some cases, but they are more concerned with the balance of power. If they were to ignore the balance of power in the international system, they risk their own power position and can precipitate war. At the highest end of the spectrum would be a systemic hegemon, whose actions can seriously alter the landscape of the system at any given time. In a unipolar system, the hegemon is most concerned with maintaining its position and in extending its sphere of influence to dissuade other powers from trying to balance against their power.

Naturally, one can point to the presidency of George W. Bush as an example when a given leader had the ability to influence the system. Many point to what is now known as the Bush Doctrine as the exemplification of how a leader has control over foreign affairs. Because the United States was the systemic hegemon, the national leader would have greater capabilities in dictating foreign policy, however, even in the case of Bush, the so-called doctrine that he presented was only ever used once in 2003 with the invasion of Iraq. Under the Bush Doctrine, the US retained the right of preemption, but the substantial decrease in the US preponderance of power that came out of the Iraq mission, especially because it was timed simultaneously with the NATO mission in Afghanistan, meant that it could not be employed further.

Irrational decisions on the part of national leaders can also occur, which create unusual situations in the international system. Rational foreign policies are those that recognize systemic constraints and opportunities, and that show reverence for the delicacy of the balance of power. There have been times when states, as decided by their leaders, have taken actions that do not adhere to the rational model of foreign policy behavior and that, in the end, negatively affect the irrational state more than any other. Iraq is a good example of this, as is the American mission in Vietnam.

All of this is to say that foreign policy is not nearly as leader-centric as observers tend to believe. The role of national leaders in foreign policy is important to note, as they typically have constitutional (or authoritarian) powers to execute foreign policy decisions. However, all leaders are forced to make policy in the same self-interested, competitive and distrustful system, regardless of whether they are Democrat or Republican, Liberal or Conservative, communist or capitalist, etc. President Obama will have some ability to determine how America will behave internationally, but the world will be watching.

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