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Foreign Policy and the 2012 Presidential Election: Divergent Visions for the Future

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The 2012 presidential election has, not surprisingly, focused on economics. It is likely to come down to the candidates' opposing philosophies about the role of government in the society and the economy; foreign policy is not likely to get much attention. In fact, the little attention that foreign policy has received has suggested that the candidates' foreign policy worldviews are too similar to matter. Upon closer inspection, however, this is overstated. Furthermore, voters should take care to consider the foreign policy proposals of each candidate since presidents often leave their legacy in foreign rather than domestic politics. The fact of the matter is that presidents are less constrained by the political landscape in foreign policy and, as a result, are often freer to leave a personal legacy in foreign policy. Thus, it is important to take a closer look at Barack Obama and Mitt Romney's foreign policy approaches.

Barack Obama's Approach

Unlike his contemporary predecessors, Barack Obama has neither served in the military nor faced the draft; furthermore, the Vietnam War has had less of an impact on his thinking than previous presidents. For President Obama, three events appear to have motivated his foreign policy: 9/11, the war in Iraq, and the financial crisis. The September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon convinced Barack Obama of two things. First, the United States was no longer an impenetrable fortress; it was vulnerable. Second, the transnational nature of terrorism meant that the United States could no longer rely solely on its military to meet challenges throughout the world; furthermore, the United States could no longer "go it alone". In an interdependent world, confronting terrorism would require military and non-military action, as well as cooperation with other world leaders.

The war in Iraq and the financial crisis reinforced these views. In the fall of 2002, Obama called the war in Iraq "a dumb war. A rash war. A war based not on reason, but on passion, not on principle, but on politics" (see White). The war reinforced his view that the United States could no longer rely on the military as the main instrument of American power, although Obama made certain to explain that he was not a pacifist. In fact, the speech revealed a willingness to use military force for humanitarian purposes. Moreover, it underscored the significance of cooperation in the post-9/11 world. The war in Iraq was not only "rash", it was fought without the kind of multilateral cooperation and support required in a post-9/11 world. Multilateral cooperation and burden-sharing became even more significant to Obama as the financial crisis emerged. The American financial crisis ultimately convinced Obama that the United States could no longer bear the burden of global problems. Any challenge required cooperation with American allies; moreover, the United States was no longer required to take the lead.

The crisis in Libya reflects Obama's foreign policy philosophy better than any other challenge the administration has faced. While he engaged in conflict in Afghanistan and the war on terror, these policies were inherited from his predecessor. Libya, however, was an entirely new crisis and Obama was able to craft his own strategy. In early spring 2011, the administration was facing considerable pressure from its French and British counterparts to establish a no-fly zone in Libya as rebels moved to topple Libya's long-time leader Muammar Gaddafi. Obama rejected the no-fly zone, opting for a stronger response: airstrikes aimed at incapacitating the Libyan regime and strengthening the rebels. His decision in Libya encapsulates his wider goals.

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First, President Obama emphasized the humanitarian nature of the conflict, arguing that acting would constitute a “just war” and expressing concern that American inaction would lead to a massacre of civilians. Furthermore, the establishment of a no-fly zone would merely provide the appearance of action, while civilians on the ground continued to face attacks. He did not go as far as to suggest an Obama doctrine, but in acting in Libya he made a clear break with the Bush foreign policy, stressing humanitarianism over national interest.

Second, he did not go as far as to introduce ground troops. Instead, the president stressed burden-sharing with America’s allies. The United States would not “go it alone” in responding to the crisis. Instead, America would take the lead by employing calculated airstrikes against Libyan targets but would then hand the continued aspects of the crisis over to its allies. Moving away from his predecessor’s reliance on unilateralism, Obama demonstrated a preference for multilateral strategies and solutions to problems.

Mitt Romney’s Approach

Governor Romney’s approach is likely to be very different; for starters, Romney has stressed that President Obama is weak on foreign policy. In a speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention, Romney argued, “If we do not have the strength or vision to lead then others will take our place, pulling history in a very different direction....A just and peaceful world depends on a strong and confident America” (Pecquet). But if President Obama is weak, what might a stronger Romney policy look like?

Romney offers a version of the hawkish foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration. In fact, more than half of Romney’s foreign policy advisors served in the George W. Bush administration, and while Robert Zoellick’s appointment as head of Romney’s national security transition team has angered many neoconservatives, one should not overlook the fact that Zoellick was one of the individuals that signed a letter to President Clinton in 1998 pushing for regime change in Iraq.

Despite Zoellick’s appointment, one must consider Romney’s personal foreign policy views. Romney has publicly stated that Russia is “without question” America’s “number one geopolitical foe” (Friedman); in addition, one of his advisors, Richard Williamson, referred to Russia as the Soviet Union during a discussion at the Brookings Institution (Romney Aide refers to Russia as the Soviet Union). This parallels with George W. Bush’s early policy toward Russia, particularly his renunciation of the ABM Treaty; Bush’s policy increased tensions. Moreover, it suggests that Romney and his advisors are frozen in time, focusing on Cold War challenges as if this election were taking place in the 1980s. Romney’s policies are also likely to increase tensions with Russia; even if Romney’s statement was merely rhetorical, public statements have substantial impacts and the Russians certainly took notice.

Romney’s tough stance on foreign policy is also reflected in his choice of a running mate. Representative Paul Ryan has argued that the debt crisis is about maintaining American hegemony and superpower status. Despite his desire to cut spending on major domestic entitlement programs, Ryan wants to grow the size of the defense budget (Rubin). And Governor Romney agrees; in July, he told the American Legion that he would “not cut the military budget” but would “instead expand our essential weapons programs and our...active-duty personnel...so that we can prevent wars” (Rosenthal). This could portend a dangerous foreign policy that sends the wrong signals to a world that is still leery of American power in the twenty-first century.

His approach to China best illustrates Romney’s foreign policy philosophy. It is clear that Romney believes that the United States should take a more hard-lined approach toward China. In October 2011, Romney stated, “I will label China as it is, a currency manipulator. And I will go after them for stealing our intellectual property. And they will recognize that if they cheat, there is a price to pay. I certainly don’t want a trade war with anybody...but we can’t have a trade surrender either.” He continued, “When people have pursued unfair trade practices, you have to have a president that will take action. And on day one...I will issue an executive order identifying China as a currency manipulator. We’ll bring an action against them in front of the WTO for manipulating their currency, and we will go after them. If you are not willing to stand up to China, you will get run over by China, and that’s what’s happened” (Halperin).

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Romney has also taken a much harder line with the Palestinians, angering many when he argued that Israelis enjoyed a better standard of living than the Palestinians because they had a superior culture and enjoyed the “hand of providence” (Sherwood). Further, Romney’s close relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is similar to the relationship between George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon, suggesting that Israel may receive a freer hand under a President Romney than they have received under President Obama.

Divergent Approaches to Iran

Iran offers a good illustration of the differences between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. While Obama and Romney appear to agree on the general approach to Iran, the devil is in the details. Both men say that a nuclear Iran is unacceptable and both have maintained a military option as a part of any policy toward Iran. However, Obama has focused on giving sanctions and multilateral diplomacy time to work, and has worked to prevent Israel from engaging in a preemptive attack against Iran. Romney, on the other hand, argues that Israel has the right to launch a preemptive strike against Iran’s nuclear sites. Romney adds that “it is essential that Iran does not become nuclear...a nuclear Iran represents the greatest threat to the world” (Halper).

The most important controversy lies with the question of regime change. While President Obama has launched covert operations against Iran’s nuclear facilities, presumably including cyberworms attacking uranium enrichment operations, he has not called for regime change in Iran. One reason for this is the term’s association with the George W. Bush administration; however, more important is that President Obama fears that talk of regime change in Iran will endanger multilateral cooperation and harm the international talks with the Iranians. Romney, on the other hand, has openly called for regime change, arguing that his administration would work with Iranian dissidents and encourage an end to the Iranian regime. Also, Romney has argued that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad should be indicted for genocide since he has called for Israel’s annihilation.

Foreign Policy Matters

Thus, despite being overlooked by pundits and the public alike, foreign policy matters in this presidential election. President Obama has offered an approach to American foreign policy that rejects the policy of the George W. Bush administration, while Governor Romney is likely to offer an updated version of it. If history provides any lessons, it is that presidents are more capable of exercising their foreign policy rather than their domestic policy visions; thus, we must take care in choosing our presidents. A carefully crafted foreign policy is just as significant to moving America forward as a sound economic plan. Any consideration of the future must take the presidential candidates’ foreign policy approaches into account.

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