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The US Presidential Election: Implications for East Asia

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Introduction

As the American presidential election draws closer, both candidates—Barack Obama and Mitt Romney—are well aware that domestic issues would hold the key to determining the poll results. Policies, related to immigration, taxation, military spending and healthcare, are where Obama and Romney and their electoral bases stand polarized at the opposite ends of the division that has shaped American politics over the last century. Foreign policy issues, however, are not to be ignored.

In 2009, Obama not only inherited a crippled economy, but also a precarious geopolitical situation with American armed forces fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. With the end of the eight-year-long occupation of Iraq and preparation to leave Afghanistan by 2014 underway, focus must now shift to East Asia, where the legacy of long fought wars still remains. The region is home to an erstwhile enemy-turned ally, Japan, a contemporary rival, China and the Cold War allies—Taiwan, South Korea and the Philippines—as well as a 'rogue' nuclear threat, North Korea. Historically, the Asia-Pacific region has featured prominently in the foreign affairs of the US; in the 1980s, US presidential candidates resorted to Japan bashing to counter the economic success of the island nation, amidst fears that it would soon overtake the American economy. China's rapid economic rise through the 1990s ensured its place as a major foreign policy issue for both the Clinton campaigns. Now the heavy militarization of the region has reinvigorated American foreign policy focus on the region.

On one hand North Korea presents a direct military threat as it continues to flout international norms and regulations on the testing and development of nuclear weapons. China's rapid military modernisation has led to a spate of maritime disputes over territorial sovereignty. As tensions escalate, the Pentagon acknowledges the significant foreign policy challenge posed by the region to any candidate

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for the presidency. As Asia-Pacific already accounts for more than 40% of global trade, as well some 60% of total US exports¹, finding the right balance between military resilience and economic cooperation is essential.

The upcoming elections in Japan and South Korea, the imminent 18th Party Congress in China, as well as the change in leadership that has taken place in North Korea will have far-reaching economic and diplomatic consequences. What must also be factored in is the effect of post-election US policy in influencing the transition of power in this increasingly important geopolitical domain.

Obama – The Pacific President

Barack Obama's ascension to the presidency in 2009 was marked by hope; he promised bold solutions to the country's gravest problems. However, three million more Americans have been added to the number of the jobless in the last four years and the national debt is 5 trillion dollars higher. America's economic recovery has been sluggish; with a mere 2.2% increase in GDP since 2009. It is therefore not surprising that Obama's approval ratings are below 50%.² Nonetheless, it might be too early to judge Obama on his economic record, given that no President inherited the nation's economy in such a dismal state since Franklin Roosevelt. Another term may be necessary for a real economic revival.

The President has also been forced to witness the overall decline in America's geopolitical dominance, with the emergence of several multi-lateral counter balances to US hegemony. China's rise has meant that American foreign policy must place economic cooperation ahead of military and diplomatic tensions between the two nations. In the run up to the election, both Democrats and Republicans have emphasized Chinese strength for reasons of both national security and political expediency, leading to the much hyped 'Pivot to Asia' attitude.³

From an American perspective, China's rise presents both an opportunity and a threat, as economic interdependence has resulted in Chinese sensitivity to fluctuations in the dollar, as it is the largest holder of US debt securities. However, China's compounded increase in defence spending focused on bolstering up its maritime capacities has threatened to diminish US military influence in the region, sending up flares in allied states such as Japan and Philippines. China's disregard for international norms on important issues such as human rights, intellectual property rights, and fair trade practices is seen as a dilemma not just for the US, but for the global economy. In his 2012 State of the Union address, Obama announced the creation of a Trade Enforcement Unit, to investigate unfair trading practices by countries such as China. He also stated that his administration had brought in trade cases against China at nearly twice the rate of George W. Bush's term.⁴ Unlike the ties with the erstwhile Soviet Union, the current US relationship with China has a central economic dimension, with each being a major source of trade and investment for the other. Clearly, that is why Obama has a genuine desire to iron out differences with China, provided he can work out three key issues:

- 1) China's neighbours who want an unobtrusive bubble of American protection against Beijing's aggrandising behaviour;

- 2) Humanitarians who believe that strategic and economic concerns should be subordinated to democratic norms and human rights and;
- 3) Conservatives who fear China's military might, and believe that the only response is to increase defence expenditure.⁵

Economic integration between China and America has suffered due to China's military assertiveness and political impunity. Although America's economic fortunes are directly linked to Chinese commercial practices and vice versa, Obama has made efforts to counter-balance China's burgeoning presence in East Asia. His first term saw the signing of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with South Korea. However, the primary vehicle for economic integration has been his pursuit of the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (TPP), whose tenets include strengthened corporate governance, protection of labour rights, and further liberalization of domestic markets to facilitate international economic cooperation.

While the US President maintains that the TPP is open to China, its conditions surely would compromise the ideology behind China's national identity. Additionally, Japan's status as only an observer state, due to immense domestic resistance against its membership, has further challenged Obama's vision for the TPP.

On the surface, the TPP appears to be a platform for economic cooperation. However, out of the eleven member nations, the US already has established strong economic linkages through Free Trade Areas with Singapore, Australia, Chile, Peru, Canada and Mexico, leaving only the relatively minor economies of New Zealand, Brunei, Vietnam and Malaysia. The inclusion of these nations in the TPP does not significantly increase the market area, due to the relatively small size of their economies, giving prominence to the idea that the only real purpose of the TPP seems to be to reset a regional balance of power which has increasingly shifted to China in recent times.

This line of argument is further strengthened when one looks into America's military presence in the Pacific. In April 2012, a group of 200-odd marines arrived in Northern Australia, a number expected to increase to 2500 by 2016. In South-East Asia, the US plans to permanently deploy littoral combat ships in Singapore, accelerate joint military exercises in the Philippines and increase defence cooperation with Vietnam.⁶ The Obama government also announced a 5.8 billion dollar defence deal with Taiwan. This is in addition to the 52-year-old Treaty of Mutual Security signed with Japan which houses over 85 different armed forces facilities.⁷

The US Pacific Command (PACOM) is the largest of the America's six regional commands; its assets include 325,000 military and civilian personnel, 180 ships and 1,900 aircrafts.⁸ Hence, it would be justifiable to claim that, whereas Obama projects a policy of engagement with China through strengthening bilateral economic cooperation, his primary interest has been to contain China's rise. Chinese strategists assume that a country as powerful as the United States will use its power to enhance and preserve its privileges, and this leads to a pessimistic conclusion: the higher China rises, the more the US resistance increases.⁹

Mitt Romney and the Republican Agenda

If past elections are anything to go by, Mitt Romney has the harder job. Although Obama's approval ratings are the lowest of any incumbent President to be re-nominated, Romney's own approval ratings aren't impressive either. He no doubt benefits greatly from the ideological polarization of voters, and knows that his conservative agenda is enough for garnering approval amongst certain communities and in certain states. Many voters believe him to be better than President Obama on policies to revive the economy, but he pales in comparison on issues concerning foreign policy and national security.

The reckless rhetoric he has presented on foreign policy questions has raised doubt over his candidature. He infamously asserted that on the first day of his presidency he would declare China a currency manipulator, knowing that such a move would probably lead to China's withdrawal from participating in the next treasury auction, sending American interest rates soaring.¹⁰ Romney's rhetoric is fine for talk-show hosts and political rallies, but surely it cannot be a reflection of his real policy pursuits with real life consequences.¹¹ This hard line stance on China and his comments regarding Russia and Iran show his desire to galvanize public opinion into viewing him as a more assertive candidate for American interests in the global arena. In an increasingly interdependent economic climate, Romney's provocations seem to lack substance, especially considering the fact that an economic downturn in China could potentially create another more wide-spread global recession.

Romney needs to be able to show the public that he can lead at a time of great uncertainty abroad, where American geopolitical primacy and the ideological universality is being challenged by the competing Chinese model. Currently, the Republican Party is as divided as ever before on foreign policy, and Romney being the chosen nominee, has an obligation to clarify his and his party's position.¹²

Republicans are divided on the proposed increase in the defence budget and it is imperative for Romney to justify his plan to add \$2 trillion in defence spending over the next ten years, which is mostly seen as a method to increase American military presence in Asia-Pacific to counter-balance China's aggressive behaviour. The 2012 Republican Party manifesto released in August at the Republican National Convention says that “in the face of China's accelerated military build-up the US and our allies must maintain appropriate military capabilities to discourage any aggressive or coercive behaviour against its neighbours.”¹³

There are several implications arising out of the proposed escalation in tensions by Romney. Firstly, it could result in retaliatory actions by China in the economic sphere, freezing any progress on further financial integration. Secondly, a more assertive US military posture is likely to increase Chinese military spending, thereby influencing the emerging regional arms race.¹⁴ It is imperative for any American administration to ensure that its expanding military presence in the Asia-Pacific region is seen as a deterrent rather than a provocation.

During election season, there is a well established pattern of condemning the incumbent government's China policy as being 'soft', especially on issues such as disregard to international norms on fair trade

and human rights. However, the pattern also reflects a turnaround when in office, where generally restrained and more realist policies are adopted to engage China economically.¹⁵ Romney's own stance fits well into this pattern.

China bashing has become a mainstay of the American electoral game, and although most analysts see Romney's firm stance on China as mindless rhetoric aimed at vote gathering, one of his foreign policy advisors—Aaron Friedberg—believes otherwise, claiming that Romney believes very strongly that it is necessary for the United States to not allow the Chinese to go scot free with some of the things that they are getting away with. Friedberg further hints that China's continuous flouting of international norms and its strong emphasis on militarism and nationalism may lead to it manifesting itself as a fascist regime in years to come.¹⁶

Romney's calls for increasing defence spending—and thereby American naval presence in the South east Pacific—may not just be an electoral game, but an accurate reflection of his desire to shift away from the 'soft approach' taken by President Obama. Comments made by the chair of the Republican Foreign Affairs Committee, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, bolster this argument, claiming that China's school yard bully tactic was aimed at controlling the vital sea lanes, potentially choking off commerce and oil shipments; this attempt, she says, must be met with stronger American support for its strategic allies, namely Japan and the Philippines.¹⁷

Current Issues in Asia Pacific

Much has been said with regard to a potential stand-off between China and America, “where Americans see the Asian economic giant as a threat to their democratic and capitalist ideals and the Chinese believe the United States to be a revisionist power that seeks to curtail China's political influence and stall its rise to preserve their precariously balanced hegemony.”¹⁸ Whereas this may suggest a bipolar tug-of-war between China and America, the Asia-Pacific region is home to major economic powers, like Japan, South Korea, Singapore as well as Australia, all of whom have to preserve their own interests in the region.

There is a particular cause for concern amongst nations that are China's immediate neighbours, Japan and South Korea. Despite their deep bilateral ties with the US, their economic interests have increasingly become tied to those of their burgeoning neighbour. And, although nations like Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia are all competing over maritime territories in the South China Sea, they, along with other ASEAN nations, depend on the free flow of trade and commerce with China.

Despite escalation of disputes in both the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and the souring of diplomatic ties between China and some of its neighbouring economic partners, full-scale conflict, armed or diplomatic, is not an option for China. Military conflict would stop nothing short of a naval world war, and diplomatic pressure can only be marginal in the light of increasing economic interdependence. What is clear, however, is that the US armed presence cannot afford to recede in the region. Perceived American weakness will only lead to further assertiveness from Beijing.

As America therefore sets out to regain some lost ground in Asia-Pacific, this could spell bad news for candidates in the upcoming Japanese general election for the House of Representatives, where public disenchantment with the continued presence of the American military in Japan is taking a central role in domestic politics. In 2008 Okinawa, the 'unofficial fiefdom of the American armed forces since 1945', reported 28 accidents, six cases of water pollution from oil waste, 18 controlled land fires and a total of 70 felonies, all caused by military personnel. This has raised concerns that the once unquestioned strategic alliance between Japan and the United States has begun showing signs of strain.¹⁹

Recently there has been an escalation in US-Japan tensions, with the deployment of the Osprey tilt rotor aircraft, with nationwide protests in Japan. The aircraft has the infamous reputation of just falling out of the sky, with a string of accidents having caused a total of 36 fatalities. In October, the Osprey is scheduled to begin operations in an extremely sensitive area linked to the American-Japanese alliance, the Futenma Air Base.²⁰ The failure to close down the base, which occupies 25% of Ginowan City, was cited as the main reason for the resignation of former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama.

America's response has been that in light of China's assertiveness and the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, the presence of troops is a necessary evil, an opinion that is being accepted by the Japanese media, albeit with considerable reservations. However, the public has not been easy to convince: a poll conducted by the Mainichi Shimbun indicates that a record breaking 65% of Japanese citizens favour a revision of the post-war constitution.²¹ There is a strong suspicion that the dissatisfaction with the Osprey and the flare-up of territorial disputes with both China and South Korea have led to the Japanese public demanding a more assertive national security policy that prioritises Japan's own interests.

Asia-Pacific is home to yet another security concern for any US President. The death of North Korea's Kim Jong-Il last year sparked fresh concerns regarding the internal dynamics of an already veiled country. Stylized as the 'Supreme Leader', he commanded the fourth largest standing army in the world; he has been succeeded by his son Kim Jong-Un.

The Six-Party Talks initiated during George W. Bush's first term in office were followed through by President Obama who offered 240,000 tons of food-aid in exchange for Pyongyang agreeing to freeze nuclear weapon tests, the enrichment of uranium, and agreeing to be subjected to a new inspection by IAEA. This approach based on 'strategic patience' did not work as well as the President hoped, and North Korea continues to be a blip on the radar of America's strategic allies, South Korea and Japan.²²

Mitt Romney has argued that, instead of approaching the problem from a position of strength, President Obama sought to appease the regime with a food-aid deal that proved to be as naive as it was short lived. Romney has vowed that with rogue nations with nuclear ambitions such as North Korea, the imposition of harsh sanctions was the only form of dissuasion.²³

Conclusion

As the election campaign heats up, Obama has the edge over Romney on most issues except America's economic revival. While Romney's fiscal policies have impressed voters, his somewhat belligerent position on issues of national security and foreign affairs have not done well for his candidature. This, however, does not signal celebration for Obama and the Democratic Party just yet: it is important to consider that, although Obama may be seen as a better candidate to negotiate with the Chinese and safeguard American interests in Pacific-Asia, the state of the US economy contributes to the 'unhealthy' balance in Sino-US relations. In order to build a healthier relationship it is vital for Americans to save more, consume less, and get their banks to behave less recklessly.²⁴ Here it is important to note that whereas polls suggest that 90% of Americans will choose the next US president on domestic issues such as jobs, healthcare, budget deficit and social security, China may not figure directly, but indirectly could hugely matter in boosting America's economic revival.²⁵

Recently, both US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited China. Both visits have been a final opportunity to explain and reinforce the Obama administration's complex approach to Sino-US relations.²⁶ Panetta claimed that “our goal is to have the United States and China establish the most important bilateral relationship in the world, and the key to that is to establish a strong military-to-military relationship; senior level interactions are aimed at reducing the potential of miscalculation and to boost a real understanding between our two countries.”²⁷

The focal point of both meetings has been the various maritime disputes over territories in both the South China and the East China Sea, and despite all of America's military deployment in the region, both Clinton and Panetta have asserted that America will not choose sides, and that all nations in the region should work collaboratively to resolve the disputes without coercion, without intimidation and certainly without the use of force.²⁸

There is a further consideration. The Romney campaign has also accused the Obama administration of 'abandoning' Israel, and this has raised concerns that a Romney government might continue US involvement in the Middle East. An Israeli attack on Iran, with the backing of a Romney administration would not only create a new crisis, but push the US further into the region, making deployment of American resources to the Pacific even more difficult.²⁹ Thus the potential impact of unpredictable events in the Middle East is also important in considering US policies in East Asia. The costs of deeper entrenchment in the Middle East clearly outweigh the perceived benefits, especially when considering the rising tensions in East Asia. Sino-Japanese relations have reached their lowest point since the establishment of diplomatic ties between them in 1972; 90% of Chinese citizens back additional countermeasures planned to be taken against Japan over its nationalisation of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.³⁰ This suggests that the 52-year old Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan might finally need to be put to test.

As this volatile political climate unravels, the transition of power due to take place in Washington D.C. may have grave consequences for a region which for the last half a century has focused on economic

cooperation. An ideal scenario would see the American 'pivot to Asia' resulting in deterrence rather than conflict, diplomatic resolution of territorial conflicts as well as strengthened economic integration; however, the converse could happen on all of these fronts, leading to negative global consequences. It is no wonder then, that in the run up to the election, the Obama administration has played its cards in a manner that re-imposes the American footprint over the Asia-Pacific region.

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