



WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE, IF ANY?

Roger Svensson

The 2012 presidential campaign has shown that there is not much daylight between President Obama and Governor Romney when it comes to foreign policy. The difference is more in tone than in substance with Governor Romney attacking the President for being weak and apologetic. The President on the other hand has played his Commander-in-Chief card. In this policy brief ISDP Senior Fellow Roger Svensson argues that regardless of who becomes the next President, American foreign and security policy will be decided by events rather than grand strategy.

The 2012 presidential campaign has shown that there is not much daylight between President Obama and Governor Romney when it comes to foreign policy. The difference is more in tone than in substance with Governor Romney attacking the President for being weak and apologetic. The President on the other hand has played his Commander-in-Chief card with repeated references to the killing of Osama bin Laden, ending the war in Iraq, and in due course, the war in Afghanistan. It is a bromide (as popularly quoted by Republican Senator Vandenberg during the Truman administration) that US politics stops at the water's edge. In this presidential race it very much looks as if this will hold true.

A few differences in substance can be found. For instance, Governor Romney will, if elected, define China as a "currency manipulator," provide arms for "some" of the Syrian rebels and side more clearly with Israel on the issue of Palestine. He has also indicated that he would be more willing to keep troops in Afghanistan after 2014, depending on the advice of the military commanders. American focus would also likely shift from the Asia-Pacific to Latin America. These are however nuances rather than distinct differences.

Until a few months ago, President Obama had a robust approval rating for his foreign policy. Obama still maintains a lead as preferred president, but the murder of the US ambassador in Libya triggered a loss of approval, especially among independents. Even before this event, the candidates have made a decision to keep foreign policy on the back burner, likely based on an assessment of the mood

of the American public. It might even be more correct to state that foreign policy is primarily, if not exclusively, seen through the prism of domestic policy, and of course especially in the context of the economic situation. Hurricane Sandy shows a domestic situation which, in a heartbeat, arrests voters' focus from foreign policy and redirects their attention to domestic issues.

Events, My Dear Boy

If one looks back at US foreign and security policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it might be illuminating to quote the British Foreign Secretary (and later Prime Minister) Harold MacMillan. Asked by a journalist what is most likely to blow a government off course, MacMillan quipped "Events, my dear boy, events." Even if the quote is most likely apocryphal, it gives a succinct summary of what US foreign and security policy has been facing for at least two decades: event-driven policy choices.

The Black Hawk Down incident in Somalia in 1993 had a lasting impact on American willingness to operate as a global police force in foreign conflicts, at least when it comes to putting "boots on the ground". President Bill Clinton intervened in the Balkan conflict using US supreme airpower. While France and the United Kingdom more or less forced the US to create the conditions for the fall of the Libyan dictator Muammar al-Ghadaffi. These events, and the American reactions to them, were more ad hoc than a reflection of a foreign or security strategy. More importantly, they were events that beckoned action.



Trouble Weighs a Ton

It might be fair to say that the US has a strategy in the Asia-Pacific for dealing with an assertive China and an almost nuclear North Korea. How effective that strategy is remains an open question. However, when we look at the numerous other trouble spots, it is striking how fumbling and disoriented the US foreign policy is – and will continue to be, regardless of the outcome of the presidential election. Israel will continue to be their “greatest ally,” but also, not least due to Israel’s disproportionate importance in domestic politics, one of the greatest headaches for the next American president. Another ally, the dysfunctional Pakistan, is turning more and more anti-American with each drone strike that the President orders. The Syrian situation has no constructive end in sight. Iran will be hit by “crippling sanctions” but the Iranian people will look forward to the prospect of an Iranian nuclear capability. “No option is off the table” is the official American posture vis-à-vis Iran but a military operation, unlikely as it is, would have dramatic consequences. A growing list of countries are increasingly anti-American, amongst them Russia under Putin.

The traditional military doctrine of the US has been that its armed forces should have the capacity to fight in two theatres of war. In today’s world the notion of theatres of war has lost much of its relevance. Neither Afghanistan nor Iraq can be viewed as wars in the traditional sense, more as a poisonous combination of war and civil war. The same situation might easily develop in other hotspots in Asia, North Africa and the Middle East. What the US forces can do is an open question, but more to the point: What would the

American public allow their Commander-in-Chief to do? If pledges are to be believed, a President Romney would increase military spending to four percent of GDP and increase the Navy. Yet while a stronger Navy might deter an assertive China and keep North Korea at bay it would not make any difference whatsoever for disentangling the situation in the Middle East or in Pakistan.

The bottom line is that future US foreign and security policy will be even more hesitant and decided by unforeseen developments beyond its control. Even if the US public believes in a leading role for the nation, war weariness and the persistent economic difficulties will force it to concentrate more within its borders than outside them. The next president of the US – regardless of who it will be – will have to do the best he can with the cards that he is dealt. The challenges will be the same, and more to the point, mostly so the options as well. What will shape their presidency will be the events rather than a grand strategy. Hurricane Sandy, at the eleventh hour of the presidential campaign, shows just how such an unforeseen event can impact on politics – and could sway voters from foreign issues to those closer to home.

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