

# The American Presidential Elections And US Security Challenges

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The American presidential elections, which are held every four years, will take place this time on November 4, 2008 to elect a new president to lead the United States and define its national security interests. Two candidates with different backgrounds and worldviews are competing for the job. The candidate of the Democratic Party Barack Obama calls for drastic change based on new social principles. The candidate of the Republican Party John McCain calls for some change but without deviating from the principles that have governed the policies and politics of President Bush. Will the new president be able to change things and reorder American priorities to correspond to his vision? I do not believe so. While change will be introduced, the outcome will be neither drastic nor comprehensive to make a big difference in state policies or politics.

The experience of the last forty years has demonstrated that presidents tend to introduce change and set new priorities, and that the views they articulate and programs they promote during election campaigns influence their approach to domestic issues, security matters, international relations, environmental and energy policies, and poverty concerns. But because the US has been a great superpower with security and economic interests everywhere, no administration has ever been able to overhaul old policies or institute new ones that contradict the conventional wisdom prevalent in Washington. The US Congress, the American media, and the many lobbies have acted as guardians protecting domestic and international programs and policies that serve their interests and promote their cultural values.

Foreign political analysts in general tend to think that domestic and international policies differ from one another because they are based on different assumptions. While this view is largely true in most democratic states; it is not true in the United States. The US political system and constitution have made both policies interlinked and thus inseparable. In fact, US foreign policy has almost always been an extension of domestic policy. Meanwhile, the advancement of economic globalization and increased US dependence on foreign investment capital and oil, policymaking and implementation has become very complicated. The financial crisis that engulfed the United States lately proves that domestic and foreign policies are interlinked, and that the economy is a major national security issue.

Though it is widely believed that the US national interest is the organizing principle of the American foreign policy; and thus it governs the country's international agenda and approach to international relations and global security concerns, things have never been this simple. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the demise of Marxism, and the end of the Cold War, it became very difficult to define the American national interest in clear terms that enjoy the support of the ruling political military, economic, and media elites in the United States. The September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the US failure to

win the war in Afghanistan or Iraq or on "terrorism," eliminated all possibilities to reach consensus regarding US national interest. Meanwhile, the reemergence of Russia as a major economic and military power, the rise of China and India and Brazil as global economic powers, the consolidation of Europe as an economic and political power house, and the financial meltdown of Wall Street in September 2008 have made any attempt to define America's national or security interests an exercise in futility.

Barack Obama, who worked as a community organizer to help the poor and defend the rights of an oppressed minority, belongs to small educated elite that care for the rest of the world. Therefore, he is expected to be more of an internationalist than a nationalist. John McCain on the other hand, being a military man who served in the US Air force and whose father had been a general, is more of a nationalist than an internationalist. An internationalist leader is more likely to cooperate with allies and consult with friends and negotiate with adversaries to resolve conflict; he tends also to recognize the rights and interests of other nations and deal with international issues through the United Nations and other regional and international organizations. A nationalist leader in contrast, tends to pursue unilateralism, give priority to national interests that correspond to his ideological worldview, and ignore the UN and other regional and international organizations, or use them as tools to legitimize acts that otherwise could not be legitimized. And in his quest to protect the perceived national interest and promote his political and economic ideas, a nationalist is more likely to ignore the rights and interests of other nations.

The magnitude of the security, military, economic, financial and political problems facing America today make it impossible to articulate a list of achievable goals and translate them into workable programs that could protect the "national interest." Only ideology could come up with a vague list of unachievable goals that ignore reality as well as the interests and rights of other nations. While some people in American think that fighting "terrorism" is the major national security issue; others consider restoring the stability of the financial system and the revival of the American economy the most important national goals. Still others think that the new Russian posture and regional designs, and Iran's nuclear ambitions represent the most serious security challenge facing the United States and its allies. But regardless of what members of Congress, the White house, the media, and the captains of the sinking ship of capitalism might think, and what the presidential candidates might say, the United States is today in a mess, and no one knows how to get out of it.

No matter who wins the November elections and becomes the president of the United States, the major security challenges he will inherit and thus must deal with are the following:

1. Fighting the war in Afghanistan;
2. Devising an exit strategy from both Iraq and Afghanistan;
3. Stabilizing Pakistan and securing its nuclear arsenal;
4. Facing the Russian challenge in Europe and Asia;
5. Keeping access to the Gulf oil supplies secure;
6. Stopping Iran's nuclear program; and
7. Restoring the US political credibility abroad and financial stability at home.

If Barack Obama wins the presidential race, his administration is likely to be staffed by many of the people who served in the Clinton administration; and that should enable America under his stewardship to regain some of its lost credibility and respect around the world. Though some social and economic policy changes would be introduced, no drastic change will take place; and consequently, no sociocultural or socioeconomic transformations will be forthcoming. As for the security challenges, president Obama will devise a plan to get out of Iraq in an orderly manner, while using military force to win the war in Afghanistan. However, I do not believe he will win the war or peace in Afghanistan, unless he works with Russia, India, Pakistan, China and Iran to forge a regional coalition to stabilize the failing states of Pakistan and Afghanistan, contain the threat of terrorism, and recognize the interests of all parties concerned. While Obama is expected to give more attention to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, McCain is expected to ignore it.

If John McCain wins the presidential race, his first act as president-elect is expected to be an engagement in what I call the "recycling of human trash," to bring back the discredited neoconservatives to power. As a consequence, America's credibility will deteriorate further, little economic or social policy changes will be introduced, and the American economy will face more problems. Under McCain and his neoconservative madmen, America and the world will have more of the same: aggressiveness to pursue what is perceived as US interests, neglect of international problems, and stupidity in managing the economy. As for the security challenges, president McCain will develop policies to stay in Iraq for as long as possible, increase the intensity of war in Afghanistan, and pursue regional policies that could destabilize the Pakistani regime further, take a tougher stand towards the Iran that could lead to attacking its nuclear facilities, and continue the racist campaign against Islam and Muslims. While most Americans were made to believe that Islam and a nuclear Iran present a serious threat to world peace and Israel's survival, I believe that the likelihood a fundamentalist Iran becoming a nuclear state in the near future is less than the likelihood that a nuclear Pakistan becoming a fundamentalist state.

In view of the American financial meltdown and economic decline, the new president will have fewer resources available to him to initiate new social or military programs that could have a major impact on the lives of poor Americans or the future of other nations. Therefore, whoever gets elected in few weeks will have to recognize that the United States of America is an empire in decline, a diminished superpower in no position to dominate the world as before. President Obama is more able to recognize this fact and act accordingly; while president McCain is less likely to accept such a verdict and therefore is more likely to conduct a policy based on illusions and outdated ideological ideas that hurt everyone and serve the interests of no one. The emerging new world order will not be based on one superpower acting alone, but on a few great powers competing for political influence and economic advantage.

Though America's view of security interests is expected to change after the elections, the US policy toward the Middle East is less likely to experience any noticeable change. It is a policy that had become an article of political faith, and therefore no one dares to change it or even raise doubts about its utility. Such a policy has the following objectives:

1. Protecting the security of Israel and supporting its policies and maintaining its military edge over all neighboring Arab states;
2. Guaranteeing access to the oil resources of the Arabian Gulf and securing the free flow of oil supplies to the West;
3. Defending the Arab Gulf states particularly the oil exporting ones, against internal and external forces of instability;
4. Preventing the emergence of a regional power capable of dominating its neighbors or threatening American interests in the region; and
5. Fighting international terrorism.

While the invasion of Iraq caused the US to lose its political credibility and be viewed as the greatest threat to world peace and security; its failure to win the war in Iraq or Afghanistan or on "terrorism" has caused it to lose some of its military credibility. Meanwhile, the financial crisis has caused America to lose its financial credibility and a great deal of its economic power. Though the US economy remains the largest in the world, it is no longer the strongest; it has proven to be badly managed and vulnerable to internal acts of fraud and manipulation and external forces of rising oil prices and emerging economic powers. As a consequence, the US security challenges have expanded to include finding a way to transform its consumer culture, change its political culture, and overhaul its economic culture; a tall order that requires foresight, planning, determination and a generation or two to complete.

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