

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE 2012 ELECTION

REPORT

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U.S. Foreign Policy After the 2012 Election
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To outside observers, U.S. Presidential elections can be a noisy cacophony of competing agendas, claims, and priorities, where it is often difficult to filter out essential information from political spin. With heated campaign rhetoric and an endless news cycle, the choice offered between Democrats and Republicans is often pitched as one of stark contrasts and choices, with major policy outcomes for the following four years dependent on whoever is the occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Despite this environment, a gathering of experts agreed on a counter-intuitive claim: on underlying structural issues of U.S. economic, military, and political foreign policy, both parties are largely in agreement.

On October 16, 2012, the Ottawa Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) held its eighth event, a seminar discussion on U.S. Foreign Policy after the 2012 election jointly organized with the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA). The discussion featured three panelists on different aspects of U.S. Foreign Policy: Anthony Quainton from the American University in Washington, and distinguished former U.S. Ambassador addressing political foreign policy; former Chief Economist of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) John Curtis on U.S. economic foreign policy; and Joel Sokolsky, Principal of the Royal Military College of Canada on U.S. military foreign policy. The event drew over 100 participants from DFAIT, NPSIA, and the CIC National Capital Branch membership to DFAIT's headquarters at the Lester B. Pearson building. It was jointly moderated by Craig Hunter, one of the co-chairs of the CIC FPI, and David Mendeloff, Director of Centre for Security and Defence Studies at NPSIA.

Panelists were asked to provide their views on three overarching themes. First, how should the next administration deploy its resources, diplomatic and military, to reflect the growing economic and political importance of Asia? What would be the implications of a shift of attention towards Asia for other regions of the world and for countries that have been long-time allies of the U.S., such as Canada? Second, should the United States continue to lead in working towards an open international economy and global economic growth in the next presidential term? If instead the U.S. withdraws from leadership and becomes more inward looking, should Canada reorganize its international economic relations, significantly diversifying its trade and investment ties? Third, how should the next administration define its national security role over the next four years? How might a more modest American role affect the prospects for international conflict and instability? Given the altered circumstances of its closest ally should Canada re-think how it ensures its own security?

On military policy, the panel foresaw a continuation of maintaining the U.S. position as the world's preeminent military power, with no possibility of the U.S. retrenching its military power in favour of an isolationist approach. Panelists noted a national consensus on the current strategic culture of projecting forward-looking, offence-oriented military power, which seeks to move conflicts as far away from the U.S. homeland as possible. The U.S. will also continue to engage allies in protecting U.S. interests, but any shift in U.S. military policy will be based on an increased variety of tools.

Dr. Sokolsky suggested that the U.S. will likely continue engaging in irregular warfare, such as the 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya, but will do so with an overall focus on fewer "boots on the ground" with the exception of Special Forces. Instead, there will be increased preference for use of naval and aerial forces, including unmanned drones. Allies, including Canada, will be called upon to assist with these operations when they occur. Within this mix of military tools, a Republican victory might lead to an additional emphasis on missile defense, but apart from this distinction neither Presidential candidate has expressed much interest in any protracted counter-insurgency operation similar to the Afghanistan mission.

With respect to Canada and military foreign policy specifically, the panel foresaw a continuation of the status quo. New initiatives for North American security have not been raised in the election campaign as a priority, and existing institutions such as NORAD will continue, as well as continuing cooperation on operational aspects such as intelligence sharing. However no deepening of institutional mechanisms is anticipated.

The linkages between military policy and the U.S. fiscal position were raised. In particular, it was asked how military foreign policy may be impacted by the looming \$500 billion sequestration of military spending cuts scheduled to be made unless Congress is able to agree to a new budget with the President before the start of 2013. The view of the panel was that some arrangement would be made after the election, irrespective of who wins, as neither party has the desire to permit such cuts to go ahead.

On the issue of U.S. foreign economic policy, John Curtis framed foreign economic policy as an extension of domestic economic policy. While domestic public finances are the predominant focus of campaign debates, it was pointed out that the U.S. is in an enviable position as the world's reserve currency, with borrowing costs for government remaining low. As a result, the "fiscal cliff" is somewhat overstated.

There was general agreement that both parties will seek to contain China's rise on the world stage, particularly in the economic sphere. Here, the ongoing discussions under the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was identified as a multilateral effort that will likely be the focus of the President's attention over the next four years. The U.S. will also continue to engage in multilateral forums such as

the G7 / G20, and IMF, while exerting pressure bilaterally on countries like China or Russia for trade practices.

Finally, in addressing political priorities for U.S. foreign political policy, the major theme was one of continuing U.S. “exceptionalism”. Though President Barack Obama promised in 2008 to “reset” relations with certain states both the President and challenger Governor Mitt Romney have expressed little desire to seek broaden diplomatic engagement with countries like Iran or North Korea and would be likely to continue the approach of isolating such states.

There may be some differences in U.S. political foreign policy where dissimilarities exist between the two major political parties on domestic policy. For example, a Republican victory would likely lead to less emphasis on human rights, such as women’s rights, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, as has been personally championed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Similarly, Democrats may be more inclined than Republicans to support interventions on humanitarian grounds.

Aside from the three major planned themes of the discussion, several issues cut across multiple aspects of U.S. foreign policy. First, U.S. foreign policy was described as primarily reactive, or event-driven, rather than based on proactive planning. However in responding to external events, the political consensus favours maintaining U.S. control to the extent possible. Second, there will be a continuing interest in China across U.S. foreign policy, as the U.S. furthers its strategic “pivot towards the Pacific”. Third, energy issues were raised in the discussion, with panelists noting that with North America moving towards greater energy independence, there will be gradual strengthening of North America as a construct through increasing integration of Canadian and Mexican energy supplies with the U.S. market. Finally, the discussion noted that the U.S. is undergoing a long-term shift in identity, as a result of its changing geopolitical status vis-à-vis the rise of new emerging powers, and internal demographic changes. While U.S. exceptionalism will remain an important framework for U.S. foreign policy in the foreseeable future, this shifting identity will gradually manifest itself in terms of shifting engagement with regions such as China or Latin America.

Overall the discussion provided many insights for participants to consider through a stimulating conversation. The CIC National Capital Branch is grateful to the panelists for their participation, in addition to the Policy Planning Bureau of DFAIT, and CIC FPI volunteers for their assistance in planning the event. This event would not have been possible without the support of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

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