



## Foreign policy and US elections

By  
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Campaign season in the United States is in full swing, with the presidential election scheduled to take place within one month's time. Early voting in some states has already started. Washington's policy wonks are planning their election night parties, while campaign workers gear up for the home stretch, making last-minute phone calls to voters asking for donations and reminding them to vote.

For foreign policy enthusiasts, this election has been less than thrilling. With the exception of Iran and Israel, foreign policy is not a priority in this election. Of the four debates scheduled, only one — on Oct 22 — is exclusively devoted to foreign policy. The next president will be elected almost entirely on the basis of domestic issues, namely the economic health of the country, which most Americans rightfully prioritise over foreign policy.

But the focus away from foreign policy will not last long. The next American president will have to almost immediately begin tackling international issues. In case anyone needs reminding, the world is in turmoil. The Middle East is still coping with the political reverberations of the Arab Spring. Hawks in Tel Aviv, Tehran, and Washington are honing in on the question of Iran's nuclear capabilities.

Europe's financial crisis continues to weigh down the American recovery. The United States is still running a war in Afghanistan. US relations with Pakistan are on the mend but there could be more turmoil ahead if the two countries cannot come to agreement on national security and counterterrorism policy related to Afghanistan. When foreign policy is discussed in the campaign, Pakistan ranks high in the pecking order. Most mentions of Pakistan are in conjunction with the May 2, 2011 unilateral raid that killed Osama bin Laden.

Understandably, the raid is a source of tension in Pakistan. But for Americans, the death of the mastermind behind the Sept 11 attacks is a major step towards closure in a conflict many believe has dragged on too long. It is no surprise the Obama campaign will want to take credit for it. But I wouldn't expect too much more bravado from the Obama or Romney campaigns on foreign policy achievements or failures, especially in the final days of the election — history has taught them otherwise. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter was handicapped in his re-election bid by his inability to free American hostages in Iran, including by covert military force.

Just three years after the Sept 11 attacks, in 2004, many Americans were more supportive of a second term for George W. Bush simply because "changing a horse in midstream" would have damaged nascent war on terror efforts. No one wants to hurt their chances at power — not even America's partners across the world. Pakistan, like many other countries, is likely waiting to take any big decisions regarding the United States until after the elections because it knows foreign policy does not get advanced in a campaign season. But it also makes sense to wait because the election could usher in an entirely new set of government characters to work with.

Even so, many continue to hone in on and parse each campaign's specific mentions — or rather, lack of mention — of Pakistan. Partisan rhetoric usefully highlights the differences in how the campaigns view Pakistan. Despite the recent history of strained US-Pakistan relations, the Obama campaign does a better job than Romney at explaining Pakistan's importance to the American people. Obama for America campaign adviser Michèle Flournoy recently called Pakistan a strategic partner in counterterrorism, highlighting its many sacrifices in the fight against Al Qaeda, while at the same time noting a genuine interest on both sides to improve a relationship that has faced several ups and downs. Romney took on a more paternalistic role when he said "we need to help bring Pakistan into the 21st century, or the 20th century for that matter".

But something has been ignored in the over-analysing of words and the hesitation to make bold foreign policy statements in an election year: the fact that partisan politics in the United States is not likely to change the policy on Pakistan. No level of partisanship will alter the most urgent national interest at stake: that the two countries must cooperate on Afghanistan in the short term to facilitate the Nato drawdown, which is scheduled to conclude in December 2014. A policy that is expected to stay on track means that controversial security and counterterrorism policies will also remain sources of tension between the US and Pakistan — unless there are new solutions to decades-old problems. The next American president will have the daunting task of figuring that out. At the top of the to-do list will be many critical issues, including: managing the Nato drawdown via Pakistan routes; participation in an Afghanistan reconciliation process; rebuilding the non-security relationship with Pakistan; redefining security assistance as the US and Pakistan transition away from 'war on terror' cooperation.

Ultimately, it is not individual quotes or campaign rhetoric that will determine the future of US policy on Pakistan. The policy will be determined by the pursuit of US interests. We should all be thankful for that. Romney's comments that the US needs to bring Pakistan into the 20th century reflect a level of arrogance and lack of education that the bilateral relationship simply does not need right now. There's no stopping candidates from making statements like this to use foreign policy to make domestic gains — a phenomenon that is also alive and well in Pakistan — but very rarely do such moves alter national interests or strategies already in place.

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