

The Re-election of Barack Obama and Foreign Policy: Smart Power vs. Decline¹

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Against all predictions and despite the burden of U.S. history, Barack Obama was re-elected, making him the seventh president to achieve a second mandate with over 50 percent of the vote.² All of his domestic and foreign policies have been closely scrutinized, generally at the instigation of the Republican opposition. The 2008 election results (53 percent of votes for Obama vs. 46 percent for McCain) painted a picture of a polarized United States, particularly given that an Afro-American went on to win a second presidential term of a nation historically divided according to strict racial hierarchies.³

While “racial thinking” is predominant among various sectors of society, the ultra-conservative political elite, headed by the Tea Party movement, has taken it upon themselves to spread and reinforce the belief that Obama is not fit to gov-

ern. These sectors cannot forgive him for being an outsider president: a young, progressive politician and therefore a non-WASP “anomaly.” The members of this movement therefore adopted a stratagem that has been successful in the past in U.S. social history: to discredit his actions, they accused him of being a socialist, a Muslim (in other words, non-Christian), and even questioned his U.S. citizenship. However, this has not affected Obama and its only achievement seems to have been to put the political system in check and to have plunged the Republican Party into a crisis, the magnitude of which remains undetermined.

The criticism leveled at Obama—generally unfounded and from extremist political positions—has focused less on his foreign than his domestic policies, which are of more interest to the average voter.⁴ This process has laid bare the confusion and demagoguery among the Republicans, very possibly caused by their lack of proposals or spokespersons

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who can articulate coherent ideas about how to recover international leadership. They are bereft of ideas and running on empty. Therefore the issue of the economic crisis is caught up in a political disagreement sparked by the far-right's efforts to damage Barack Obama.

For example, in August 2011, a possible suspension of payments was discussed given the lack of a timely agreement in Congress that would allow the debt ceiling to be raised; eventually an agreement was reached, but only at the last possible moment and, to top it all off, leaving various points requiring subsequent negotiation.⁵ This has brought moderates and ultras back into the political ring, and worse still, in December the situation threatened to lead the country to the edge of the fiscal cliff.

This agreement imposed various budget cuts: over the coming decade the defense sector faces cuts of US\$480 billion, which suggests that Obama will have to exercise caution when defining his foreign policy priorities. This budget cut is a bone of contention among conservative sectors as they fear that a restricted U.S. foreign policy will erode the country's power base on the world stage. However, Parent and MacDonald say that these fears are baseless because throughout history (not only for the United States but for other powers, too), reduced military strength has generally not led to diminished international importance.⁶ In some cases the opposite is even true, since huge military expenditure has triggered economic disasters and some important foreign commitments have not been met.⁷

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Furthermore, in the Republican primaries, the potential nominees' foreign policy positions suggested a resumption of Bush's hard power. For example, the eight contenders (Jon Huntsman, Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, Herman Cain, Michele Bachmann, and Rick Perry, most of whom were subject to extreme pressure from the Tea Party) agreed that, if elected president, they would adopt an aggressive policy toward Pakistan, Syria, and Iran (and even involve the use of military force against the latter two). They would also continue supporting Israel run by the unpredictable Netanyahu (à la Bush) and would try to force China to abandon its unfair trade practices. Some of these candidates did not hesitate a moment to return to the policy of rolling out an anti-missile shield in Eastern Europe, and six of them were determined to use waterboarding on prisoners of war. The only ones opposed were Paul and Huntsman.⁸

Mitt Romney, the Republican Party's nominee, took a similar line. At that time, the Republican candidate and his campaign team focused on discrediting Obama's foreign policy achievements and on attempting to capitalize on some



Kevin Lamarque/REUTERS

mistakes of his administration, such as the attack on the United States consulate in Benghazi, Libya, where Ambassador Christopher Stevens died on September 11, 2012. Obama continues to face criticism on this issue, and in fact Chuck Hagel's nomination to head up the Pentagon was used to exert pressure. Hagel was finally confirmed on February 26 after sharp confrontations in the Senate, with 58 votes in favor and 41 against. Ultimately, the Republicans' indication that they would return to hard power as their first recourse revealed their negligence regarding foreign policy issues, suggesting that within the party the hard-liners that dominated the agenda have not taken into account the damage done by Bush's foreign policy. They have yet to realize that, as Brzezinski suggested at the time, it is better to exercise effective leadership than to dogmatically impose U.S. hegemony.⁹

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The concern over current U.S. foreign policy comes at a critical juncture: 1) the country's historic relative loss of leadership on the world stage; 2) political disagreements and budget crisis, and 3) a polarized pre- and post-electoral context in 2012. It is therefore particularly important that the country's foreign policy avoid excesses; in other words, it must not commit to more issues than it can handle, and, therefore, not make large, unnecessary, and inflexible investments in actions abroad. Initially, the smart power strategy was mainly aimed at tackling the first point, but it has gradually been forced to adapt to the needs inherent in the second and third points.

In the first place, in terms of recovering leadership, Washington has perceived that the advantages of a smart power strategy outweigh its disadvantages. For example, the United States has avoided directly confronting countries with which it has had troubled bilateral relations over the past three decades (such as Iran, North Korea and even Venezuela.)¹⁰ In addition, multilateral diplomacy has been chosen as a route for reaching international decisions (for example the intervention of North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces in Libya). Furthermore, the United States has shown an interest in practice in global issues, such as global warming, human rights, sustainability, and economic and financial stability. It has also shown interest and the willingness to enter into dialogue with actors it had previously snubbed or distanced itself from, due to negligent willfulness (the European Union, the

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Muslim world, and countries in the Asia-Pacific and Latin American regions, among them, Cuba).

Nevertheless, this strategy has not achieved all of its objectives. Suffice it to cite the Israel-Palestine conflict. It has also failed to diligently seek basic consensus on items on the global agenda, such as the economic and financial crisis, and the environment. But it should be emphasized that the smart power strategy is, in principle, a relatively advantageous way of advancing the interests, objectives, and values of the United States around the world, not a means of solving all the problems affecting the international community as a whole. Although it would eventually have an impact on broadening multilateral democratization of the global system and the redesign of its architecture, the smart power strategy essentially seeks a safe environment for the United States, which appears to a certain extent curbed by its loss of leadership and by the rise of other emerging players who may eventually become predominant, co-actors in the international arena.

Therefore, Obama kept stressing the importance of smart power during his campaign, and since his re-election he has held a steady course; he has stuck with the idea of solving problems derived from the loss of leadership, and of resuming relations with new emerging actors, all in order to recover the country's pre-eminence in the reorganization of the international system.¹¹

In the second place is the budget crisis. Although fears exist because this situation may place limitations on U.S. defense and security policy, it can also be said to offer a potential advantage. Restricting the use of military power is a smart choice in a context in which its use is accepted neither locally nor internationally, and instead threatens to worsen already-chaotic situations (such as Afghanistan and Iraq), especially if the use of military power is unjustified, as was the case in Iraq. In addition, the events that took place during the Bush administration taught a lesson: an exaggerated use of force does not necessarily confer on a nation status as the world's

supreme power, nor does it guarantee control over regional balances.¹² The transition toward recovering international leadership and legitimacy, a process initiated by Obama in his first term of office, is certain to be consolidated during his second administration. As he pointed out in his State of the Union address on February 12, 2013, he will continue with the smart power strategy, in an attempt to show the face of a cooperative country with an interest in the common good, to eventually recover legitimacy and regain the authority to play an influential and predominant role in decision-making in a globalized world, without this involving actions in any way detrimental to other players.

It should be noted that, even though the current administration continues to work with a sharply divided Congress, the rifts are more related to domestic than to foreign policy. This does not mean that Democrats and Republicans share the same ideas on how to pursue U.S. interests abroad. However, it will be easier to reach an agreement as long as 1) not all foreign policy issues involve party-based preferences of the U.S. electorate, and 2) the United States' international position remains coherent and it continues working toward the reconstruction and consolidation of a safe environment for the country.

Thirdly, but no less importantly, the 2012 presidential election results show an electorate more concerned with the fate of the U.S. economy and social spending than with foreign policy. Therefore, the candidates' proposals on international issues were not decisive for all voters. Obama has clearly been concerned with the financial crisis, proposing domestic reforms and even looking for opportunities abroad, through the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the creation of a Trans-Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (TAFTA) with the European Union. Nevertheless, the ultra-conservatives have led the charge against the president's initiatives, including this ground-breaking agreement. This has obviously impeded any chance of reactivating the economy and ensured that deficit, debt, and unemployment levels remain high.

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The Republican Party's anti-political approach can be seen firstly in its concern about falling over the edge of the "fiscal cliff" and then falling victim to the so-called "sequester" of the budget. But in the recent elections, an obstacle arose that would prevent conservative sectors from obtaining enough votes to regain the presidency or to win a majority in both chambers: splits within the party. Although most critics of Obama's administration come from the Republican opposition, not all its members are ultra-conservatives and Tea Party members (which incidentally seems to disregard the country's critical financial situation: for example, when it imposed the budget this year or refused to support Obama's bills to improve the economy). In the United States, public opinion about this movement became even more negative as a result of such positions; the Republican Party itself took a blow during the elections because it had shown too much tolerance—not to say complicity—with a clearly authoritarian, regressive movement. However, the Republican defeats in the presidential election and in the Senate have contributed to its members taking more moderate positions. Therefore, they agreed to negotiate, albeit under certain conditions, educational and immigration reforms that seem to be making good progress.

The situation facing the United States described above constitutes a complex panorama for the current administration. But this does not suggest that the United States is about to lose its power, or that it will meekly cede its place to emerging players on the world stage. Its economic strength has been affected to a certain extent, given that its national debt now exceeds its GDP and its growth dropped 2.9 percent in 2010 compared to 2009. However, the World Bank still ranks the United States as the world's leading economy, with a GDP of US\$14.5 trillion, compared to China with \$5.8 trillion, and it is also the world's second largest manufacturing nation after China. It continues to have the most powerful military, with expenditure outstripping every other country: up until 2010 it was still the world's biggest military spender, at US\$698 billion per year, equivalent to 4.8 percent of its GDP.¹³ In terms of public spending as a percentage of GDP, in 2009, according to the 2011 United Nations Development Programme, it spent 16.2 percent on both health and education, and in 2008, according to the World Bank, it invested 2.82 percent in science and technology.

This set of indicators suggests that that we cannot talk about an absolute decline in the United States.¹⁴ Although it is growing slowly in comparison with the BRICS,¹⁵ the latter

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countries are not spending much on key sectors for more sustainable development and have a long road ahead of them in other areas such as income distribution, poverty, inequality, and human rights. Finally, from a political perspective, the United States continues to be a key player on big international issues and, for some countries, its intervention in some of these matters is essential as long as it remains able to balance power.

The outlook is certainly worrying given the narrow margin for maneuver for taking action, especially in terms of for-

eign policy. However, the strategy seems to have given the United States a historic opportunity to correct the effects of its past excesses around the world, in order to regain lost ground. Achieving this will not depend only on its vast quantity of resources and capacities, but on using them as efficiently as possible, on the mechanisms it uses to implement objectives, and on its ability to develop a coherent strategy and able leadership, in other words, to move forward with smart power. ■■■

NOTES

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² The other six were: Andrew Jackson (with 54.23 percent of the vote), Abraham Lincoln (55.02 percent), Dwight D. Eisenhower (57.4 percent), Richard Nixon (60.67 percent), Ronald Reagan (58.77 percent), and George W. Bush (50.7 percent).

³ Michael Hunt refers to three key characteristics of U.S. foreign policy down through history that have formed the basis for its ideology and public policies: 1) a vision of national grandeur, 2) racial hierarchy, and 3) limits imposed on revolutions. See Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 17-18.

⁴ This is shown in a survey published by Gallup a few days before the 2012 elections, in which 37 percent of U.S. Americans interviewed said that the economy is the top issue facing the country, followed by unemployment and the fiscal deficit. Meanwhile, no foreign policy issue is mentioned by even 5 percent of the population. Gallup Politics, "Economy Is Dominant Issue for Americans as Election Nears," October 22, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/158267/economy-dominant-issue-americans-election-nears.aspx>.

⁵ Although for the first time in 20 years both parties agreed to raise taxes for the wealthiest, the bipartisan agreement put off negotiations on more thorny issues such as cuts in public spending and debt; it was therefore deemed insufficient by the IMF and credit rating agencies like Moody's.

⁶ Joseph M. Parent and Paul MacDonald, "The Wisdom of Retrenchment," *Foreign Affairs* no. 6, vol. 69, November-December 2011.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Waterboarding is an interrogation technique catalogued as torture. The issue gained prominence after John Brennan's nomination as director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Brennan worked for the agency under the Bush administration and claimed that he had completely opposed the use of such techniques; however, during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee, he admitted that he had not tried to stop this program.

⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Choice. Global Domination or Global Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

¹⁰ This article was written before the crisis in U.S.-North Korea relations that began at the end of March 2013. [Editor's Note.]

¹¹ As part of this new strategy, the United States understands that it cannot deal with major international challenges on its own. Therefore, its new approach centers on working alongside other actors with whom it has to share certain spheres of influence. However, its ultimate aim continues to be maintaining its position as the most influential player and ensuring that the twenty-first century is a U.S. American century. See "Moving America Forward 2012. Democratic National Platform," <http://assets.dstatic.org/dnc-platform/2012-National-Platform.pdf>.

¹² In fact, the idea of smart power refers to the capacity of effectively drawing on both soft and hard power, and so even internally within the United States, the need has been recognized to make the most of the country's military, diplomatic, economic, legal and moral strength in a balanced and integrated way. See R. I. Armitage and J. S. Nye, *NCIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America* (Washington, D. C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), http://csis.org/files/media/ncis/pubs/071106_csissmartpowerreport.pdf; Joseph Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011) and The White House, "Defense Guiding Principles," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/defense>.

¹³ China ranks second with approximately US\$119 billion, followed by Great Britain with US\$59.3 billion in annual spending, France also with US\$59.3 billion, and Russia with approximately US\$58.7 billion. See Sam Perlo-Freeman, Julian Cooper, Olawale Ismail, Elisabeth Sköns, and Carina Solmirano, "Military expenditure," *SIPRI Yearbook 2011. Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2011, <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2011/files/SIPRIYB1104-04A-04B.pdf>.

¹⁴ In 2007, the percentage of GDP spent on education and science and technology was, in the case of Brazil, 5.2 percent and 1.1 percent, respectively; in Russia, 7.4 percent and 1.12 percent; in India, 3.3 percent and 0.8 percent; and in China 3.3 percent and 1.44 percent, respectively. In 2009, the percentage of GDP spent on health in Brazil was 9 percent; in Russia, 5.4 percent; in India, 4.2 percent; and in China, 4.6 percent. The World Bank, no date; OECD, no date.

¹⁵ According to the World Bank, the U.S. GDP grew from 2009 to 2010 by 2.9 percent, while in Brazil, it grew 7.5 percent; in Russia, 4 percent; in India, 9.7 percent; and in China, 10.3 percent.