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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



What Does Obama's Re-election Mean to South Asia

Shanthie Mariet D'Souza¹

Abstract

While the world watched the closely contested Presidential elections in the United States in much anticipation, most observers and policy wonks in South Asia were bracing for change or continuity in the foreign policy that the new administration in Washington would herald. Although India received scant mention during the third Presidential debate which was focused exclusively on foreign policy, Pakistan and Afghanistan gained ample attention but with a caveat. There was little differentiated gap between the positions of the two candidates – President Obama and Governor Romney – on ending the war in Afghanistan. It is therefore no surprise that with President Obama's re-election, many in South Asia are bracing for continuity in US foreign policy. However, with his likely focus on legacy and attention towards other hot spots, there are imminent dangers of other South Asian countries taking a back seat in the US foreign policy priorities.

¹ Dr Shanthie Mariet D'Souza is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. She can be contacted at isassmd@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy

The presidential elections in the US and changes in administration bring about change in the foreign policy making. While most of the change is not dramatic and continuity remains for some time, any new administration brings about a change of about 2,200 US Government (USG) personnel dealing with various arms of foreign policy. A Romney win would have seen such change of personnel, in addition to a shift in focus to the Middle East and China. Obama's re-election does away with that necessity. Even with the possibility of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton demitting office soon, her probable replacement – Susan Rice, an Obama loyalist who serves as the US Ambassador to the United Nations,² or John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee³ -- indicates little departure for Obama administration's project continuation. However, even with this trend towards continuity, the second term of the Obama administration can be expected to reveal subtle shifts in focus, much of which has already been set in motion; and each of these shifts could have significant implications for developments in South Asia.

Focus on Legacy

It is widely expected that in his second and last term, President Obama would focus on his legacy. He would focus on key international hot spots, particularly in the Middle East. This could make the case of intervention in Syria a more likely possibility. The emphasis on 'reset button' with Russia will need to be recalibrated particularly since the reset sought in the first term has only compounded the existing problems. In particular, differences between the US and Russia have widened on how to respond to developments in Syria and Iran and also the US anti-ballistic missile systems in Europe. However with Obama promising Putin greater flexibility in a second term, for all of their differences, the Russians were relieved to have a Democratic victory President Obama would also focus his time and attention on nuclear disarmament initiatives. On China, the Obama administration would take a more accommodative public posture, in pursuit of greater engagement. At the same time, there are

² Amb. Susan Rice could face a bruising confirmation hearing given that she was the first face of the administration's maligned explanation of the recent fatal attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya. Ben Feller, Shaping a security team, Obama's challenge deepens, *Bloomberg Business Week*, 13 November 2012, <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/2012-11-13/shaping-a-security-team-obamas-challenge-deepens>. Accessed on 14 November 2012.

³ Although Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) is thought to covet the job of secretary of state, senior administration officials familiar with the transition planning said that nomination will almost certainly go to Susan E. Rice. President Obama is considering asking Sen. Kerry to serve as his next defense secretary, part of an extensive rearrangement of his national security team. Karen DeYoung and Greg Miller, Obama considering John Kerry for job of defense secretary, *The Washington Post*, 13 November 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-considers-john-kerry-for-job-of-defense-secretary/2012/11/12/8a0e973a-2d02-11e2-a99d-5c4203af7b7a_story.html?hpid=z1. Accessed on 14 November 2012.

moves made to counter-balance China's assertive posturing. President Obama's first overseas trip since his re-election, to the Southeast Asian nations of Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia appears set to "reinforce the US 'pivot' toward Asia, a strategic shift since 2011 that communist China views as being aimed squarely at countering its influence and containing its growth".⁴

Afghanistan

On Afghanistan, there was very little divergence of opinion in the presidential debate. With both candidates clueless, in bringing an end to the war in Afghanistan, the Obama administration's policy of drawdown and retaining a limited troop presence beyond 2014, as expounded in the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership agreement, would form the benchmark of US policy in the war-torn country. With the intensification of scandals that has marred the military and intelligence leadership in the US, the civilian side of the USG could push for accelerated troop withdrawal. As Kabul and Washington negotiate a post 2014 troop presence through the Bilateral Security Agreement, any continued presence of US forces hinges on the negotiations over the next few months on a status of forces agreement, with the immunity to be provided to the US troops and detainee transfer remaining as contentious issues.

Pakistan

With the US-Pakistan relationship hitting the rock bottom in Obama's first term, there are indications that his administration will initiate a strategic dialogue with Pakistan. A softening of stand on Pakistan and a renewed attempt to prod Islamabad to act decisively on sanctuaries and safe havens would receive a boost, if Senator John Kerry is chosen as Secretary of State. Kerry was one of the US senators who sponsored the US\$ 1.5- billion annual Kerry-Lugar-Berman aid package to Pakistan, and is known for his warm relationship with the country. He paid visits to Afghanistan and Pakistan, following the May 2011 Navy Seal raid that killed Osama bin Laden, in an effort to save the rocky partnership.⁵

However, drone strikes against the Taliban Al Qaeda leadership hiding in Pakistan's tribal areas are almost certain to continue. In spite of the fact that the drone strikes have strained the US-Pakistan relationship, the limited counter-terrorism and Special Forces activities in the military bases in Afghanistan beyond 2014 would have to be supported by such strikes for US' long term goal in Afghanistan. It remains to be seen how Pakistan engages the re-elected

⁴ Calum MacLeod, Obama's historic Asian tour gets China's attention, *USA Today*, 15 November 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/11/15/obama-asia-trip-china/1707827/#>. Accessed on 16 November 2012.

⁵ Mahvish Ahmad, Will Obama's reelection change the US-Pakistan relationship?, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 7 November 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2012/1107/Will-Obama-s-reelection-change-the-US-Pakistan-relationship>. Accessed on 8 November 2012.

government in US and how the latter uses its remaining leverage to retain its influence over the region. The evolving negotiations with the Taliban and the decision by Islamabad to release Taliban leaders are expected to gain momentum with the fast-approaching 'end-game' in Afghanistan

India

India did not figure prominently in the US presidential election debates. While apologists attributed this to the lack of vital differences with regard to the significance of New Delhi between the two candidates, the dominant consensus among the Indian strategic community is that India and US have hit a plateau after the signing of the symbolic civil nuclear deal during the Bush Administration. Though the warming up of relations between the US and India could be traced to the Clinton presidency, conventional thinking among the officials and strategic thinkers in Delhi is that the Republicans are more supportive of India's larger global role. The Romney camp had championed a greater 'geopolitical alliance' with India.

Beyond the much-hyped nuclear deal, India and the United States have moved significantly in strengthening crucial areas of co-operation like agriculture, education, health, services sector and have had a forward movement on global commons like space co-operation and enhanced co-operation on clean energy, energy security, and climate change, in particular launching the Clean Energy and Climate Change Initiative. The Obama-Singh 21st Century Knowledge Initiative aims at building linkages between American and Indian universities through increased exchanges and programmes to strengthen educational opportunities for the disadvantaged. As the Indian government focuses on making 'inclusive growth' a mantra for surging India, these areas of co-operation will assume greater importance in the coming years, a part of the US strategy to help India build its national power capabilities.⁶

The Obama administration has been quick to dispel India's doubts about the President's commitment to the civil nuclear initiative. Obama not only pushed through its implementation, but went a step beyond to support India's integration into various multilateral non-proliferation export control groupings like the Nuclear Suppliers Group. He also supported India's candidature for the permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council.⁷ Of late, there have been enhanced levels of counter-terrorism co-operation initiatives and strategic dialogues and consultations, including on Afghanistan, Myanmar and Africa.

⁶ Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, India-US Relations: The Need to Move Beyond Symbolism, IDSA Comment, 3 December 2009, http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/India-USRelations_smdsouza_031209. Accessed on 8 November 2012.

⁷ C. Raja Mohan, A pivotal moment, The Indian Express, 8 November 2012, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/a-pivotal-moment/1028319>. Accessed on 9 November 2012.

However, a change in guard in the Secretary of State's office worries New Delhi. It is expected that many of the strategic dialogues and consultations initiated by Hillary Clinton might temper down. The policy would now shift more towards specific programmes. The issues associated with outsourcing and H1-B visas are likely to remain contentious. While India and the US have a meeting of minds on most global trends -- whether it is partnership in Africa or beefing up collaboration in maritime security -- the biggest political divergence is on West Asia.⁸ Though the Indian lobbies and interest groups would continue to play a significant role, there are calls for New Delhi to step up to the plate. As the Obama administration embraces New Delhi as a strategic partner, as part of its 'pivot of Asia' policy, New Delhi will have to be decisive in charting a new trajectory for the relationship.

The Next Four Years

Even with the anticipated continuity in US policy, there are indications that other South Asian countries could quietly recede to the 'back-water' for the present administration. While India would continue to remain a crucial component of the 'pivot of Asia' policy, other countries in South Asia will have to find ways and means for renegotiating their principles of engagement with the US. Afghanistan would continue to receive assistance beyond 2014, albeit reduced; Pakistan will have to find ways of mending its fences with Kabul as its relevance to the US in the Afghan end-game gradually diminishes.

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⁸ Sandeep Dikshit, Towards maturity, The Hindu, 10 November 2012, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/towards-maturity/article4082085.ece>. Accessed on 11 November 2012.