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What should Europeans expect?

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CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM

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★ For all the disputes between the presidential candidates on US foreign policy, a second Obama term or a Romney administration would have a lot in common.

★ Both candidates have similar views on several issues. In addition, the room for manoeuvre of the next president will be constrained by various factors outside of his control, in particular Congressional politics and America's budgetary pressures.

★ Nevertheless, some differences in strategy are still likely between a Democratic and a Republican government, in particular towards Russia and the eurozone.

Because of America's financial woes, most of the political debates leading up to the US presidential and Congressional elections this November have focused on the American economy. Democrats and Republicans vying for office have been acrimoniously disputing how to bring the US back from the brink of its fiscal cliff. But the two contenders for the White House, the incumbent president, Barack Obama, and the Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, have also been sparring about US foreign policy.

Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, has accused President Obama of being the most feckless American president since Jimmy Carter, conceding to America's enemies while throwing its allies "under the bus". The Republican candidate is promising to restore US global leadership by rebuilding its military might and defending its values.

President Obama, by contrast, has accused Romney of being "stuck in a Cold War time warp" and "reckless" with national security. His campaign has warned that the former governor wants to take the US back to the bellicose "with-us or-against-us approach" of the Bush years.[1]

But for all the heavy criticisms exchanged between both presidential candidates on matters of national security, US foreign policy under a second Obama term or a Romney administration would have a lot in common. This paper discusses the reasons why. It also highlights the few areas where a second Obama term and a Romney administration would differ, and reflects on the implications for Europeans.

What bipartisanship?

Although US politics are becoming increasingly polarised – two leading American scholars, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, describe them as "utterly dysfunctional" – there remains significant bipartisan consensus in Washington on a number of foreign policy issues. One is European security. Another is China. Yet another is the use of drone strikes against suspected terrorists. Whoever wins the presidential election, the next US administration will continue to consider Europe an important part of the world. But it will increase its calls for Europeans to do more to uphold international security and continue refocusing America's attention towards the Pacific. In addition, whether

1: Michèle Flournoy and Colin Kahl, Memorandum to interested parties, Obama Biden campaign, October 2012.

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Europeans like it or not, the US will continue to rely heavily on drone strikes across the world as it attempts to combat international terrorism.

Romney has criticised Obama for neglecting European allies. Many Europeans agree. Poland and the Czech Republic feel slighted by Obama's reconfiguration of the Bush administration's missile defence programme – which both countries had agreed to host in the face of strident Russian opposition. European governments are disconcerted by Obama's refusal to lead the NATO deployment to Libya last year. And many are unnerved by the Democratic administration's defence plans for the next decade. Announced in early 2012, these envisage a 'pivot to Asia' and the withdrawal of 11,000 US troops from Europe.

But Romney's criticisms and European concerns are overstated. The Obama administration, conscious of its poorly managed announcement on missile defence, has since introduced a series of measures to reassure Central Europeans that it cares about their safety – including a permanent US Air Force detachment in Poland from 2013. The 2012 defence guidance stresses that the US would remain committed to NATO, and nearly half of all US troops abroad would remain based in Europe (about 70,000 military personnel).

US politicians from across the political spectrum have been asking Europeans to take on more responsibility for transatlantic security for decades. And these calls will keep getting louder unless Europeans take steps to reverse the deterioration of their armed forces. Robert Gates, while Secretary of Defence during President Obama's first term, publicly warned that NATO was facing a "dismal future" unless Europeans changed their ways. Meanwhile Romney has stressed that Europe's dwindling military capabilities risk turning NATO into an "alliance in name only".

Both Obama and Romney support closer European defence co-operation – including through the EU – as a way to maximise the potential of dwindling military resources. Such a consensus is a significant change from previous US administrations, both Democrat and Republican, who feared EU defence efforts could undermine NATO (a view some of Romney's advisers and other Republicans still hold). But such support is accompanied by heavy scepticism. Few Obama officials believe EU governments will limit the impact of their latest military spending cuts by 'pooling and sharing' their armed forces with other European countries. And for Romney, the concept of the EU as a military superpower "is as welcome as it is improbable".

China has long been of great importance to the US from an economic perspective, with Democrats and Republicans both complaining about Beijing's allegedly unfair trade practices and 'theft of US jobs'. This tough stance – which contrasts with Europe's softer approach – is likely to persist under the next government. President Obama boasts that his administration has brought more trade cases against China in one term than President George W Bush did in two. And Romney is promising to label China a currency manipulator in order to encourage Beijing to revalue the renminbi. America's more recent military focus on China is likely to continue growing too. For Romney, Obama's pivot to Asia is "vastly under-resourced". The Republican contender wants to expand the US naval presence in the Western Pacific and strengthen military co-operation among Asian countries in order to monitor aggressive behaviour in disputed waters.

> *"Both Obama and Romney support closer European defence co-operation, including through the EU."*

Finally, whoever wins the presidential election, the next US administration is likely to continue relying heavily on drone attacks as a way to target suspected terrorists in various parts of the world, not least Pakistan and Yemen. According to CNN, over the last four years, Barack Obama has authorised six times more strikes by remotely piloted aircraft in Pakistan than George W Bush did during his two administrations combined.[2] The targeted attacks are one of the few Obama policies which Romney does not criticise. And against a backdrop of budgetary pressures and public wariness about protracted military engagements, drones will be an increasingly attractive option for the next US government.

In Europe, the sustained use of drones will cause unease. Several EU states are concerned about the legality of some US strikes and their collateral damage. But, if Europeans manage to agree on a common position on the issue, they could have an opportunity to shape Washington's views over the course of the next administration. Although drones have so far benefited from significant US public support, Congress and experts have begun reflecting on the various associated risks. And the next administration is likely to come under growing pressure to clarify the conditions under which it resorts to strikes.

Agree to disagree

In addition to the foreign policy issues on which the presidential candidates openly agree, there are those on which they agree, but pretend not to. Romney has been most prone to this tactic, reprehending Obama on

2: Peter Bergen and Megan Braun, 'Drone is Obama's weapon of choice', CNN, September 19th 2012.

a number of national security issues, while proposing similar policies.

The Republican contender notably criticises the president's efforts to stop Iran's nuclear energy programme which the US suspects is designed to develop a nuclear weapon. At the same time, Romney proposes to prevent Iran getting a bomb through economic sanctions backed by the threat of military force – as does Obama. According to Romney, the president's failure of leadership towards Syria is allowing civilians to be massacred. But both candidates oppose military intervention against President Bashar al-Assad unless chemical and biological weapons are involved. Romney also has criticised his opponent's decision to announce the withdrawal of US combat troops from Afghanistan in concert with other NATO allies, arguing that it emboldens the Taliban. But Romney, like Obama, would also withdraw troops during 2014.

The next US president's views on the use of force in the Middle East and North Africa could of course evolve over the next few years depending on how events develop in the region. But the current wariness of both Obama and Romney to resort to military force will be welcomed by Europeans. Most EU governments have long worried that attacking Iran would destabilise the region. While the European appetite for providing military support to popular uprisings in the Arab world was already low prior to the NATO intervention in Libya. And it has dwindled even further since Europeans saw how hard it was to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi.

> *"The wariness of both Obama and Romney to resort to military force will be welcomed by Europeans."*

Hawkish bluff?

It is also unclear to what extent the former governor of Massachusetts is committed to his most hawkish views – such as refusing to negotiate with the Taliban in Afghanistan, an idea which according to several of his advisers is unrealistic. Another controversial idea of Romney's has been his fear that Russia will take advantage of the new strategic arms reduction treaty (New START) agreed by Obama to mount intercontinental ballistic missiles on bombers. For many in Washington, including Republican Senator Richard Lugar, this concern is unfounded. As Steven Pifer, a former US Ambassador to Ukraine, points out it would be impossible for an aircraft to take off with such a heavy load.[3]

For many in Washington, the former governor's controversial ideas have been designed to win over Republicans who were uncomfortable with his initially moderate positions. Similarly, Romney's inclusion of many figures from the administration of George W Bush within his advisory team seems geared to shoring up support from neoconservatives, a faction which remains influential in the Republican party. According to *The Nation*, 70 per cent of Romney's advisers have worked for Bush.[4] These include John Bolton, a hawkish former Ambassador to the UN, and Cofer Black, Bush's co-ordinator for counter-terrorism between 2002 and 2004.

Romney would not be the first US president to walk away from campaign pledges: in the run up to the 2008 election, Obama promised to label China a currency manipulator, like Romney does now. And George W Bush was against using US troops for nation-building in 2000, shortly before they were deployed to do just that in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Romney already has a track record of about-turns on policy. During the Republican primaries, he questioned whether humans were responsible for climate change. But he had previously striven to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The former governor now commends the president for his raid against Osama bin Laden. Yet the Republican challenger opposed covert operations in Pakistan when Obama first voiced the idea in 2007. And during the first presidential debate on October 3rd, Romney disregarded some of the central pledges he made during the primaries. After opposing higher taxes on oil companies, he supported them. And after promising tax cuts for high-income Americans, he promised not to cut them.

External constraints

Finally, the room for manoeuvre of whoever occupies the White House will be constrained by several factors outside of the new president's control – in particular Congressional opposition, America's budgetary pressures, US public opinion, and developments in the outside world.

During Obama's first term, opposition from Congress and unco-operative foreign governments prevented the president from achieving two of his flagship priorities – peace amongst Israelis and Palestinians, and ambitious nuclear arms reductions.

After Obama proclaimed that a Palestinian state could be created by 2011, his administration struggled to mediate the conflict: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refused to adopt US ideas, Palestinian divisions

3: Richard Oppel, 'Romney's adversarial view of Russia stirs debate', *The New York Times*, May 11th 2012.

4: Ari Berman, 'Mitt Romney's neocon war cabinet', *The Nation*, May 21st 2012.

undermined their ability to negotiate, and the popular uprisings in Egypt and Syria prevented these countries from being involved in peace efforts. Furthermore, although some officials within the Obama administration believed that Hamas needed to be involved in a sustainable peace effort – a view shared by most EU member-states – fierce Congressional opposition to the Islamic faction kept US engagement off the table.

The combination of Congressional politics and difficult foreign interlocutors also constrained the Obama administration's efforts to strive towards a world free of nuclear weapons. Many arms control measures require ratification by the US Senate, which is more averse to checks and cuts than Obama. As a result, although the Democratic administration managed to ratify New START, it has failed to secure Congressional support for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Meanwhile Moscow has shown no appetite to co-operate on nuclear reductions – and arms control more generally – in the administration's last year, reducing the scope for bilateral measures with Moscow which would not require the approval of Congress.

To the EU's great disappointment, the combination of Congressional and foreign constraints is likely to stop the next US government from trying to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. According to officials in the Obama administration, the president feels burnt by the experience of his first term in office, and in particular by Netanyahu's reluctance to co-operate. If re-elected, Obama would not launch a new diplomatic initiative as long as Netanyahu led the Israeli government. (And Netanyahu's parliamentary majority is likely to grow in Israel's next elections in January 2013.) Even if a second Obama administration did at some point restart peace talks, officials believe that it would be forced to maintain America's boycott of Hamas.

If Romney were president, his Middle East peace efforts would be similarly constrained by Congress' stance on Hamas and the unfavourable realities on the ground in the Middle East. In addition, Romney's personal views on the Arab-Israeli conflict seem more in line with Congress than Obama's. The Republican candidate has placed Hamas under the same umbrella as al-Qaeda (with Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood). He has pledged to reduce financial assistance to the Palestinians if they form a unity government that includes the Islamic group. And, Romney, an old friend of Netanyahu's, has opposed President Obama's attempts to stop Israel building illegal settlements – efforts which Europeans have strongly supported.

> *"Congressional and foreign constraints are likely to stop the US from trying to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict."*

Congress and the outside world will also continue to affect any arms control efforts the next US government might want to pursue. In contrast to policy towards the Middle East, a re-elected Obama could have more room for manoeuvre on this issue than during his first term. Russia is likely to be more open to co-operation – according to officials within the current administration, Moscow dislikes working with US governments at the end of their term because they might not be able to deliver on their commitments. In addition, freed from the pressures to seek re-election, a second term Obama could put forward arms control initiatives which did not require Congressional approval. The administration could notably seek to exchange more information with Russia on the size and make up of both countries' nuclear arsenals. It could also find ways to co-operate with Moscow on missile defence. But, depending on the composition of the next Senate, treaties are likely to remain off the table. In light of Romney's views on Russia (discussed below), it is unlikely that he would prioritise arms control if he were elected. And he is particularly unlikely to invest political capital in attempting to convince a sceptical Congress of the merit of endorsing treaties on the issue.

Public debt and weary voters

America's large fiscal deficit will constrain the new president's ability to use foreign aid and military force. Indeed, budgetary pressures have already led Obama to reduce both types of expenditure – the administration notably announced in 2012 that the Pentagon's budget would be cut by around $500 billion over the next decade. And Mitt Romney has turned an initial commitment to maintain defence spending at 4 per cent of GDP into an aspiration. (Under President Obama, the 2013 defence budget would represent 3.4 per cent of GDP.)[5] The Republican candidate now pledges only to reverse Obama's defence cuts. But the governor might struggle to enact even this commitment if he wants to deliver on his other promises of lower taxes and cutting the fiscal deficit.

In addition, the next US president might have to live with 'sequestration', which Obama and Romney both oppose: if Congress does not agree a deal to reduce America's federal deficit before the end of the year, $1 trillion of public spending cuts will automatically be introduced over the next decade, including around $500 billion in military and national security and $20 billion in foreign aid. (The US spends 20 per cent of its federal budget on defence and 1 per cent on foreign aid.)

5: Todd Harrison, 'How big should the defence budget be?', *The New York Times*, September 9th 2012.

Such budgetary constraints will notably impact America's support for the new governments in the Middle East and North Africa. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has already lamented that economic realities will prevent the US from creating an equivalent to the Marshall plan for the region. Fiscal challenges will also increase US pressure on Europeans to do more. The Obama administration already complains that the EU is not providing enough financial support to Egypt and other countries in the region – even though the EU gave over a billion euros to its southern neighbours in 2012. And Mitt Romney wants to rally allies to match America's generosity.

The next US president's scope to use military force is likely to be affected not only by budgetary constraints, but also weary US voters. According to a recent poll from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 70 per cent of Americans oppose a unilateral strike on Iran.[6] And the German Marshall Fund's transatlantic trends find that 68 per cent of US citizens would like to reduce or withdraw troops from Afghanistan.[7] As discussed above, both presidential candidates are already showing a reluctance to use military force. And in the case of President Obama, officials openly recognise that such a position is influenced by financial constraints and public opinion.

Still some differences

Although a second Obama term and a Romney administration would have more in common than one might at first expect, some differences would still be likely, in particular towards Russia and the eurozone.

Whoever wins the presidential elections, relations between the US and Russia will remain tense. But an Obama administration would continue trying to engage with Russia, while a Romney administration would probably be more confrontational. Notwithstanding the numerous disputes between Moscow and Washington which exist today, the Obama administration does not regret its 2009 initiative to press "the reset button" – an attempt to improve ties between both countries after they had plummeted during the war between Russia and Georgia. In the words of one official, at least now the US and Russia have stopped arguing about issues on which they actually agreed, and they focus their disputes on genuinely contentious issues. The Democrats also prize New START and Russia's co-operation on Afghanistan and Iranian sanctions. As a result, a re-elected Obama would maintain the current approach. And as discussed above, officials expect that another Democratic administration would put forward an array of initiatives relating to arms control which did not require Congressional endorsement.

A Romney administration would be less likely to pursue such an approach. The Republican contender has portrayed Russia as America's "number one geopolitical foe", a country which risks becoming as much of a concern for his grandchildren as it was for his parents. Romney has pledged to "reset the reset". He wants to more vocally defend human rights in Russia and give stronger support to countries in its near abroad, among other things, by putting NATO enlargement back on the agenda. The Republican candidate has scolded NATO for not having helped Georgia during its war with Russia in 2008. He also believes President Obama's new missile defence programme has been a regrettable concession to Russia because it downgraded the involvement of US allies Poland and the Czech Republic. And far from echoing Obama's ideals of a nuclear free world, the former governor of Massachusetts opposed the ratification of New START – which, as discussed above, he believes allows Russia to strengthen its nuclear arsenal.

As for most of Romney's hard line stances, such rhetoric could be partly designed to shore up the Republican base. But at the very least, he is unlikely to push for nuclear disarmament. And if the former governor is genuinely committed to the views he has expressed on Russia, his election to the White House could lead to a significant deterioration in relations with Moscow.

> *"US officials identify the EU's inability to solve its economic travails as their biggest frustration with Europe."*

Most Europeans, and those with close bilateral ties with Russia in particular, will be keen to minimise disputes with Moscow. Even EU states that are more hawkish on Russia will hope that Romney does not implement all of his current ideas. Most Europeans are happy that NATO enlargement has been placed on the backburner. They were also relieved that they had no security commitments towards Georgia when the 2008 conflict broke out. (Most European NATO allies did not even think Russia was solely to blame.)

Regardless of the outcome of the presidential election, the eurozone crisis will be a source of major US concern. Officials in the Obama administration identify the EU's inability to solve its economic travails – which threaten to harm America's economic prospects – as their biggest frustration with Europe. For them, EU institutions have shown themselves incapable of addressing the crisis. And they are frustrated with Chancellor Angela Merkel, who they believe ignores President Obama's pleas to avoid an excessive focus on austerity. Mitt Romney, and Republicans more generally, have also stressed their concerns about the eurozone's troubles.

6: Dina Smeltz, Foreign policy in the new millennium, Results of the 2012 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US foreign policy, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2012.
7: Transatlantic trends, Key findings, 2012.

But the specific advice put forward by the next US government on how to solve the eurozone crisis could differ between a re-elected Obama and a Romney administration. The incumbent president would be likely to keep encouraging Europeans to help the struggling eurozone economies. But a President Romney could adopt a position closer to Berlin's. In the German newspaper *Handelsblatt*, Glenn Hubbard, one of Romney's senior economic advisers, has criticised the Obama administration for encouraging Germany to bailout financially weak eurozone governments and banks. As on other issues, the rhetoric from Romney and his team could be political posturing. But if the former governor is committed to such ideas, a Republican victory at the presidential election in November could lead to a shift in US foreign policy. And although America's views on the eurozone are not the principal driver of EU policy, such a shift could have an impact on internal EU negotiations nevertheless.

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