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The 2012 U.S. Presidential Race: Impact on US policy on China and Southeast Asia

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Synopsis

Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican nominee for president, has been highly critical of President Obama's foreign policy. What impact, if any, would a Romney presidency have upon American foreign policy towards Southeast Asia and China?

Commentary

The 2012 U.S. Presidential race will, in all likelihood, remain tight until Election Day in November. Both Barack Obama and his Republican opponent, Mitt Romney, have reasons to be both optimistic and pessimistic about their respective campaigns. The widespread public dissatisfaction and deep frustration with the current state of the national economy and politics, always a critical determinant in American elections, will undoubtedly be a major factor in the remaining months before the election.

Romney secured the Republican nomination in May, and was the most forthcoming of the Republican field about his approach to foreign affairs. This included the release of a 44-page foreign policy white paper and the announcement of a team of foreign policy advisors with considerable experience in government and the Washington think-tank community. This group broadly bridges the mainstream realist and neoconservative wings of the Republican Party.

A Romney presidency would likely follow a relatively mainstream Republican approach, with an emphasis on maintaining a strong defence and asserting American national interests. Romney has indicated that "if you don't want America to be the strongest country on Earth, then I am not your President" – suggesting that the issue of "American Exceptionalism" will likely play a large role in the campaign. This is consistent with his call for increased military spending, particularly on an expanded ship-building programme for the US Navy.

To date, however, Romney has frequently demonstrated a penchant for rather vague platitudes, reflecting both his caution as a candidate and his campaign's desire to keep the election focused on the economy. While his white paper suggests that Romney would most likely follow a hawkish approach in Asia and globally, few details or policies are described. All presidential candidates seek to retain a degree of policy flexibility during the race, but even by these standards Romney's statements have lacked any notable precision.

Republican attitudes towards ASEAN, South China Sea

While ASEAN has received greater attention from Obama than Bush, important events like the 2009 signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) by the United States were initially prepared under Bush. Similarly, the groundwork for the deepening of bilateral relations with Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam began in the later years of the Bush Administration and have continued under Obama. The US-ASEAN Summit (including the participation of Myanmar) led by Obama in Bali was initiated by Bush (though minus Myanmar). Similarly, it is likely that the participation of the US in the East Asia Summit would continue under a Republican administration.

Should Romney win in November, the trends of American foreign policy towards Southeast Asia are unlikely to change significantly. Romney's calls for a larger American navy would complement the "pivot" towards the Pacific that has occurred under Obama. (Romney criticized Obama for "under-resourcing" the military aspect of the "pivot".) The strategic relationships in Southeast Asia developed during George W. Bush's second term and continued under Obama have considerable support in Washington across both parties. While part of Obama's success has been based upon the personal rapport he has with many Southeast Asian leaders Romney as president would find many partners willing to cooperate.

In part, Obama's success in developing closer relationships within Southeast Asia reflects regional concerns over China's rising power. Specifically, Chinese conduct towards the South China Sea dispute has left regional states worried. Here again, it is difficult to see Romney changing American diplomacy towards the disputing sovereignty claims, other than perhaps taking a more hawkish approach.

China has made clear that it wants to settle competing sovereignty claims in the South China Sea bilaterally, but Secretary of State Hillary Clinton received rare praise from Republican foreign policy circles with her handling of China's aggressive actions. Coupled with her statements that the US would focus "substantially increased investment – diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise" towards the Asia-Pacific (and away from Iraq and Afghanistan), it would be surprising to see how Republicans could effectively oppose this effort in an electorally-relevant way.

China

While the exact policies that Romney would implement should he win the White House remain vague at this stage, there is little question that he will continue to emphasise "getting tough" with China on the campaign trail, particularly over the issues of currency manipulation and trade practices. This familiar charge routinely gathers bipartisan populist support in Congress, as it unites important Republican and Democratic constituencies. Furthermore, it follows a long-standing trend in presidential elections for the candidate of the party in opposition to criticise the incumbent party for being "soft" on China.

Continuing economic turmoil in the US has increased this rhetorical pressure. Romney has described Beijing as "cheating" in its trade practices; he has also said he would declare China a "currency manipulator" on his first day as president. Such a policy stance allows for a linkage to be made between Obama's economic and foreign policies while offering little in concrete policy outcomes. While attracting much attention, these aggressive statements have raised concerns that they threaten the enormously important relationship with China.

Former Ambassador to China Jon Huntsman, who ran unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination before endorsing Romney, called Romney's comments "wrong-headed" and warned such actions could lead to a destructive trade war with China. Other notable conservative voices have criticized Romney for allowing rhetorical flourishes on "getting tough" with China to take the place of policy development. Business leaders have also warned Romney about using protectionist rhetoric that threatens free trade. Since securing the Republican nomination, however, Romney has toned down his recent comments.

A Republican version of the Obama administration?

In the run-up to the election, domestic and economic issues will remain the primary focus of both candidates, and trade issues will remain a contentious theme. While China will be one of the major foreign policy topics to receive attention, Southeast Asia will be a peripheral campaign topic at best.

But if recent history is any guide, upon taking office a Romney Administration would likely moderate its approach to foreign policy away from the rhetoric of the campaign. Broadly, Romney's foreign policy would likely resemble that of George W. Bush's late in his second term – and in that regard, campaign rhetoric aside, it would also largely resemble that of his opponent, Barack Obama.

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