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■ US election and foreign policy

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Why has so little space in US presidential election debates been devoted to foreign policy? It is indeed only on rare occasions that foreign issues are ever raised in the statements made by the individual candidates, in the debates among them or in media coverage. When brought up, foreign policy issues end up being reduced to general slogans and catchy soundbites aimed at helping specific candidates set themselves apart from the others.

How surprising, considering that the future President of the United States will be broadly empowered to formulate and implement the country's foreign policies. There is no exaggeration in the claim that such powers are enormous, checked solely by those of the Congress and that on a handful of points only. The Congress may veto international treaties and agreements signed by the President (their ratification is subject to the approval by a 2/3rds majority of the Senate). The Senate is also required to approve foreign deployments of US armed forces in operations that last more than 60 days. However, armed interventions can only be initiated by the President acting as the commander in chief. Also importantly, the Congress ultimately determines the size of the state's defense budget (as well as the size of the entire federal budget).

Although such powers of the legislative branch of the government may affect the way in which the United States pursues its foreign and security policies, the sheer extent of the powers of the chief White House resident is nevertheless enormous. For that very reason, a great deal if not all depends on the President's vision of the global role to be played by the US, his priorities, his awareness of external factors, his leadership skills and his courage to act. All these factors have direct impact on external strategies, often making the difference between success and failure.

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Adding further to the significance of foreign affairs is the US President's role as a world leader. Although strained and contested of late, America's international primacy remains unquestionable. This said, the US is nevertheless no longer as capable and willing as it once was to influence international developments and resolve global issues. It is now less prepared to take on challenges and less efficient in its actions. However, as a leader cooperating with other partners and prudently using the available ways and means, America appears to be the best available guarantor of global stability.

As a consequence, it is highly significant to see what the potential candidates running for the top White House office and seeking their party's nomination have to say about the US foreign policy and their country's role and responsibility for the world order. It is therefore all the more disappointing that so little attention has been given to foreign policy in the presidential race. It is in fact frightening what some of the candidates have to say about America's future role in the world and in shaping the world order.

However, from the American viewpoint, there is nothing strange about the fact that issues other than foreign affairs dominate the attention and pre-electoral narrative, especially at the stage of the primary elections. In the race for the top job in the White House, foreign policy has never been decisive or a topic of heated debates and battles that settled the ultimate outcome. If at all, foreign policies significant has been limited to that of providing arguments for criticizing the incumbent presidents and a tool for denigrating their achievements. A case in point are the developments of 1920 when the international involvement of Thomas W. Wilson and especially the engagement of the United States in World War I, which violated the "sacred rule" of isolationism, tipped the scales in the presidential election in favor of a candidate from the competing Republican Party, who supported keeping America far removed from the world's predicaments, and especially those of Europe.

Another example comes from 1992 when the democratic candidate William J. Clinton ran a campaign under the slogan of "it's the economy, stupid", which was not only a catchy travesty of the isolationist Republican slogan "America First" dating back to 1920, but also a criticism of the incumbent president George H. W. Bush centered on his foreign policy. Clinton's victory seemed to confirm that Americans want a president focused on the country's internal issues. As a consequence, they were not bothered by his lack of foreign policy experience and more appreciative of his competence and promises regarding economic and social matters.

Incidentally, a similar ploy was employed in the year 2000 by George W. Bush Jr., who used his international affairs ignorance to his advantage. George Bush argued that he would delegate the coping with the complexities of world issues to a team of competent and experienced advisors allowing himself more time to focus on domestic affairs. While criticizing Clinton for having excessively involved America in global matters, he committed to remain more restrained internationally. He said: "America cannot be everything to everyone. We are a freedom-loving people. If we are an arrogant nation, they will resent us. If we are a humble nation, they will respect us". Bush's victory over the previous Vice-President Albert Gore, who represented the line of Bill Clinton, could suggest a return to a policy of restraint, limited in its objectives and focused on America's vital interests.

As it turns out, the emphatic election promises regarding foreign policy are often met with sharp criticism driven by international events as they unfold. By assuming responsibility for the security of Americans and for international obligations, new White House residents are forced to adjust their goals and priorities and even working methods. Thus, under the Clinton administration, America became incredibly active world-wide, even involving itself in armed interventions overseas. The 9/11 Al-Kaida attack on America fundamentally changed Bush Jr.'s approach to American involvement overseas. All the stops were then pulled out.

Many disappointments in foreign policy have resulted from the nearly complete presidency of Barack Obama. It was hoped to restore the global significance of the United States that had been seriously compromised by Bush policies. This is in fact what this Democratic Party candidate had promised at nearly every stage of his electoral campaign ("Yes, we can"). Nevertheless, it was all too often that the first African-American White House incumbent lack in determination and fortitude in his foreign policies, not only in his actions but also in his decision-making. His approach undermined people's confidence in the effectiveness and credibility of the United States, caused American diplomacy to fail in the Middle East, contributed to failures in the war on the terrorist Islamic State, allowed Russia to pursue its harmful policies and, finally, indirectly fueled the migration crisis. Simply put, the world ended up in historic quandary.

It is for those reasons that the global community are observing the American presidential race with a great deal of interest as well as a certain dismay, struggling to piece together the fragmentary statements and assessments of prior actions into a complete picture of the foreign policies that the main presidential candidates would like to pursue once in office. The situation is further compounded by the unpredictable nature of the presidential race. As some of the favorite candidates defy expectations, overseas observers become unnerved. The most attention by far has been attracted by Donald J. Trump, the main candidate of the Republican Party for the White House office. And no wonder as the success of this wacky billionaire has surprised many, proving false the view that an unpredictable person with no political experience stands no chance of passing through the screen of the preliminary election procedure.

What is certain, however, is that it was not foreign policy ideas that contributed to Trump's success thus far. Actually, there are no ideas to speak of. His electoral slogan of "Make America Great Again!" is a take off on the best slogans on America's power which appeal to the voters. It is, in fact, a direct reference to Ronald Reagan's electoral slogan of 1980: "Let's Make America Great Again". Nevertheless, the slogan is no substitute for even the most general but coherent glimpse into the foreign policy he intends to pursue upon victory. Not only do Trump's statements fail to make a coherent whole but also include ominous undertones. For instance, in his criticism of Obama's policy towards Russia, Trump assured he could easily make deals with Vladimir Putin whom he described admiringly as a "strong leader". In saying so, Trump ignored the current state of US-Russian relations, turned a blind eye on the threats posed by Russia and limited himself to highlighting the positive role it plays in Syria.

In reference to one of the largest threats in today's world, which is Islamic terrorism and its most dangerous embodiment, the Islamic State, Trump proposes a simplistic solution - a blanket airstrike on the self-proclaimed caliphate with no regard

for civilian casualties. Trump has offered equally quick fixes for competing with China which was to tax Chinese products, and for irregular migration, which was to build a wall separating the US from Mexico. In addition to Trump's utter buffoonery, such ideas show also how simplified his view of the world really is and how light-heartedly he proposes to resolve its problems. His approach is likely to prove very dangerous to the United States and the rest of the world.

Equally disquieting are Trump's isolationist inclinations. They are evident in his discussions of the cost of the US military presence in Europe (and South Korea). Trump demanded to know what Germany and America's other wealthy allies are doing to help it achieve common goals. Even though this is not the first time the issue was raised by Americans (it was brought up by e.g. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2011) and even though Trump's solution resonates with a great number of American taxpayers, proposing it at this juncture is foolhardy. It may force the competing candidates to tackle the issue in a similar tone and "open a can of worms" changing the way the United States fulfills its responsibility for the world order. This could bring America dangerously close to isolationism which, all things considered, is deeply ingrained in the mind of the average American. Will that not redefine America's priorities and limit its aspirations to promoting its vital interests? What will become of, e.g., strengthening the eastern flank of NATO, supporting Ukraine or nurturing trans-atlantic relations?

Compared to the populist style of Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton comes across as much less exciting. However, this former Democratic senator and former Secretary of State stands head and shoulders above Trump in her unquestionable foreign relations expertise. In fact, she could not be more different from the Republican candidate against whom she is likely to be pitted in the final bout. The only thing they have in common is an ambition and a determination to fight for power. Their biggest difference is that Clinton is a predictable and reasonable politician. And this, considering the extent of the power entrusted with the American president, is a significant asset. There is no denying that this former first lady is intelligent, competent and experienced.

A little more questionable is the overall accomplishment of the head of American diplomacy. She may have visited more than 100 countries between 2009 and 2012 and spent over 400 days traveling, which goes to show she is exceptionally hard working. Nevertheless, she did not go down in history as an architect of American foreign policy that is equal in rank to the likes of Henry Kissinger but rather as a loyal executor of the will of President Obama. In her utter dedication to the policy of reset with Russia, she turned out to be a failure, revealing a certain naiveté of American diplomacy. And yet, it was the President in office that took the blame for her defeats just as he too got the credit for her accomplishments. The latter were few and far between during Obama's first term of office. Although, admittedly, America may well have recovered the moral authority that was lost during the Bush presidency, its trans-atlantic relations ended up being largely undermined. The US has "pivoted towards the Pacific". The wife of Bill Clinton, who once received the honorary title of a "European", could do nothing to prevent that. The United States is no longer popular among the states of Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, which felt offended at the ostentatious lack of interest on the part of the Obama administration.

Finally, Hillary Clinton's time in office has been invariably associated with the WikiLeaks scandal which involved a disclosure of secret documents of the American diplomacy.

A good question is whether, if and when she becomes President, Clinton will use the opportunity and her excellent qualifications to put American politics on a track that reflects the needs of the time. Will she, as a leader of America and the world, live up to the challenges and issues of the day? Without a doubt, her ambition would be to leave a lasting imprint on American diplomacy and show Americans and the international community that it was not by accident that she became the first woman to run the United States. Especially that she is considerably more at ease acting on the international scene than the other presidential candidates. Not only does she personally know the majority of leaders of major European countries and the world, which will certainly not be without significance for the achievement of her goals, but also appears to be more decisive than Obama, prepared to make commitments to protect interests and uphold values. For her, global politics is more of a game of powers and leaders than a post-national globalized system.

However, notice needs to be taken of the exceptional nature of the current circumstances. Clinton is fighting for a nomination of the Democratic Party against Senator Bernie Sanders, who - even more than Trump - leans towards isolationism. She is also firmly opposed to the use of force in resolving conflicts which, although positive in itself, would prove counterproductive in the face of the great number of tensions and crises that plague today's world and in view of opposition from such adversaries as the Islamic State. It is difficult to imagine how a new organization modeled on NATO but additionally involving Russia and the Arab states, could ever defeat terrorism. More ideas of this kind, which reflect the anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s and which show just how naïve this kind of approach to international issues really is, have been voiced by Sanders. Perhaps such ideas could be ignored in the hopes that their author fails to obtain his party's nomination.

However, Clinton is not in a position to dismiss them in her final bid for the White House. In order to win over Sanders' supporters, the majority of whom are young Americans captivated by his "socialistic" and anti-establishment slogans, she will most likely be compelled to echo some of his promises. This may apply also to his foreign policy ideas or, as Sanders puts it, the need to minimize America's objectives and the US overseas interference. How precisely this will translate into Clinton's external strategy, should she win the election, remains to be seen. The outcome will hinge not only on the nature and pace of international developments but also on the sentiments harbored by the American public who, although interested in seeing their country grow stronger, nevertheless tend to favor isolationism, or at least reductions in the global engagement of the US, and focus on domestic issues, of which there is no shortage.

To complete the picture of the ongoing election campaign, one should recall two other candidates who may still have a fighting chance of securing their party's nominations. Much like the majority of the contenders vying for their place in the White House, Ted Cruz, a Texan Senator associated with the ultra-conservative fraction of the Republican Party (with ties to the Tea Party), has no foreign policy experience whatsoever. He hardly even mentions foreign affairs, the only exception being his

vehement criticism of Obama's politics, which is in keeping with the general policy of the Republican Party, considering such politics to be ineffective and weaken America's global position. His claims are said to be proven by the Iran Agreement which, in Cruze's view, was a mistake that has jeopardized the Middle East and American interests. Cruze has said that: "We need a new commander in chief who will be trusted and who will stand up to our enemies". My actions, promises Cruze, will be decisive, ferocious and effective.

As for Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who receives the most support from the establishment of all Republican Party candidates, he comes across as highly predictable and reasonable compared to Trump and Cruze. As member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he has also taken the appropriate slant on international matters, especially in American politics. While he hardly differs from other Republican candidates in his criticism of Obama, during his stint in the Senate, Rubio proved himself to be a stickler for well-defined rules. He has consistently and firmly worked to oppose the aggressive policies of Russia, support Ukraine and strengthen US presence in Eastern Europe. Given that Senator Rubio is also capable of collaborating with Democratic politicians, as demonstrated during his time on Capitol Hill, he may well be the optimal candidate, at least among the Republicans and one that guarantees a decisive but reasonable foreign policy, capable of compromise but also predictable and, finally, one that promises to support the international credibility of the United States.

All things considered, Rubio is close to being the ideal candidate who meets the expectations of America's partners and whose broad prerogatives make him the perfect President. But can he realistically be expected to win?

The statements expressed herein reflect solely the opinions of its author.

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