

## The 2012 U.S. Presidential Election and Its Implication in East Asia

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After the extended and fierce campaign, Obama finally clinched the victory in the 2012 presidential election. By gaining more than 300 electoral-college votes, which are disproportionately huge given his popular vote margin of around two percent over Romney (50% vs. 48%), he can legitimately claim national mandate for the next four year, although conservatives will be reluctant to embrace that mandate. After making a history four years ago by becoming the first black president to occupy the White House, he made another history this year by recapturing the presidency amid the still evolving Great Recession with the high unemployment rate around 7.1%.

Given this historic nature of Obama's second term, this paper aims to show how Obama was able to maintain an exceptionally competitive campaign despite the extremely bad national economic conditions. From the widely accepted consensus that the outcome of the U.S. presidential election is largely determined by the economic conditions of the election year, Obama's successful presidential campaign needs explanation in one way or another. Following that, the paper also attempts to predict what the post-election U.S. East Asia policy look like. Will the post-election U.S. policy be different from the mainline policy of the last four years? If not, what would be rationale of the policy consistency? This paper will address these questions.

### Advantaged Obama before the First Debate

#### 1. Romney's Credibility Problem

Obama's consistent competitive edge over his opponent, at least before the first presidential debate, was largely due to the Romney's weakness as a presidential candidate. At the same time, it was also partly due to Obama's campaign strategy of taking advantage of Romney blunders and gaffes during the campaign. Then, what were Romney's shortcomings in the before-debate phase? And how did Obama team succeed in highlighting Romney's flaws in their intensive negative ads, particularly in those battleground states such as Ohio, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania?

Romney's recurring problem, sort of endemic throughout his candidacy, was his "credibility deficit," and the deficit, whether it was called "trust problem" or "disconnect problem," was perceived to stem from his frequent policy position shifts. Obama even sarcastically called it "Romnesia" during the last phase of the campaign. And as a matter of fact, his flop-flopping on

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various policies can be traced back to the time the Republican primary started in Jan. 2012.

As was widely known from the moment he declared his candidacy, Romney's policy position frequently shifted, making voters doubt the credibility of his remarks and promises. He started his political career as a leaning Democratic, later shifting to the Republican side when he began to eye on the governorship of Massachusetts. It is now notorious that candidate Romney denounced Obama's signature law, the 2009 Patient Protection and the Affordable Care Act, which is pretty similar in content to the statewide, mandatory Massachusetts health care system of Romney's own making during his governorship. On social issues to which he once had been susceptible before his candidacy, such as abortion and homosexual relationship, he also swung to the right in order to have more conservative support.

In the shifting process during the primary, he attacked Texas Governor Rick Perry's lenient policy toward children of illegal immigrants, thus making Latino voters remain unfavorable to him, and also sided with social conservatives by opposing the health care's coverage of contraception, which made a great number of female voters hold on to the Democratic Party. As he confessed during one stop of the Republican primaries, he just wanted to be "severely conservative" in order to capture conservative support.

The assumption behind Romney's bold rightward shift during the primary was that after becoming a Republican candidate, he can still run an effective campaign against Obama by consistently focusing on economy and attacking Obama for the sluggish economic recovery. But as National Journal columnist Brownstein points out, it turned out that non-economic issues still mattered in the general election in some sizable blocs of the electorate.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Romney's strategy of focusing exclusively on economy did not work as he intended when the general election campaign began to proceed. Although it was true that the economy was the paramount con-

cern of American voters, Romney's draconian immigration posture and his embrace of socially conservative stance on women-related issues made Latinos and many women turn their backs on Romney. In other words, he had to pay cost for his rightward shift during the primary as he phased into his genuine duel against Obama. He was consistently led by Obama several percentage points since.

Sensing the need for strategic change, Romney made another swing, this time to the left toward the center in order to gain support among Latinos, women, and independents. And this second shift, depending on your interpretation, partly succeeded in making some cracks in one of the solid pro-Obama blocs, the women voters, and in regaining support from some independents. As his top campaign advisor Eric Fehrstrom clumsily foresaw last March in a later heavily criticized interview with CNN, Romney actually attempted to "etch a sketch" over the "severely conservative" remarks he made during the Republican primary. As an electoral strategy, that may have worked as Romney intended, but Obama was quick and smart to attack his flip-flopping, calling it "Romnesia," and that began to widely circulate. In other words, his credibility problem was a fodder for Obama's attack around the clock throughout the campaign.

## 2. Obama Taking Advantage of Romney's Weakness

Taking advantage of these Romney problems, Obama campaign team was pretty successful in keeping the campaign focused on the "real Romney" being exposed to the suffering middle class, particularly in the battleground states. Among other things, Obama was able to pull ahead of Romney in capturing the hearts and minds of the American middle class by effectively attacking Romney's career in Bain Capital and by highlighting his refusal to release tax records of the decade before 2010. The Obama campaign team surgically attacked Romney by arguing that the Bain Capital fired a large number of employees during Romney's CEO days, and that he had no reason to refuse to re-



lease his tax records other than to hide on what he should have paid. Besides, by portraying Romney as the upper class spokesman trying to relieve rich people's tax burden, Obama disgraced Romney self-proclaimed image that he was the best to salvage U.S. economy and to help the middle class. This strategy worked pretty well in those battleground states such as Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania.

Obama's success on the middle class agenda is well captured in the New York Times/CBS News Poll released on Sep. 14. In that poll, 54% of respondents (registered voters) said Obama would do more to help middle class Americans, while only 40% of respondents said Romney would. Related to the previous response, 60% of respondents also said that Obama understands the needs and problems of people like themselves, while only 46% answered that Romney does the same thing. Finally, but not the least importantly, 30% of respondents that Obama would treat all groups equally, and another 30% that he would favor the middle class, while 53% of the respondents said Romney would favor the rich and 8% that he would favor the middle class. All the New York Times/CBS Poll statistics show Obama gaining more and more support of the middle class Americans.<sup>2</sup>

To make matters worse for Romney, Obama virtually eroded all of Romney's advantage in solving the nation's economic problems. In the same New York Times/CBS Poll mentioned above, 47% of respondents said that Obama would do a better job in handling economy/unemployment, while 46% of them said Romney would. In other words, Obama virtually tied with Romney on the issue in which the latter should prevail over the former. In addition, the Gallup Poll released on Oct. 1 showed Obama led Romney among "small business owners" as well as among "middle-income Americans," an outcome virtually sentencing Romney candidacy dead.<sup>3</sup>

### Romney Surge after the First Debate and the Onset of Razor-thin Race

For those who have closely observed the recent U.S. presidential elections, the impact of the presidential debate has never been greater than that of the first Obama-Romney faceoff held in Denver on October 3. The commonsense that presidential debate's impact on the campaign is meager at best was shattered by the total recast of the campaign mood and the resurgence of Romney after the first debate. Among other things, Obama's lackluster performance and Romney's aggressive posture made Obama look unprepared, negligent, and somewhat arrogant, and helped Romney appear well-prepared to take the White House.

Obviously, Romney proved to the millions American voters that he is "presidential." The momentum and bonus bounce Obama seemed to have gained after the Democratic national convention evaporated quickly. All of a sudden, the presidential campaign became a razor-thin, less than 2%-margin competition. Now, the post-first-debate Romney was solidly engrained as a competent candidate in the minds of many American voters. As a result, the campaign mode permanently changed into a really unpredictable, totally uncertain, 50-50 competition nationally.

Facing Romney surge, Obama tried to regroup himself and to get refocused. As a result, in the consequent two debates Obama was able to stop Romney's momentum by showing the American public that Romney's economic plan is far from "fair" and not for the middle class Americans, and that Romney is primarily a "liar" mongering only for votes and forgetting what he had said during the primary. In addition, he was able to show his mastery of foreign policy, including the killing of Osama bin Laden, in the final third debate despite Romney's focused and intensive attack on the so-called Obama's mismanagement of the Benghazi situation.

As the campaign phased into the final stretch, the race became a dead-heat competition, and the two



candidates' entire resources were intensively invested in such battleground states as Ohio, Virginia, Florida, Wisconsin, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, Colorado, which many thought would determine the final electoral college winner. According to the CBS-New York Times poll conducted late October just before the Hurricane Sandy's invasion, the campaign became an "exceedingly close race," showing Obama leading Romney nationally by just 1% among likely voters, 48% vs. 47%.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, many other national polls showed Romney's slight lead over Obama. Observing Obama's slight but consistent lead in the battleground states coupled with his around 2% falling behind Romney in the post-debate polls nationally, political commentator Charlie Cook even began to raise the possibility of "minority president." Some newspapers even started to carry the rumor on two teams' preparing for the post-election legal battle, which would be a replay of the 2000 presidential race between George W. Bush and Al Gore.

### **The Day of Reckoning and the Forecast of U.S. Policy in East Asia**

After all the political turbulence and mutual negative ads during the campaign, Obama finally emerged as the winner of the election, with the Republican House and the Democratic Senate unchanged. Besides Romney's credibility deficit and Obama's effective strategy of appealing to the middle class, the improving unemployment rate and the demographic change of increasing Latino population also contributed to Obama's victory.

In such a crucial battleground state like Ohio, whose unemployment rate decreased largely due to the recovery of auto and other manufacturing industry, Obama sharply criticized Romney's misguided remark years ago that failed auto companies should go down, not being bailed out. Besides, by repeatedly talking about "Romnesia," he tried to give the voters the impression that Romney is not trustworthy. In addition,

more Americans started to believe that the American economy is going in the right direction, although still many American believed Romney would be better than Obama in managing economy. Finally, Latino's level of support for Obama was still strong in 2012 as in 2008, compensating for Obama's loss among white males.

Given the U.S. presidential election outcome as just described, what will the post-election U.S. policy toward East Asia look like? Will it be different from that of the past four years? How will the U.S. domestic economic and political configurations constrain the U.S. policy toward in the region? How will the "Asia pivot" work out after the election?

As a matter of fact, the U.S.-East Asia relationship in particular and the U.S. foreign policy in general did not attract much of public attention in this election. If the foreign policy mattered at all, the attention was rather focused on Romney's offense on Obama's mixed reaction to the killings of U.S. diplomats in Benghazi, Libya. Other than that, the third foreign policy debate was mostly focused on the post-democratization Middle East turmoil and the freefalling Syrian situation on the hand, and the U.S.'s relationship with Pakistan and the withdrawal of the U.S. ground forces from Afghanistan on the other hand. The only East Asia-related issue was the U.S. trade relationship with China, which was what it should be given its domestic economic repercussion. Despite this lack of attention, the post-election, short-term forecast on the U.S.'s policy toward East Asia would be interesting all the time as it always has been since the rise of China.

Before addressing the post-election U.S. policy toward East Asia, the author proposes some baseline premises for further discussion as follows.

1. The U.S. resource deficit and the partisan deadlock between Democrats and Republicans will continue for the time being. The partisan conflict will only intensify in the still divided government for the coming four years.
2. The first and foremost task for the new President



would be reviving U.S. economy and restoring the public confidence in economic recovery by creating jobs and reducing federal deficit. A greatest portion of the U.S. resources will be spent to achieve this urgent goal.

3. Related with 1 and 2, a bold, drastic departure from the current U.S. foreign policy in East Asia is hardly expected. Military options could be considered to solve the regional security issues, but only as the last resort after thoughtful, thorough, and exhaustive review of other alternatives.

4. Despite the “U.S. decline” argument, the new U.S. president will not and cannot denounce its global leadership role, and the U.S. public will generally support the presidential case for the leadership role, but now on the condition that it will not severely drain U.S. treasury.

5. The new U.S. president will seek a closer bilateral cooperation with the traditional U.S. allies in Asia. At the same time, and multilateral consultation will continue to remain the primary mode in managing regional security and economic issues, in East and South Asia as well as in the transatlantic relationship.

6. Despite the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and its further commitment to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan by 2014, the strategic importance of the Middle East will only loom larger as the continuing target of U.S’ foreign policy attention. The rampant post-democratization backfire and the rising Anti-American sentiment, and Iran’s continued adventurism in nuclear development will continue to enmesh the U.S. The Asia pivoting cannot be achieved at the expense of the Middle East.

7. The Middle East development will further constrain U.S. foreign policy options in East Asia, restraining any drastic change from the status quo in East Asia.

Assuming the above premises are plausible, we can make following forecasts on the U.S. East Asian policy. First, with respect to China, the United States, faced with domestic constraints, will not initiate a policy that is intended to provoke China. That does not, however, suggest that the U.S. will give China a free pass in the region. With China increasing its military spending and modernizing its military, the U.S.’s reaction will be firm, quick, and determined, particularly when China continues to file an inordinate claim on strategically important sea lanes and islands. The U.S. will seek a lot more close consultation with its traditional military allies, such as Japan and Korea, and further with the Philippines, Australia, Vietnam, and possibly India in coping with China’s incessant and increasing military assertiveness.

In the trade relationship with China, the U.S. will continue to pressure the Chinese government to appreciate its currency, and will ask the Chinese government to import more U.S. goods, and address the intellectual property issues, which were all the most heated topics in the final presidential debate on foreign policy. Related with the job-creation issue on the U.S. domestic side, the new Obama administration will play the China-bashing card when he thinks it is necessary. The bashing will surely resurface in the 2014 mid-term election, as it has always been as China began to grow economically. Still, the mutually destructive trade war is highly unlikely. It only damages both nations, and is not a proper option in the WTO era.

Simply put, the U.S. will primarily seek a good and friendly relationship with China so as not to make China feel besieged by the increased U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific. Among other things, the U.S. needs China’s cooperation on North Korean and Iranian nuclear development, sanctions on Syria, nuclear nonproliferation, global anti-terrorism, and other energy- and climate change-related issues. And the U.S. also needs the huge Chinese domestic market to continue to be open for American goods. Recent visits to China in September by Secretary of State Clinton and



Secretary of Defense Panetta can be interpreted as measures to maintain a good working relationship with China further into the future.

At the same time, the baseline of the U.S. posture toward China does not omit asking China to “play by the rules” in dealings with the U.S. and other nations, and particularly in approaching territorial disputes with its neighboring nations. As Obama called China both an “adversary and potential partner” in the final TV debate, the new Obama administration will stand firm against any of China’s inordinate demands tinged with military threat, first to protect its vital interests in East and South Asia, and secondly to give assuring signals to its traditional and potential allies in the region, including Australia. Otherwise, the Asia pivoting may sound empty to the U.S. allies. If not accompanied by genuine investment of resources to sustain the pivoting, the allies will hedge.

Second, with respect to South Korea, the new Obama Administration will try to continue its cooperative policy stance of the last four years if the 2012 Korean presidential election selects again a conservative candidate as the new owner of the Blue House. The U.S., then, will continue to support Korea on the international stage, including the U.N. Security Council and other forms of multilateral institutions. In return for this cooperation and support, however, the U.S. is highly likely to ask for more contributions from the Korean government in the defense and military spending, and for more active role in the U.S.-led military and security initiatives, such as the participation in the PSI.

On the other hand, the U.S. will be extremely cautious in dealing with Korea if another progressive president occupies the Blue House. Recalling the roller-coaster days of the troubled U.S.-Korea alliance during the past Roh presidency, the U.S. will attempt to figure out for a while the leadership nature and orientation of the new Korean administration. Among other things, the U.S. will be cautious not to repeat policy coordination blunders, and not to cause unnecessary misunderstandings between the two new administrations. It will

try to find out common ground to pursue cooperation and avoid conflict, which will only come after some adjustment process and will be quite a testing job.

Regardless of the ideological bent of the new Korean administration, however, the U.S. will react extremely negatively to any kind of Korean requests to renegotiate the free trade deal concluded between two nations. It is particularly so given the deeply troubled U.S. economy and Obama’s commitment to create jobs by exporting more U.S. goods through more free trade deals. The members of the U.S. Congress will not be amenable to the renegotiation idea at all, either.

Vital as it is to the Korean people and government, the North Korean nuclear issue was rarely mentioned during the U.S. presidential campaign. Neither Romney and nor Obama showed much interest in that issue, which means it never became an agenda in this election (Frankly, it has never been in the past election, either. So it is no surprise.). That means two things. First, the U.S. election was primarily driven by domestic economic issues. Second, the U.S. does not regard the North Korean nuclear issue as urgent as the Iran’s nuclear development.

Although the U.S. government officially refuses to give North Korea the status of nuclear power, some Korean specialists in the U.S. seem to acknowledge that North Korea is now a nuclear power. Given that, the baseline approach of the U.S. is not to aggravate the North Korean nuclear situation by making sure that North Korea does not attempt to sell nuclear warheads and technology to rogue states or non-state actors. The new Obama administration will continue to take this posture in “resolving” North Korean nuclear issue, passing the buck to China and the now defunct six-party talks first, and then to Korea.

Then, is there any possibility for the U.S. to take a bold and unilateral measure to deal with North Korean nuclear issue? There can be two different views on that, pessimistic and optimistic. The pessimistic view forecasts that a bold step would be only possible when Obama feels hungry for some diplomatic trophy as U.S.





domestic politics gets entangled into deadlock due to the endemic partisan politics, and/or when North Korea genuinely proves that it is really willing to have a sincere talk with the U.S. to (re)negotiate its nuclear program. Both are not, however, likely that much or will be short-lived at best, according to the pessimistic view. Thus, China-led Six-Party Talk would be the best working alternative. Korea should be vigilant on that.

The optimistic view, however, would contend the second Obama administration can be more proactive toward the bilateral dialogue with North Korea if the renewed Six-Party Talk works well, the inter-Korean dialogue reopens, and North Korea shows some meaningful changes in these two talks. Given that one pillar of Obama's global visions is a nuclear-free world, this view argues that Obama cannot simply let the North Korean nuclear issue get worse. He, too, has some incentive to help solve the North Korean nuclear issue to prove his commitment to the nuclear free world.

In summary, as far as the vital U.S. strategic interests are not violated in the region, the U.S. will not have much incentive to change the status quo. It is increasingly so given the urgency of the U.S. domestic economic recovery and the accumulating budget constraint. As a corollary, the U.S. will continue to seek a close and cooperative relationship with China unless China makes claims the U.S. cannot accept, such as monopolistic control over the sea lanes and militarized approach in solving disputed islands in the East and South China Sea.

At same time, deeply concerned what happened repeatedly over the recent past when Chinese nationalism broke out and/or when China intended to flex its military muscle, the U.S. will be on constant alert and continue to pursue a wider-circle, a new breed of "containment from afar" policy toward China. With this thinly conceived extended containment in mind, the U.S. will further fortify the military bases in Guam and increase its navy presence in the West Pacific, attempt to consolidate its alliance relationship with Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Australia, and finally try to

strengthen ties, both economic and military, with Vietnam and India.

Then, what should the new Korean government do? The following guidelines can be suggested.

1. Korea should try to minimize the U.S.-China conflict in East Asia, particularly around the Korean peninsula. The U.S. has been Korea's most important security partner sharing democratic liberal values and having fought on the Korean side during the Korean War. China has long been the greatest Korean trade partner with its huge market crucial for Korean export and is the only nation who many believe can influence North Korea. Given that, Korea has to pursue diplomacy smart enough to make both sides to know Korea's unique geopolitical relationship with each of the two giants. In line with this, Korea should play a middle power role as an essential hinge in the U.S.-designed Asian architecture, first to help the U.S. understand some intricacies and nuances in the East Asian regional interaction, and to avoid falling into a dilemma trap where it has to choose one giant at the expense of the other.

2. Knowing that the U.S. pivoting toward Asia can swing toward any point between the extreme ends of containing and engaging China, Korea has to prepare for the way back to the normal relationship with China when the U.S. to enter the containing phase and urges us to join it. It would be risky for Korea to blindly follow the U.S.'s cue in its containing phase without considering the way back to normalcy with China. When the U.S. suddenly changes its policy direction back toward the engaging phase, unprepared Korea will only suffer faced with an antagonistic China.

3. Korea should have a series proposals and counter-proposals prepared in case the U.S. asks the Korean government to contribute more to the U.S.-Korean military cooperation, and to play a more active role along with the U.S. on the global anti-terrorism and nuclear non-proliferation. The U.S. request is highly



probable given its draining budget situation and Obama's commitment to cut military spending. Besides, the U.S. may also pass Korea and Japan the buck of playing a more active role in East Asian security and keeping on watching China, while it plays China containment from afar.

4. If we are to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, we should know that Korea is more interested than any other nations in the six party talks in resolving the issue. The U.S. will continue to rebuke North Korea on its nuclear and long-range missile development at the international forum, and ask China to place more pressure on North Korea; China will reluctantly nod to the U.S.-led U.N. Security Council resolution condemning North Korean adventurism, and try to persuade the strong-ego of North Korean leaders. But it all has limits on its own. The new Korean government, left or right, must devise a long-term, realistic plan to settle the North Korean nuclear issue, and actively persuade other six party participants to join this endeavor. Before that, however, the Korean government should ask itself whether it is determined to tackle this thorny issue. ■

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Brownstein, "His Original Sin" *National Journal*, Sep. 22, 2012. p. 12

<sup>2</sup> "Likely Voters Weigh In on the 2012 Presidential Election:" The New York Times/CBS Poll  
<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/09/14/us/politics/2012-presidential-election-poll.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Obama Beats Romney as Better for Middle-Income Americans: Candidates are tied in perceptions of who would most benefit small-business owners"  
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/157799/obama-beats-romney-better-middle-income-americans.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> "Obama and Romney in Exceedingly Close Race, Poll Finds," Oct. 30, 2012, *The New York Times*.

