

Foreign policy in the American election battle

The fact that foreign policy has not been crucial in the American election battle for the White House has been an unwritten tradition for many years. And even if it happened to be important, it became more of a burden to the incumbent president running for a second term or to any other candidate from his camp. That is exactly what happened to President Woodrow Wilson, whose strong involvement in the international arena, including the participation of the United States in the WWI as well as the President's unprecedented presence at the Paris Peace Conference, which constituted a violation of the "sacred rule" of isolationism, determined the result of the 1920 presidential elections. In consequence, that elections were won by a Republican candidate who stated that the US should stay out of world problems, and especially European ones.

It is worth to invoke an example from recent past. In 1992, Bill Clinton, the Democratic candidate, ran his campaign under the slogan "It's economy, stupid," which was a catchy travesty of the famous Republican slogan from 1920 - "America First." Clinton's paraphrase was meant to distance him from the actions undertaken by the then incumbent president, George H. W. Bush senior, whose attention was primarily focused on foreign policy and solving various problems in the international arena. As domestic policy was left somewhat unattended, the country experienced recession, an increase in unemployment rate and budget deficit. The fact that Clinton won the 1992 presidential elections seemed to confirm that Americans wanted a president who would concentrate on the internal affairs of their country. That is why they did not mind his foreign policy inexperience. What they appreciated more was his competence and declarations about economic and social issues.

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George W. Bush junior made a very similar move in 2000, when he turned his superficial knowledge of international affairs into an asset. He convinced the electorate that in order to understand the intricate world problems he would use the advice of competent and experienced advisors. He, himself, on the other hand, would focus on matters of utmost importance to the country, that being domestic policy and moral values. He heavily criticized Clinton's foreign policy believing that the Democratic administration engaged the USA in global issues too much. After all, those eight years of Clinton's presidency – contrary to what had been declared during the election campaign – were not about America's withdrawal or even limited presence in the world. Quite the opposite – the US intervened in the Balkans and Haiti, tried – unsuccessfully – to fight international terrorism, engaged diplomatically in the Middle East conflict. Consequently, America retained the status of a leader and creator in the international arena, and her engagement in various regions of the world was significant. On the one hand, it evoked admiration, on the other, caused aversion and irritation.

For this reason, in the 2000 election campaign Bush strongly criticized Clinton's administration, demonstrating that it led "actions without vision, engagement without priorities, missions without end – an approach which wasted America's enthusiasm and energy." The power of the USA was involved in secondary matters, operating "from crisis to crisis." Thus, he himself called the USA to greater humility in operations extending beyond its territory, and regard for international reactions. He used to say: "America cannot be everything to everyone. We are a freedom loving nation and if we're an arrogant nation, they'll resent us. If we're a humble nation, they'll respect us." Bush's victory over the then vice president Albert Gore, who belonged to the Clinton's camp, may have suggested a return to the policy of moderation and limited objectives, which focused on the America's vested interest.

However, the course of events verified these declarations very fast. The terrorist attack of Al-Qaeda in the USA exerted unprecedented pressure on President George W. Bush. Not only did this pressure radically change his attitude towards the American involvement in the international arena, it also made foreign policy the number one topic in the subsequent election campaigns for the White House and Congress, the topic which could now determine the elections' results. It was the presidential administration's firm reaction, based on strength and the possibility of unilateral action, to the international terrorism, that made him victorious in 2000 and 2004. At that time, Bush's strategy for fighting the terrorist threat appeared adequate and efficient. It seemed to have responded to the needs of the moment and protected the USA. These same factors contributed to the victory of Republicans in the elections to both Houses of the US Congress. It was an unprecedented situation when foreign policy of the incumbent president, not the domestic



one, decided about who would be elected to the Senate or House of Representatives. However, it was a special moment as well – most Americans were still shocked by Al-Qaeda's attack. Therefore, they elected a president whose determination in the international arena would restore their sense of safety lost in the 9/11 attacks.

These same aspects, namely the nature of the actions undertaken by the Bush administration and, most of all, the consequences of his foreign policy strategy, determined the results of the midterm Congressional elections in 2006 (the Republican Party lost majority in both Houses). Above all, however, they caused the defeat of the Republican presidential candidate. There was no other way but to understand Barack Obama's victory in 2008 as a confirmation that Bush's eight-year presence in the White House was a failure. A failure on the domestic, but primarily international arena. What seemed, at first, a proper and efficient response to the terrorist threat, turned out to be a revolution in international relations which endangered the position of the United States in the world and her relations with multiple countries. The so called Bush doctrine broke the hitherto prevailing world order. It was a manifestation of American strength and arrogance. In consequence, it led to a fierce and critical reaction in the international arena and an unprecedented collapse in Transatlantic relations. To make things worse for the USA, she lost her importance and role in the world.

It is not surprising, thus, that Barack Obama, the candidate from the Democratic Party running for the highest office in the country, focused his attention on, among many others, rebuilding the good image of America in the world and especially among her European allies. It was for that reason that he came to Europe during his presidential campaign and presented his foreign policy priorities. It was an extraordinary situation, since never before in the history of the United States has an election campaign been run beyond the borders of the USA. The Democratic candidate, however, decided to go to Europe so that from here he could address the Americans (and Europeans). It was a remarkable pre-election tournée – in July 2008, Obama visited London, Paris, and Berlin. In each of these places he was greeted by enthusiastic crowds (in the capital of Germany he was applauded by circa a quarter of a million people). This became his unquestionable asset in the election battle. The applause and enthusiasm of the Europeans was not solely the result of the quite common dislike for the then incumbent president, George W. Bush. It was also a display of hope that the new president would change America's approach to the world, Europe, and international problems. That there would be more dialogue, consultation, and acceptance of the arguments of others, and at the same time less arrogance and use of force. The American electorate had similar expectations of their future president. They wanted a leader who would change the American approach to the world and its challenges and, as a result,



restore the world's respect towards the USA and regain her position in the international arena. It can be said, thus, that the expectations of the public opinion both within and beyond the borders of the USA were fixed on one man. The American foreign policy became the focal point of these expectations.

This historical context seems relevant as it enables to better assess the latest election campaign and the international issues raised in it. The general thesis, at least when we take into consideration the course of the election battle, the climax of which is still ahead of us, is that foreign policy would not dominate the campaign. The reason is the global financial crisis experienced also by the USA. It draws the attention of the American electorate and troubles politicians as well as the international public opinion. On the other hand, Obama will not escape the assessment of his accomplishments in the international arena. Were the expectations concerning foreign policy placed by the world, Europe, and Americans themselves on the dark-skinned president fulfilled? – that is the fundamental question which will be asked in the crucial moments of the campaign by rival candidates.

The answer is not unequivocal. For sure, Obama managed to regain some of America's good reputation relatively early in his presidency. There was also more harmony and positive attitude in relations with the European allies. It worked as an advantage that the Obama administration altered its political strategy – negotiation was valued over military force, willingness to cooperate and listen to the arguments of political partners was shown. It seemed that pragmatism in actions and consultation replaced ideologization of politics, so typical of Bush, and authoritarian decision making process. Bringing back the American troops from Iraq can also be perceived by many as an asset of Obama's presidency, although, the general result of the military operation in this region of the world is hardly positive and Obama did not change that. The relations with Russia are another spectacular achievement of this presidency. The symbolic "reset" done by both countries was important per se. There were many who could gain from the improvement of these relations and such was the prevailing conviction, especially in Western Europe. The signing of the new START treaty in December 2009, which substantially reduced the limit of American and Russian nuclear warheads, was a positive effect. On the other hand though, the "reset" in the relations with Russia meant giving up the original plans to build an anti-missile shield. That, in turn, interfered with the national security interests of Poland – the America's acquiescent ally.

However, Poland is not the only country that has the right to feel disappointed by the policy of the Obama administration, but at least we no longer have illusions about our place in the strategy of Washington. It is difficult to positively assess the outcome of the Transatlantic relations. Even though the importance of greater harmony between the USA



and Europe cannot be denied, this particular relation lacks a strong impulse which would confirm the point of its existence and effective functioning. This impulse, however, was expected of the United States, as she is the main pillar of the agreement. Even the joint military operation in Afghanistan, due to the growing difficulties and problems faced by this country, did not contribute to the reinforcement of the Atlantic solidarity. Meanwhile, Europe could only watch its position deteriorate in the eyes of Washington, because the American foreign policy underwent reorientation – from the Atlantic towards the Pacific. This is how the President Obama's real achievements in relations with Europe can be presented. But Americans are not the only ones to be blamed for this state of affairs, since Europe is still very reserved when it comes to bearing responsibility for the situation in the world.

On the other hand, the pure diplomacy policy of mainly presenting the America's kinder face to Iran, as it was at the beginning of Obama's presidency, or to the whole Arabic world, even at the expense of positive relations with Israel, did not strengthen the American position in the world. We found ourselves in a position which to many analysts means the beginning of the end of the American domination, even the end of the American era. It is believed that a post-American world is lurking on the horizon. And it is not solely about the competitiveness of China or the remaining countries of the so-called BRIC. Such actions of the Obama administration as the announced defense budget cuts, marginalized cooperation with Europe, reduction of the American military presence on the Continent, loss of influence in other regions of the world, all have additionally contributed to the confirmation of this belief. As a result, what we witness is the formation of new powers, whose position is defined by the amplified economic potential. Sooner or later, there will also be strong political ambitions. It appears that the Obama's administration has not found an effective response to that. It struggled helplessly, only to take strictly military actions in the end: military attacks in Pakistan or operations against the Gaddafi regime.

The question is how strongly will those important and controversial issues be expressed in the presidential campaign which is still to gain momentum. Will the Republican candidate, most likely Mitt Romney, take up the challenge? What should, in this particular context, be inferred from the prospective Republican candidate's visit in Europe? Bearing in mind the original assumption that foreign policy does not have great importance in this election campaign, there will still be room for presenting the accomplishments and failures of the Obama administration in the international arena, as well as Romney's policy towards the world.

No matter who wins these presidential elections, the fundamental direction of the American foreign policy cannot be changed. It will be much more oriented towards the Pacific region. Romney's visit to Great Britain, Israel, and Poland is rather about the tactics,



not strategy. Anyhow, commentators agree on that. Behind those visits there was the intention to list Obama's failures, criticize his negligent policy towards Poland and Israel and, thus, gain particular electorate. They were not intended to herald a radical change in the American strategy. It is certain that economic factors - the Asian rival - and political reasons - the threat of terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction - will impose the retention of non-European priorities in the American policy.

The role of Europe in the American policy, however, will depend to a large extent on how our Continent fulfills the American expectations and whether we increase our participation in different fields and roles. Both the Republicans and Democrats will take a very similar stand on this matter. There is no going back on the situation when Europe has to take some of the obligations and burdens, according to the rule that the USA executes her part of the tasks but Europe does the same. Because in a good partnership, there is no room for fare dodgers.

What will, to some extent, distinguish the Democratic and Republican candidates is their declarations about the America's role and position in the world. The Republican Party politicians are drawn to the concept that the America's position is dependent on her military strength and the ability to make effective and brave decisions, without ruling out the application of force. They express it openly and with determination. President Obama, on the other hand, in his speech will be true to his convictions that America should, above all, use her soft power – set an example, value negotiations over military operations. In practice, however, he does not need to follow those principles that strictly. Especially, when the circumstances in the international arena would impose radical and effective actions.

Let us watch the American presidential campaign, but not expect that the foreign policy programs presented by both candidates will differ fundamentally or crucially influence the results of the elections. However, a lot can still happen.

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