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American Elections at a Time of Crisis: The Risks of Introspection

John Collins

By Emiliano Alessandri and Gregorio Bettiza.

With the primaries in the Republican Party well underway, the campaign season has finally gained momentum. The President's recent State of the Union [address](#) left no doubt that Obama has shed his presidential "coolness" to re-gain the passion of the campaigner. From now on, America will be increasingly absorbed by the process of choosing its next president. With each election comes a new level of spending, scrutiny of the candidates' public record and private life, media coverage, and, no less important, drama and entertainment. The main networks such as Fox News and CNN have already set the stage for what they will broadcast once more as a "historical election" – with all the hammering insistence that 24-hour news channels are capable of. Nothing less than "America's destiny", commentators and presidential contenders like to repeat, will be decided on November 6, 2012.



An Introspective Campaign:

Yet, it is hard not to spot a growing sense of fatigue this year. At a time of crisis, parochialism is a great risk. These elections, in fact, may become remembered as the most inward looking the U.S. has had in decades. On the one hand, the battleground seems clearly delineated to the point of the obvious: how to put America back on track with employment and growth. An old Clintonian mantra has been recycled and updated for this electoral season: "It's the economy, stupid 2.0". On the other hand, the focus on domestic economic issues is mirrored by a deep concern with restoring American greatness. But so far responses to this challenge have been largely introspective. Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich say they offer "no apology" for America's actions in the world. They are fighting Obama not over a New America that can thrive in the world of the 21st century, but an original, purer America that is no longer and perhaps never was. Nor is Obama's message necessarily more visionary and outward looking. That "decline is not a destiny" is declared by the Democratic President and its Republican rivals with the characteristic insistence of those who are struggling to convince themselves. Indeed calls for renewed American leadership appear imbued with a sense of real anxiety about the country's future.

As the United States struggles to relaunch its economy and redefine its identity, the outside world has become the mirror in which America sees its weakness, not the place where it is reminded of its greatness. Republican contenders such as Ron Paul call for a total disengagement from the international sphere. Gingrich and Romney see the country besieged by foreign rivals and enemies, with only Israel standing tall as its sole true friend. The notion that a more globalized and interconnected world can be a positive force for peace and prosperity has disappeared in Obama's latest strategy to "insource" jobs. In the State of the Union address, Obama moved a sharp critique to China's unfair industrial and commercial policies. U.S. companies that were shipping jobs overseas were presented as almost guilty of treason and responsible for persistent high unemployment in the U.S. In public debates Mexican immigrants, Middle Eastern clerics, Indian students, Chinese workers and European socialists risk to be relentlessly and interchangeably portrayed as a danger to the American way of life.

The paradox is that America feels under siege by a globalizing and changing world that is largely, although clearly not exclusively, of its own making. The economic rise of China has been fuelled by the application of market-oriented principles extensively championed by the United States. The long hoped for reformist impulses sweeping across the Middle East should reassure Americans about the universality of democratic values rather than soliciting kneejerk suspicion. Rather than dwindling European socialism, it is rampant financial deregulation that should take the blame for America's economic ailments. In the past, America largely believed it could remake the world in its own image. Now instead Americans seem to be turning their gaze away from the world, as if they were no longer comfortable with the image they saw.

Is Anybody Paying Attention Out There?

While the United States is increasingly introspective, the rest of the world appears simultaneously less interested in the direction America will take. Chinese officials greeted the Pacific pivot announced with great fanfare recently in Washington with remarkably underwhelming concern. In their minds, America has always had its eyes on the Pacific: since it intervened in the Philippines in the late XIX century, all the way to the Korean and Vietnam wars. Europeans also appear less emotionally attached to the current Presidential elections. Firstly, they are distressed and distracted by their own crisis. Secondly, they have no one to really loathe or love: Romney is no Texan cowboy, while Obama 2012 has lost much of the 2008 sparkle. The

Middle East is going through its own revolutionary convulsions with notably little public interest in America bashing from the Arab street. In many quarters of the world the notion of American decline has taken hold. Hence, the implicit assumption seems among many, why bother paying attention to who will occupy the White House next?

During times of crisis, focusing on one's own problems while ignoring others or treating them with contempt is a strong temptation. Yet it is also a dangerous one. After over a century of ascending American power and deepening institutional, economic, political and cultural interconnectedness, the United States' destiny is ever more tied to that of peoples and countries across the globe. And *vice versa*. Public debates during this campaign season, however, have taken a risky turn. America's economic interests and national identity are relentlessly defined in contrast with, or against, those of the rest of the world. Obama's latest State of the Union address captured entirely this mood. This has left little space for constructive and pragmatic discussions about the challenges and opportunities posed by globalizing markets, the international consequences of Asia's growth and rise, the effects of Europe's economic and political woes, and the complexity of the new Middle Eastern dynamics that certainly cannot be reduced to a competition between the good reformists and bad Islamists.

Likewise non-Americans should be careful of falling prey to naïve cynicism and lofty dreams of decline. Indeed, whoever the next resident of the White House will be, what he will say and do will continue to be critical for international security, cooperation and prosperity. Europeans are worried about the U.S. "downgrading" of Europe. Yet, how the next President will lead America's engagement in the Asia Pacific may turn out to matter more for Europe's future than what Washington does across the Atlantic directly. Likewise, the way the U.S. will solve its economic troubles will undoubtedly have ripple effects for all. Failing to see the global stakes of the next Presidential elections will be at America's and the world's peril.

[Emiliano Alessandri](#) is Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the U.S. in Washington DC

[Gregorio Bettiza](#) is a PhD candidate at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and a LSE IDEAS Transatlantic Relations Programme Research Associate.

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