

America's foreign fantasy

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Foreign policy has been invisible in the US election campaign, and that will not change when Mitt Romney travels overseas next week. His trip to the Olympics, Israel and Poland will be pure domestic politics, like the campaign as a whole.

This is a little unexpected. Foreign policy was central to Barak Obama's hope-charged campaign for the presidency in 2008. After George W. Bush's assertive incompetence, a key part of Obama's pitch was his very different vision of America's place in the world. But now, as he seeks re-election, Obama is as silent on foreign policy as his opponent. Both focus solely on issues at home: the economy, jobs, healthcare and taxes. Neither has given a major address on foreign policy this year.

This is not just because these domestic issues loom so large in a country still recovering from the GFC. More importantly, it is because, on foreign policy, Romney and Obama do not really disagree. Amid strident discord on every domestic issue, foreign policy is an oasis of broad if tacit consensus.

There are two possible reasons for this. One is that after the storms of the Bush years, US foreign policy is now back on an even keel with a set of effective policies that all sides can agree are working well, so there is nothing to argue about.

The other possibility is that the problems facing America abroad are so intractable, and the measures needed to deal with them are so difficult, that neither side wants to talk about them. In this case we are seeing not consensus, but paralysis.

Unfortunately, this second explanation is the right one. That's a big worry for Australia as well as for America, because our political leaders also share a deep consensus on foreign policy. Both Gillard and Abbott identify so closely with US positions that America's foreign policy paralysis becomes ours too.

The best way to understand America's paralysis is to look at Obama's approach to foreign policy and what he has achieved. Obama inherited from Bush a formidable set of intractable issues. They included Russia, Israel-Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, North Korea and China, as well as al-Qaeda.

On all of these, Bush set ambitious aims and failed to achieve them. He hadn't curbed North Korea or Iran's nuclear ambitions, rebuilt Iraq or Afghanistan, tamed Russia, stabilised Pakistan, brought Israel and the Palestinians closer to peace or killed Osama bin Laden. Nor had he even begun to realise the magnitude of the challenge posed by China.

Has Obama done any better? His biggest claims to success, tellingly, have been withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan, where he has abandoned bold aims and cut America's losses. And he's attacked terrorism less ambitiously by simply going after al-Qaeda itself — not just bin Laden but hundreds of others — rather than trying to transform the Middle East.

But elsewhere Obama has hung on to Bush's ambitious aims, and achieved as little as Bush did. The Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs remain unchecked. Russia remains unruly, peace in the Middle East is as elusive as ever and relations with Pakistan have nosedived. Obama's bold initiatives to tackle climate change and abolish nuclear weapons have gone nowhere.

And then there is China. The most important change in US foreign policy since 2008 has been the sudden recognition that China's rise is for real, and that its challenge to US primacy in Asia must be taken seriously. Obama's response has been to try to face down China by building a new strategic coalition — including Australia — to contain Beijing's ambitions. He has resisted any idea of constructive accommodation with America's largest trading partner. This seems a sure road to disaster.

There is a consistent element in this pattern of failure. It goes back to Bush, who set foreign policy objectives that America simply does not have the power to achieve. Washington may not like North Korea and Iran's nuclear programs, but it has no way to stop them. It may wish that Russia would follow America's leadership on vexed issues such as Syria, but it cannot compel Moscow. Washington has no way to force Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate, or to stop Pakistan's slide towards the abyss.

Obama's problems began with a misunderstanding of Bush's failures. He saw that America could not fix Iraq or Afghanistan, but elsewhere he seems to have believed that America had the power to achieve Bush's objectives, if only that power was exercised by him rather than Bush. Indeed, he apparently assumed that simply being Barack Obama — and not being George Bush — would be enough to bring success.

It hasn't worked. For all his charm, Obama has failed just as Bush did, and for the same reason. Even more than under Bush, America's international reach under Obama exceeds its grasp. And now he has added a huge new goal of his own - to push back against China as its economy grows to overtake America's. This then explains the candidates' curious silence about America's role in the world. Both Obama and Romney proclaim the same bold agenda for American leadership in the new century, and both assure the voters that this is possible because the US remains as powerful as ever, still able to mould the world to promote American interests and values.

Both probably realise this is not true, because neither is a fool. Both see how the arithmetic of economic growth is driving the biggest shift in the distribution of power for 200 years. But neither of them has the political skills, or courage, to tell Americans what this means. Neither will acknowledge the limits within which a realistic and successful US foreign policy must work. So both prefer to say nothing. That holds the seeds of deep trouble for America, and for Australia.

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