




 [print](#)  [email](#)

October/November 2010 - CER BULLETIN, ISSUE 74

The midterm elections, Europe and US foreign policy

by Tomas Valasek

Though Barack Obama remains popular in Europe, he has his detractors there, particularly among foreign policy professionals. The critics complain that the president takes too little interest in foreign policy (and in Europe in particular), attends to crises only after they arise, and cedes influence to China and Russia through indifference and inattention to global affairs. Many in Western Europe also think him naïve for expecting China and other rising powers to engage constructively in multilateral institutions. Furthermore, elites in Central Europe complain that Obama is neglecting democracy and human rights, especially in the former Soviet republics.

Some of those critics hope that the midterm elections in the US in November will change US foreign policy. There have been midterm elections that had a dramatic impact abroad. When Bill Clinton lost control of Congress in 1994, he turned to foreign policy. A 'domestic' president who had won office by promising to fix the economy and healthcare, Clinton ended up helping to broker peace in Northern Ireland, sending US forces to stop ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and presiding over NATO enlargement. The Democrats are on the brink of a Clinton-like defeat: they stand to lose control of the House of Representatives and possibly the Senate, too.

However, those who expect the midterms to provide a course correction on China or Russia will be disappointed. Unlike Bill Clinton, Obama came to power with a fairly sophisticated foreign policy doctrine. The president believes that the rise of emerging powers – and particularly of China – puts new constraints on America's ability to set the global agenda. He also thinks that their emergence could upset the global system of rules and institutions that the US designed after the end of World War Two. So he is courting China, Russia and other new powers in order to encourage them to take a greater stake in managing the global order. He believes that without China's (and to a lesser extent Russia's and India's) involvement, the US will be unable to tackle global warming, prevent the spread of nuclear weapons or lead a revival of the world economy. Obama thinks that Europe's help with these challenges is essential but not sufficient, and that emerging powers need to join the effort.

Officially Washington has few illusions about the nature of the rising powers: off-the-record, US diplomats describe Brazil, Russia, India and China as difficult and unpredictable. But Obama's ambition is in effect to educate them. He does this with China and Russia by showing respect, extending offers of co-operation and taking a long view when they act badly towards Washington. The US president has made adjustments to this strategy along the way: when China started being tough with its neighbours in early 2010, reinforcing claims to parts of India and the South China Sea, Washington responded by stepping up

military engagement with Asian allies. But the idea was not to abandon the strategy of turning China into a 'global stakeholder'; rather, it was to establish that the more responsibly Beijing behaves, the more leeway it will gain. Whether the Chinese are willing to be patronised in that way remains to be seen.

Many Republicans in Congress think that Obama is not doing enough to get China to float its currency, the renminbi. The Democrats tend to be even more critical of China's currency policy but their desire to support the president has enabled Obama to dissuade Congress from taking retaliatory measures. Things could change after a Republican triumph in the midterm elections. The pressure on Congress to 'do something' is rising because many Americans blame the under-valued renminbi for America's high unemployment. In a Republican-run Congress, Obama would have less ability to restrain law-makers. Sanctions against China could lead to a response in kind, with a damaging effect on Sino-US relations and trade. But that would probably not change Obama's China policy. He appears to think that there is no alternative to working with Beijing. And he can argue that, notwithstanding tensions over North Korea and the South China Sea, the current, fairly calm relationship between Washington and Beijing is in America's interests.

Similarly, the November elections could complicate, but will not fundamentally change, Obama's Russia policy. The president believes Moscow to be central to US efforts to keep Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and in the long run to eliminate those arms altogether. The US has toned down talk of democracy promotion and NATO enlargement, in part because it wanted to give Russia more incentives to co-operate. The White House's assessment is that the 'reset' has borne fruit – Moscow has resolved a maritime border dispute with Norway, cozied up to Poland, allowed NATO to supply its forces in Afghanistan via Russia, and signed a 'new START' treaty with the US, limiting strategic nuclear weapons. The Republicans have criticised Obama for being soft on Russia, and their victory in the midterm elections could challenge the reset policy. There are already doubts over whether the Senate will approve the new START treaty. But even if Obama found his ability to implement Russia policy hamstrung, it is not clear why he would rethink its fundamental premise: that the US needs Russia to help to tackle Iran and curb the spread of nuclear arms. As president, Obama will have the leeway to court Moscow and to continue reducing nuclear arms, even without congressional support.

Whether one agrees with it or not, Obama's foreign policy doctrine has been carefully thought through. It is based on the president's reading of shifts in global power. Those in Europe who would like the US to take a stronger stand on democracy in Eastern Europe, or be less deferential to China, will be disappointed. Irrespective of the outcome of the midterm elections, Obama will continue to think of engaging China as a top US priority, and seek to get along with Russia and other emerging powers. The issues that will compete for the president's attention over the next few years will be Iran, Afghanistan and the Middle East peace process. Neither the EU nor Eastern Europe is likely to move up his agenda.

Tomas Valasek is director of foreign policy and defence at the CER.

[Centre for European Reform](http://www.cer.org.uk/articles/74_valasek.html) © CER 2010