

U.S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN: BROAD CONTOURS

-A briefing Note

Introduction:

The U.S Presidential election campaign, preparatory to voting on 6th Nov, is now at its climax. Since the past six months, the contestants President Obama (Democrat) and Mitt Romney (Republican) are sharp focusing their approaches to issues in the arena. This unfolds a test for the incumbent to build a convincing argument for piloting U.S policy for another term. Concurrently, challenge for his contestant is to mobilize support for the current Republican agenda, benefiting from the incumbency factor. Notwithstanding the above, the electoral race for the apex position of the sole super power carries with it profound impact over the global and regional environment.

Furthermore, elections are taking place amidst an anticlimax in the Global War on Terror, and continuing search for re-ordering priorities in the external domain, commensurate with the domestic pre-occupations. Nevertheless, the biggest challenge for the U.S policy elite is the 'push and pull' within the country.

The candidates have already met for the first Presidential debate held in Denver, Colorado on 3rd Oct and are scheduled to meet twice again in the due course of the month. Consequently, campaign of both the candidates revolves around domestic and global issues at hand. Thus, the subsequent Para's explore the variations of both the candidates in dealing with the issues and its implications for the domestic and global politics.

Issues in focus:

The complexion of campaign in the forefront, indicate that the candidates have an urge to respond to the domestic concerns more than the foreign ones. These concerns primarily flow from the decline in U.S. economy over the decades. Therefore

pronouncements have an unmistakable focus on domestic agenda, while issues in foreign policy are either subservient to the domestic issues or are playing to the tune of domestic audience. Thus, most of the cases are muted, contrary to expectations of the international community. Nevertheless, the larger issues flagged are listed below for facility of further discussion:

Domestic	Foreign	
	Multilateral	Regional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployment and regulating economy. • Cuts and the deficit. • Healthcare • Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-GWOT scenario • Global Human Rights Abuses • UN Security Council Reforms • Environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trading groups and policies • Aid and trade perspective • Afghanistan- peaceful end game • Regional treatment for Asian countries.

Issue specific treatment:

Campaign of both the candidates essentially envisages the same ingredients while their treatment as per the issue has a stark contrast. This difference is outlined in the subsequent paragraphs:

a) *Domestic issues:* Firstly, in the backdrop of deteriorating American economy: unemployment, cuts and deficit, Obama claims to deal with their current status by generating extra revenue and cutting down ‘corporate welfare’, whereas, Romney considers to deal with them by ceasing funds to various government programs and creating more jobs with high income for the middle class. Secondly, Obama considers Healthcare as a very important ingredient of his campaign. He claims that his special program titled: ‘Obamacare’ has proved to reduce role of insurance companies thus helping elderly citizens.

Thirdly, on the issue of education, Obama emphasizes on 'no child left behind policy', whereas Romney while taking a much different direction, considers promoting private sector participation.

b) *Foreign issues:* The external concerns as flagged in the campaign can further be divided into two bifurcations:

- *Multilateral:* Like the post-GWOT scenario, Obama plans to address global terrorism objectively and bring a responsible end to war by military, diplomatic and moral means. Whereas Romney claims to address global terrorism by: military, diplomacy and helping Muslim countries to reject extremism. In addition, he emphasizes on defeating Jihadists in every part of the world. On other issues like Global Human Rights abuses, UN Security Council Reform and Environment both the candidates are a little mute to date.
- *Regional:* In this domain, issues like trading groups and policies, aid and trade perspective, Afghanistan- peaceful end game, Regional treatment for Asian countries, have come up with varying emphasis. Obama considers that U.S still has a role to play in Iraq thus, Iran and Syria should be invited in a regional dialogue, hence every other issue should be dealt with through a dialogue process. Conversely, he has refrained from making any significantly new contribution on the Afghanistan issue.
- Romney declares that Asian economies should be competed with by opening up the American economy. Thus, both contestants have a nearly similar view on foreign aid and assistance. In addition, both emphasize on addressing the threat emanating from Iran's nuclear program by sanctions and military means. On Afghanistan, Romney's remarks carried some aggressive overtones (like sending troops to Pakistan and Bali) although he offers no substantive treatment of the issue or a timeframe for disengagement from the quagmire.

Appraisal:

According to the latest survey (Real Clear Politics Website), Obama certainly has taken a lead, but it should be considered a modest one. In the end, 'Swing' states like Ohio and Florida will determine the future of candidates. Nevertheless, the current inclination of the campaign is towards a 'political equilibrium'. Obama seems to appreciate it but Romney is trying to close up on the gaps by treating the ingredients with a sharp focus and using the loopholes of the incumbent's policy.

However, Obama aware of the fact is always ready for a counter strategy. For instance, wherein domestic issues economy and unemployment were considered to change the electoral results, the recent 11% rise in economic confidence according to the Gallup poll, shows that Obama has managed to come in charge and control the situation. Thus, now the most important question arises that if Obama manages to make it back to the office, will he consider to have a policy reform or retain his 'comfort zone'.

Pakistan's primary concerns:

From the Pakistani perspective, the immediate electoral issue is the future direction of Afghanistan issue in the backdrop of withdrawal and also Pakistan-US bilateral relations. The relationship has remained on a very high pedestal in the two successive periods: 'Soviet era Jihad' and the 'GWOT'. In addition, Pakistan's role in the Afghan roll back is very important. However, interestingly both the candidates have not talked much about this as yet. In the backdrop of Pakistan's recent inclination towards Russia and long term friendship with China, it seems that no matter what the result of the elections are the status quo is likely to maintain.