

**JIIA Special Forum on the 2012 US Presidential Election (1st in Series)**  
**“The U.S. Presidential Election and Foreign Policy: Looking at East Asia”**

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**Professor Kent Calder**

Should Democratic President Obama be reelected, it seems likely that more in-depth approaches will continue to be taken with regard to Southeast Asia. At the same time, the Obama administration's foreign policy has become 'tougher' with time, as illustrated by the killing of Bin Laden and US actions in the South China Sea. The Republican candidates have been debating foreign policy toward China, Iran and Israel, but their papers on long-term foreign policy are still being compiled and their stances are thus not yet clear. When analyzing the election battle, we must take note of the fact that the opponents being targeted by the presidential candidates differ between the party primaries and the nationwide presidential election, and the fact that the rhetoric used on the campaign trail differs from the rhetoric employed once the winner becomes president.

Looking at the circumstances surrounding this presidential election, we see demographic changes proving advantageous for the Obama administration, while economic conditions seem to favor the Republican Party. In terms of election demographics, Obama as a candidate in 2008 garnered 80% of the minority vote (comprising 26% of eligible voters), 90% of the African American vote and 70% of the Hispanic vote, while he was 4 percentage points below his opponent John McCain among white university graduates and 18 percentage points behind among white non-university-graduate blue collar workers. The Hispanic population is growing year by year, and the Asian-American community, which fundamentally backs President Obama, is also expanding rapidly. Minorities as a whole tend to lean toward the Democratic Party and constitute from 26% to 28% of the electorate. Young "Millennial" voters make up 20% of eligible voters, and they support President Obama two-to-one. The fact that the Democratic Party advocates equality of the sexes more than

the Republican Party means that single women lean toward the Democratic Party. These groups will likely provide a critical boost to the Democratic Party. The Republican base, on the other hand, consists of older voters. In 2010 the dynamic of white non-university-graduate blue collar workers leaving the Democratic Party gained strength, with the Democrats losing about 30% of such workers.

Economic issues are a matter of concern for President Obama's re-election. The unemployment rate presently stands around 9%, and there is little likelihood that the unemployment rate will see a sudden improvement. The financial crisis in Europe is also bad news for President Obama. From a macroeconomic perspective, economic circumstances take about eight to nine months to have an impact on employment, so macroeconomic factors over the next six months will likely hold great significance for the presidential election.

Newt Gingrich currently holds the lead among the Republican candidates, but whoever stands out front at any given moment in this election battle comes under careful scrutiny by the rival camps and the media. Mitt Romney has already been tested in this fashion and thus has an advantage; he also enjoys a financial advantage.

On the other hand, the President's approval rating, despite the occasional upturn, has fallen below 50% since July 2010. The president's chances for re-election are fifty-fifty. President Obama is up several percentage points over the Republican candidate Romney, but Romney is strong in several swing states such as Michigan and Florida. As noted earlier, next year's presidential election is expected to be a close contest.

### **Professor KUBO Fumiaki**

President Obama's foreign policy has received relatively high praise, but his economic policy has garnered little support. According to CBS' numbers from November 11, his counter-terrorism policies have a high approval rate of 63%, his foreign policy 45% (about average for presidents) but his economic policy only 34%.

President Obama will undoubtedly endeavor to firm up his Democratic base and increase support from independents, given that ideological polarization can be seen in many areas. As reflected in the inability of the Super Committee to resolve the fiscal deficit issue, polarization is becoming more prominent at the voter level as well; of the three factions of

Democratic Party supporters, 84% of the left-wing supports Obama, while of the two factions of Republican supporters, only 7% of the conservative right-wing supports Obama.

Domestic issues are the greatest concern for the Obama administration, but it has been able to adopt a pragmatic and steadily hardline stance on foreign affairs. In the early days of his administration, President Obama assumed a low profile that differed from “Bush diplomacy” and sought to present a foreign policy stance of being willing to negotiate with any country, as indicated in his speeches in Egypt and Prague. With regard to North Korea and Iran, however, their responses also came into play, and from early on he took a hardline stance.

A variety of factors have had an impact on President Obama’s policy toward China – among them human rights issues, the renminbi, trade issues, copyrights, Google and cybersecurity – but the issue of the South China Sea looms particularly large. China’s claim that the Spratly and Paracel Islands are core interests has also likely had an impact. Accordingly, Secretary of State Clinton stressed “the freedom of navigation” at the ARF and publicly declared that the US is also an interested party. This concept of the freedom of navigation has long been advocated by the US, appearing in Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points as well as the Atlantic Charter.

For that reason, although the US has not “withdrawn” from Asia, in recent years it has made what it terms a “return to Asia.” The US has recently stationed Marines in Darwin, Australia, a strategically significant location near the South China Sea but outside Chinese missile range.

China did not become much of a point of contention during the 2008 presidential election, but the country did receive some mention in 2010 within an economic context; in 2012 China will likely be discussed in terms of the renminbi and security issues. Of course, there is considerable economic interdependence between the US and China, the two countries have just begun military exchange, and the US has refrained from selling its latest weaponry to Taiwan. While US defense spending has swelled since 9-11, cuts are being considered in view of the fiscal deficit. A high-ranking US government official has declared that the US will not be reducing its military presence in Asia, but Asian countries should keep an eye on this. The Chinese threat is steadily growing, and the US itself continues to strengthen cooperation with countries such as Vietnam involved in territorial disputes with China over the South China Sea. Japan has also made known its commitment to the freedom of navigation at the 2+2.

The Republican Party is expected to gain a greater share of the vote in 2012 than it did in 2008. Obama received 53% of the popular vote in 2008, which proved to be the Republicans' worst year due to a number of negative factors: the low approval rating of the outgoing President Bush, the failure in Iraq, the subprime loan problem and the Lehman Shock, McCain's fitness to serve, etc. In addition, it is difficult for the same political party to gain a third consecutive term. In 2000, for instance, the Democratic Party had somewhat of a problem with Gore and President Clinton and, despite the absence of any decisive disadvantage, a third term proved out of reach. Consequently, it is possible that the Republican Party will gain a slightly higher percentage of votes next year than the 46% it secured in 2008. A gain in support for the Republican candidate will mean a drop in support for the Democratic candidate, closing the gap.

Romney appears to be the steady favorite among Republican candidates. However, the conservatives in the Republican Party are dissatisfied with Romney and are looking for a replacement among Bachmann, Perry, Cain, and Gingrich. If Gingrich can gain the support of the Tea Partiers, he may well run away with the race. One survey shows that the image most associated with Romney (by 60% of respondents) is "Mormon." To what degree will this become a point of contention from the perspective of religious Christian conservatives? 17% associated him with medical insurance reform, as he was formerly in the liberal wing of the Republican Party. He is presently making conservative-sounding pronouncements but he is often criticized for flip-flopping. Romney's status as one of the business elite is also worrisome among the anti-establishment segments of the Republican Party.