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## OBAMA'S RE-ELECTION: IS HOPE BACK IN INDIA, PAKISTAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST?

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**P**resident Obama's re-election presents the opportunity for a more decisive, less risk-averse foreign policy towards both South Asia and the Middle East, where critical issues around peace and stability are strongly interconnected with geopolitical outcomes further to the east. Obama's acceptance speech in Chicago seemed to revive some of the hope the world experienced 4 years ago.

For South Asia, the likely election of Tulsi Gabbard, the Hawaii Democrat as the first Hindu in the US Congress, may point towards optimism in India regarding US-Indian relations. However, the Indian business community remains concerned about visa restrictions imposed by the US, and the likely effect on outsourcing to India, of US unemployment concerns. Furthermore, Obama's re-orientation of US foreign policy towards the Pacific means that China, India's longstanding *bête noire*, will increasingly take centre stage in the US's strategic game plan, although the longer Obama is in office, the more his administration recognises how much it needs India (regarded as being one of the US administration's top five interlocutors on almost all global challenges, including combating terrorism, stabilising Afghanistan and managing the rise of China).

Notwithstanding, there is common ground in that both India and the US experience challenges in their relations with Pakistan, as the thorn in their respective sides. Both countries experience a strained and complicated relationship with Pakistan, though in the case of India, there are small but positive indications of improvements due to recent relaxation of visa regulations and trade agreements (though these will likely benefit Pakistan's weak economy more than that of India). "Act small, think big" could mean positive bilateral outcomes for unresolved red lines between India and Pakistan, including Sir Creek, the Wullar Barrage, and Kashmir.<sup>1</sup>

1. For a discussion on possible political outcomes from recent India-Pakistan trade rapprochement, see <http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/dr-emma-hooper/military-militants-and-mandarins-prospects-for-trade-and-peace-between-t>

Pakistan is a critical player for outcomes in Afghanistan, though Pakistanis see no likely policy change under the new presidency: (the much-hated drone attacks, which provoke strongly negative, anti-US reactions across Pakistan and constitute a major irritant in this bilateral relationship, will continue under “Obama II”, as explicitly stated during his re-election campaign). None the less, President-elect Obama is likely to seek Pakistan’s maximum cooperation for troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan – at least till 2014 – and Pakistan’s current government is making positive noises towards the newly-re-elected US President. However, with upcoming elections in Pakistan in 2013, this situation could change: for example, Imran Khan’s *Tehreek e Insaaf* party has pledged to end drone attacks, which is undoubtedly a strong populist stance, but not one likely to invoke positive reactions from Washington.

The US-Pakistani relationship is also schizophrenic, as well as strained. The US has disbursed over \$25 billion in various forms of aid to Islamabad over the past decade. Yet, the two countries are at odds over Afghanistan, where, in the assessment of Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institute, the two countries are in fact “fighting a proxy war”.<sup>2</sup> Pakistan’s intelligence agency, the ISI, has long been charged with sheltering the Taliban leadership, supporting militant fighters and providing “indispensable” support to the insurgency in Afghanistan – a strategy that some attribute to Pakistan hedging its bets on Afghanistan outcomes post-2014. On the other hand, the US persists with continuing the drone war, despite the explicit request of the Pakistani parliament and foreign ministry that they cease flying, viewing them as an infringement of Pakistan’s sovereignty. As Riedel points out, the coming transition in Afghanistan from NATO to Afghan leadership in the war in 2014 will be a major challenge for American-Pakistani relations, with major implications for India. A key supporter of Kabul (and currently its largest provider of aid, seeking to fill the US’s shoes in security training for Afghan forces as well), India may well become the Northern Alliance’s main ally in a post 2014-Afghanistan. If so, an American-Pakistan “proxy war” could become an Indo-Pakistan proxy war, instead.

But, it is in the Middle East that the key to a truly changed US-Pakistan relationship may lie. The achievement of peace between Israel and Palestine could be a potential total game-changer for Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and the region, as well as for the two countries most directly concerned, for the Arab world as a whole, and for Iran. The West tends to seriously under-estimate the strength of feeling and depth of the negative effect of the unresolved Palestinian conflict on the rest of the Muslim world’s geo-political relationships. Obama has clearly stated that he will make progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a diplomatic priority from Day One, working towards the goal of two states, living side by side in peace and security. If he can pull that one off, not only will his name go down in history, but the effects elsewhere in the Muslim world, including Pakistan, and in South Asia, could be transformational. If it is true, then peace may have yet another chance.

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2. See Riedel, Bruce. *India in Transition: The Pakistan Challenge for India and America*, November 2012. <http://casi.ssc.upenn.edu/iit/bruceriadel>