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Obama and Romney Are the Same on Imperial Grand Strategy

By Jack A. Smith

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Despite the sharp charges and counter-charges about foreign policy there are no important differences on such matters between President Barack Obama and challenger Mitt Romney. The back and forth between the candidates on international issues is largely about appearance not substance.

The *Washington Post* noted on Sept. 26 that the two candidates “made clear this week that they share an overriding belief – American political and economic values should triumph in the world.” Add to that uplifting phrase the implicit words “by any means necessary,” and you have the essence of Washington’s international endeavors.

There are significant differences within the GOP’s right wing factions – from neoconservatives and ultra nationalists to libertarians and pragmatic realists – that make it extremely difficult for the Republicans to articulate a comprehensive foreign/military policy. This is why Romney confines himself to criticizing Obama’s international record without elaborating on his own perspective, except to imply he would do everything better than the incumbent.

Only nuances divide the two ruling parties on the principal strategic international objectives that determine the development of policy. Washington’s main goals include:

- Retaining worldwide “leadership,” a euphemism for geopolitical hegemony.

- Maintaining the unparalleled military power required to crush any other country, using all means from drones to nuclear weapons. This is made clear in the incumbent administration's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), and the January 2012 strategic defense guidance titled, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense."
- Containing the rise of China's power and influence, not only globally but within its own East Asian regional sphere of influence, where the U.S. still intends to reign supreme. Obama's "pivot" to Asia is part of Washington's encirclement of China militarily and politically through its alliances with key Asian-Pacific allies. In four years, according to the IMF, China's economy will overtake that of the U.S. – and Washington intends to have its fleets, air bases, troops and treaties in place for the celebration.
- Exercising decisive authority over the entire resource-rich Middle East and adjacent North Africa. Only the Iranian and Syrian governments remain to be toppled. (Shia Iraq, too, if it gets too close to Iran.)
- Provoking regime change in Iran through crippling sanctions intended to wreck the country's economy and, with Israel, threats of war. There is no proof Iran is constructing a nuclear weapon.
- Seeking regime change in Syria, Shia Iran's (and Russia's) principal Arab ally. Obama is giving political and material support to fractious rebel forces in the civil war who are also supported by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. The U.S. interest is in controlling the replacement regime.
- Weakening and isolating Russia as it develops closer economic and political ties to China, and particularly when it expresses opposition to certain of Washington's less savory schemes, such as continuing to expand NATO, seeking to crush Iran and Syria, and erecting anti-missile systems in Europe. In 20 years, NATO has been extended from Europe to Central Asia, adjacent to China and former Soviet republics.
- Continuing the over 50-year Cold War economic embargo, sanctions and various acts of subversion against Cuba in hopes of destroying socialism in that Caribbean Island nation.
- Recovering at least enough hegemony throughout Latin America – nearly all of which the U.S. dominated until perhaps 15 years ago – to undermine or remove left wing governments in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador.
- Significantly increasing U.S. military engagement in Africa.

Both the right/far right Republican Party and the center right Democratic Party agree on these goals, although their language to describe them is always decorated with inspiring rhetoric about the triumph of American political and economic values; about spreading democracy and good feeling; about protecting the American people from terrorism and danger.

Today's foreign policy goals are contemporary adaptations of a consistent, bipartisan international perspective that began to take shape at the end of World War II in 1945. Since the implosion of the Soviet Union ended the 45-year Cold War two decades ago – leaving the U.S. and its imperialist ambitions as the single world superpower – Washington protects its role as "unipolar" hegemon like a hungry dog with a meaty bone.

The people of the United States have no influence over the fundamentals of Washington's military objectives. Many Americans seem to have no idea about Washington's actual goals. As

far as a large number of voters are concerned the big national security issues in the election boil down to Iran's dangerous nuclear weapon; the need to stand up for Israel; stopping China from "stealing" American jobs; and preventing a terrorist attack on America.

One reason is the ignorance of a large portion of voters about past and present history and foreign affairs. Another is that many people still entertain the deeply flawed myths about "American exceptionalism" and the "American Century." Lastly, there's round-the-clock government and mass media misinformation.

After decades of living within an aggressive superpower it is no oddity that even ostensibly informed delegates to the recent Republican and Democratic political conventions engaged in passionate mass chanting of the hyper-nationalist "USA!, USA!, USA!" when they were whipped up by party leaders evoking the glories of killing Osama bin-Laden, patriotism, war and the superiority of our way of life.

Since Romney has no foreign policy record, and he'll probably do everything Obama would do only worse (and he probably won't even win the election) we will concentrate mainly on Obama's foreign policy and the pivot to China.

One of President Obama's most important military decisions this year was a new strategic guidance for the Pentagon published Jan. 5 in a 16-page document titled "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense."

The new doctrine is the response by the White House and Congress to the stagnant economy and new military considerations. It reduces the number of military personnel and expects to lower Pentagon costs over 10 years by \$487 billion, as called for by the Budget Control Act of 2011. This amounts to a cut of almost \$50 billion a year in an overall annual Pentagon budget of about \$700 billion, and most of the savings will be in getting rid of obsolete equipment and in payrolls. This may all be reversed by Congress.

Introducing "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership" to the media, Obama declared:

"As we look beyond the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – and the end of long-term nation-building with large military footprints – we'll be able to ensure our security with smaller conventional ground forces. We'll continue to get rid of outdated Cold War-era systems so that we can invest in the capabilities that we need for the future, including intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, counterterrorism, countering weapons of mass destruction and the ability to operate in environments where adversaries try to deny us access. So, yes, our military will be leaner, but the world must know the United States is going to maintain our military superiority with armed forces that are agile, flexible and ready for the full range of contingencies and threats."

Following the president, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta declared:

"As we shift the size and composition of our ground, air and naval forces, we must be capable of successfully confronting and defeating any aggressor and respond to the changing nature of

warfare. Our strategy review concluded that the United States must have the capability to fight several conflicts at the same time. We are not confronting, obviously, the threats of the past; we are confronting the threats of the 21st century. And that demands greater flexibility to shift and deploy forces to be able to fight and defeat any enemy anywhere. How we defeat the enemy may very well vary across conflicts. But make no mistake, we will have the capability to confront and defeat more than one adversary at a time.”

The Congressional Research Service summarized five key points from the defense guidance, which it said was “written as a blueprint for the joint force of 2020.” They are:

1. A shift in overall focus from winning today’s wars to preparing for future challenges.
2. A shift in geographical priorities toward the Asia and the Pacific region while retaining emphasis on the Middle East.
3. A shift in the balance of missions toward more emphasis on projecting power in areas in which U.S. access and freedom to operate are challenged by asymmetric means ("anti-access") and less emphasis on stabilization operations, while retaining a full-spectrum force.
4. A corresponding shift in force structure, including reductions in Army and Marine Corps endstrength, toward a smaller, more agile force including the ability to mobilize quickly. [The Army plans to cut about 50,000 from a force of 570,000. In 2001 there were 482,000.]
5. A corresponding shift toward advanced capabilities including Special Operations Forces, new technologies such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and unmanned systems, and cyberspace capabilities.

Here are the new military priorities, according to Obama’s war doctrine (notice the omission of counter-insurgency, a previous favorite):

- Engage in counter-terrorism and irregular warfare.
- Deter and defeat aggression.
- Project power despite anti-access/area denial challenges.
- Counter weapons of mass destruction (WMD).
- Operate effectively in cyberspace and space.
- Maintain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent.
- Defend the homeland and provide support to civil authorities.
- Provide a stabilizing presence.
- Conduct stability and counterinsurgency operations.
- Conduct humanitarian, disaster relief, and other operations.

In an article critical of the military and titled “A Leaner, More Efficient Empire,” progressive authors Medea Benjamin and Charles Davis wrote:

“In an age when U.S. power can be projected through private mercenary armies and unmanned Predator drones, the U.S. military need no longer rely on massive, conventional ground forces to pursue its imperial agenda, a fact President Barack Obama is now acknowledging. But make no

mistake: while the tactics may be changing, the U.S. taxpayer – and poor foreigners abroad – will still be saddled with overblown military budgets and militaristic policies.

“‘Over the next 10 years, the growth in the defense budget will slow,’ the president told reporters, ‘but the fact of the matter is this: It will still grow.’ In fact, he added with a touch of pride, it ‘will still be larger than it was toward the end of the Bush administration,’ totaling more than \$700 billion a year and accounting for about half of the average American’s income tax. So much for the Pentagon’s budget being slashed.”

The Obama Administration’s so-called pivot to the Asia-Pacific region, actually East and South Asia (including India) and the Indian Ocean area, was unveiled last fall – first in an article in *Foreign Policy* magazine by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton titled “America’s Pacific Century,” then with attendant fanfare by President Obama on his trip to Hawaii, Australia and Indonesia.

The “pivot” involves attempting to establish a U.S.-initiated free trade zone in the region, while also strengthening Washington’s ties with a number of existing allied countries, such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand and India, among others. A few of these allies have sharp disagreements with China about claims to small islands in the South China Sea, a major waterway for trade and commerce. The U.S., while saying it is neutral, is siding with its allies on this extremely sensitive issue.

Over the months it has become clear that the principal element of the “pivot” is military, and the allies are meant to give the U.S. support and backing for whatever transpires.

The U.S. for decades has encircled China with military might – spy planes and satellites, Navy warships cruising with thousands of personnel nearby and in the South China Sea, 40,000 U.S. troops in Japan, 28,000 in South Korea, 500 in the Philippines, many thousands in Afghanistan, plus a number of Pacific island airbases.

Now it turns out that the Navy is moving a majority of its cruisers, destroyers and aircraft carrier battle groups from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In addition, old military bases in the region are being refurbished and new bases are under construction. Australia has granted Obama’s request to allow a Marine base to be established in Darwin to accommodate a force of 2,500 troops. Meanwhile Singapore has been prevailed upon to allow the berthing of four U.S. Navy ships at the entrance to the Malacca Straits, through which enter almost all sea traffic between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, a key trade route.

An article in the Sept./Oct. 2012 *Foreign Affairs* by Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, titled “The Sum of Beijing’s Fears,” paints a clear picture of American power on the coast of China:

“U.S. military forces are globally deployed and technologically advanced, with massive concentrations of firepower all around the Chinese rim. The U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) is the largest of the United States’ six regional combatant commands in terms of its geographic scope and non-wartime manpower. PACOM’s assets include about 325,000 military and civilian

personnel, along with some 180 ships and 1,900 aircraft. To the west, PACOM gives way to the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which is responsible for an area stretching from Central Asia to Egypt. Before Sept. 11, 2001, CENTCOM had no forces stationed directly on China's borders except for its training and supply missions in Pakistan. But with the beginning of the 'war on terror,' CENTCOM placed tens of thousands of troops in Afghanistan and gained extended access to an air base in Kyrgyzstan.

"The operational capabilities of U.S. forces in the Asia-Pacific are magnified by bilateral defense treaties with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, and South Korea and cooperative arrangements with other partners. And to top it off, the United States possesses some 5,200 nuclear warheads deployed in an invulnerable sea, land, and air triad. Taken together, this U.S. defense posture creates what Qian Wenrong of the Xinhua News Agency's Research Center for International Issue Studies has called a "strategic ring of encirclement."

An article in *Foreign Policy* last January by Clyde Prestowitz asked: "Why is the 'pivot' a mistake? Because it presumes a threat where none exists but where the presumption could become a self-fulfilling prophecy and where others could deal with any threats should they arise in the future. Because it entails further expenditures far beyond what is necessary for effective defense of the United States and its interests. And because it reduces U.S. productive power, competitiveness, and long-term U.S. living standards by providing a kind of subsidy for the offshoring of U.S.-based production capacity."

This development cannot be separated from the increasing economic growth and potential of China in relation to the obvious beginning of America's decline. Washington may remain the world hegemon for a couple of more decades – and Beijing is not taking one step in that direction and may never do so. (Beijing seems to prefer a multipolar world leadership of several nations and regional blocs, as do a number of economically rising countries.)

"Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership," as noted above, specified that the thrust of the Pentagon's attention has now shifted to Asia. The most recent Quadrennial Defense Review already has informally identified China as a possible nation-state aggressor against which America must defend itself. The U.S. claims it is not attempting to contain China, but why the military buildup? It cannot be aimed at any other country in the region but China. Why also in his convention acceptance speech did Obama brag that "We've reasserted our power across the Pacific and stood up to China on behalf of our workers."

The U.S. evidently is developing war games against China. On Aug. 2 John Glaser wrote in Antiwar.com: "The Pentagon is drawing up new plans to prepare for an air and sea war in Asia, presumably against China, in the Obama administration's most belligerent manifestation yet of the so-called pivot to Asia-Pacific.... New war strategies called 'Air-Sea Battle' reveal Washington's broader goals in the region," including a possible war."

The Aug. 1 Washington Post reported that in the games "Stealthy American bombers and submarines would knock out China's long-range surveillance radar and precision missile systems located deep inside the country. The initial 'blinding campaign' would be followed by a larger air and naval assault."

Both candidates have opportunistically interjected China-bashing into their campaigns, second only to Iran-bashing. Obama has several times told working class audiences that China is stealing their jobs. Romney fumes about China's alleged currency "cheating." Republican former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger sharply criticized both candidates Oct. 3 for "appealing to American suspicions of China in their campaigns."

Kissinger, whose recent book "On China" we recommend, also wrote a piece in the March-April *Foreign Affairs* titled "The Future of U.S.-Chinese Relations – Conflict Is a Choice, Not a Necessity" that injects an element of understanding into the matter.

"The American debate, on both sides of the political divide, often describes China as a 'rising power' that will need to 'mature' and learn how to exercise responsibility on the world stage. China, however, sees itself not as a rising power but as a returning one, predominant in its region for two millennia and temporarily displaced by colonial exploiters taking advantage of Chinese domestic strife and decay. It views the prospect of a strong China exercising influence in economic, cultural, political, and military affairs not as an unnatural challenge to world order but rather as a return to normality. Americans need not agree with every aspect of the Chinese analysis to understand that lecturing a country with a history of millennia about its need to 'grow up' and behave 'responsibly' can be needlessly grating."

Clearly, the Obama Administration is opposed to modern China even becoming "predominant in its region" once again, much less in the world. At this stage Washington is predominant in East Asia, and between its military power and subordinate regional allies it is not prepared to move over even within China's own sphere. No one can predict how this will play out in 20 or 30 years, of course.