

US Presidential Debates 2008– Foreign Policy Concerns & Perspectives

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With only three weeks left to the presidential elections in the United States of America, the two presidential nominees have been slugging it out on their approach to both domestic and foreign policy in the last and final round of the three scheduled Presidential Debates, two of which have already been held, the first at the University of Mississippi on September 26, 2008, and the second in Nashville, Tennessee on October 7.

The third is scheduled to be held in New York on October 16.

The crux of the first two debates was focussed on domestic issues with only cursory references to foreign policy with each candidate trying to get their facts and statistics right on such issues as the economy, health care, education and a sprinkling of foreign policy concerns that included Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Russia.

We understand that nothing is predictable in foreign affairs and policy, nevertheless, the pronouncements by Barack Obama and John McCain on foreign policy issues and their approach to addressing them do give us an indication of their individual approach to issues that concern the United States today, and help us in understanding whether they indicate a ‘change’ in the way the new US president will be approaching the contentious that top their foreign policy agenda.

The north west region of Pakistan seems to be rapidly becoming the new front in the US war on terror, and with the declaration by the International Red Cross Committee to be the ‘new war zone’, for us in Pakistan therefore, the debates were of immense importance as the country faces growing accusations of providing ‘safe havens’ for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda operatives to carry out attacks against Afghan, NATO and ISAF forces across the border with Afghanistan. They come in the wake of an increase in attacks by US drones and jet fighters against Taliban and Al Qaeda targets inside Pakistan following reports in August 2008 that the Bush administration officials are urging President Bush to direct US troops in Afghanistan to be more aggressive in pursuing militants into Pakistan on foot as part of a proposed radical shift in its regional counter-terrorism strategy. *The New York Times* reported on September 11, 2008 that President Bush secretly approved orders in July that for the first time allow American Special Operations forces to carry out ground assaults inside Pakistan without the prior approval of the Pakistani government.

Since end of August 2008 to mid October 2008, there have been at least ten reported missile attacks by air and at least one ground operation by ISAF forces inside Pakistan’s tribal areas. Following incidents were tagged by the author since August 29, 2008 as reported in local print and visual media:

US strikes inside Pakistan- August-October 2008

No.	Date	Incident
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1.	Aug. 29	- US drones fires missiles in South Waziristan
2.	Aug. 31	- US drones fire missiles in North Waziristan
3.	Sept. 4	- US drones fires missiles at a village in North Waziristan
4.	Sept. 8	- US drones fire 5 missiles at the compound of Serajuddin Haqqani, son of Jalaluddin Haqqani killing 23, wounding 18
5.	Sept. 12	- US drone fires missile in South Waziristan
6.	Sept. 15	- US drone attack, South Waziristan
7.	Sept. 17	- US drone attack, South Waziristan, Baghar village, Seven (7), some reportedly foreigners killed.
8.	Sept. 25	- US gunship helicopters intrude into Spinkhwara village near Saidgai, in North Waziristan. From Khost province. Pakistan forces fire warning shots forcing the helicopters to return to Afghanistan.
9.	Oct.4	- US drones fire missiles in North Waziristan village, Mohammad Khel, 20 km from Miramshah. 18 killed including women and children. US jets also fire missiles at a NWA village near the border with Khost. Official and tribal sources told The News from the border areas that two US jet fighters and gunship helicopters pounded border villages between Pakistan and Afghanistan after US troops, patrolling the border areas inside Afghan territory, came under attack. Afghan Taliban led by prominent commander, Sirajuddin Haqqani alias Khaleefa claimed that their fighters attacked US troops in Narayzai area of Tanaee district in Afghanistan's Khost province, killing five soldiers and injuring eight others. Taliban claimed they also fired at two US helicopters that came to airlift the bodies and injured US soldiers. Sources said the US jetfighters and gunship helicopters later started pounding suspected positions of Taliban inside Afghanistan in which some of the bombs fell on two Pakistani border villages – Kharseen and Mazdak.
10.	Oct. 11	- US drones fire missiles in North Waziristan agency. The attacks targeted houses in Tappi village and the village of Dande Darpa Khel.

While the US presidential candidates mark their foreign policy concerns, the US military and allied organizations have already initiated a review of the US military strategy on Afghanistan under the new US CENTCOM chief, General Petraeus, including an Iraq-like 'surge' in the number of US troops and bringing in regional countries who have a stake in the stability of the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen was reported in October 2008 as saying that there is a need to review the US strategy on Afghanistan and broaden its scope to include India, as it has like Pakistan, long historic links to Afghanistan and an important role to play there.

With the Indo-US strategic partnership sealed by the formal signature of a civilian nuclear agreement the two countries, the question of Indian ambitions in Afghanistan acquired a special importance. Given the changing nature and direction of security threats in South Asia, Indian goodwill, both at the tactical and strategic level is essential for Pakistan.

Equally important for Pakistan is the policy framework for the region that the next US president opts for. Statements made during electoral battles are indicative of preferences but not necessarily policy decisions for the future. Most analysts in Pakistan hope that the next administration would have a more comprehensive policy towards the Afghan conflict projecting a judicious mixture of military and political initiatives.

The views and policy approaches on Afghanistan, Iran and Russia, three of the other countries that specifically drew comments from the two US presidential candidates are indicated in the tables below:

Ist Presidential Debate – University of Mississippi,

September 26, 2008

Foreign Policy	Obama	McCain
On Pakistan	We've got to deal with Pakistan, because al Qaeda and the Taliban have safe havens in Pakistan, across the border in the northwest regions, and although, you know, under George Bush, with the support of Senator McCain, we've been giving them \$10 billion over the last seven years, they have not done what needs to be done to get rid of those safe havens. Nobody talked about attacking Pakistan. Here's what I said, that, if the United States has al Qaeda, bin Laden, top-level lieutenants in our sights, and Pakistan is unable or unwilling to act, then we should take them out. Now, I think that's the right strategy; I think that's the right policy.	On this issue of aiding Pakistan, if you're going to aim a gun at somebody, George Shultz, our great secretary of state, told me once, you'd better be prepared to pull the trigger. I'm not prepared at this time to cut off aid to Pakistan. So I'm not prepared to threaten it, as Senator Obama apparently wants to do, as he has said that he would announce military strikes into Pakistan. We've got to get the support of the people of Pakistan.
On Afghanistan	I think we need more troops. I've been saying that for over a year now. And I think that we have to do it as quickly as possible, because it's	I won't repeat the mistake that I regret enormously, and that is, after we were able to help the Afghan freedom fighters and drive the Russians out of

	<p>been acknowledged by the commanders on the ground the situation is getting worse, not better. So I would send two to three additional brigades to Afghanistan. Every intelligence agency will acknowledge that al Qaeda is the greatest threat against the United States and that Secretary of Defense Gates acknowledged the central front — that the place where we have to deal with these folks is going to be in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. So here's what we have to do comprehensively, though. It's not just more troops. We have to press the Afghan government to make certain that they are actually working for their people. And I've said this to President Karzai. No. 2, we've got to deal with a growing poppy trade that has exploded over the last several years.</p>	<p>Afghanistan, we basically washed our hands of the region. And the result over time was the Taliban, al Qaeda, and a lot of the difficulties we are facing today. So we can't ignore those lessons of history. I'm confident, now that General Petraeus is in the new position of command, that we will employ a strategy which not only means additional troops — and, by the way, there have been 20,000 additional troops, from 32,000 to 53,000, and there needs to be more.</p>
<p>On Iran</p>	<p>I believe the Republican Guard of Iran is a terrorist organization. They have funded Hezbollah, they have funded Hamas, they have gone from zero centrifuges to 4,000 centrifuges</p>	<p>Senator Obama twice said in debates he would sit down with Ahmadinejad, Chavez and Raul Castro without precondition. Without precondition. Here is Ahmadinenene [mispronunciation],</p>
	<p>to develop a nuclear weapon. So obviously, our policy over the last eight years has not worked. we cannot tolerate a nuclear Iran. It would be a game changer. Not only would it threaten Israel, a country that is our stalwart ally, but it would also create an environment in which you could set off an arms race in this Middle East. Now here's what we need to do. We do need tougher sanctions. we are also going to have to, I believe, engage in tough direct diplomacy with Iran and this is a major difference I have with Senator McCain, this notion by not talking to people we are punishing them has not worked. It has not worked in Iran, it has</p>	<p>Ahmadinejad, who is now in New York, talking about the extermination of the State of Israel, of wiping Israel off the map, and we're going to sit down, without precondition, across the table, to legitimize and give a propaganda platform to a person that is espousing the extermination of the state of Israel, and therefore then giving them more credence in the world arena and therefore saying, they've probably been doing the right thing, because you will sit down across the table from them and that will legitimize their illegal behavior. I'll sit down with anybody, but there's got to be pre-conditions.</p>

	<p>not worked in North Korea. In each instance, our efforts of isolation have actually accelerated their efforts to get nuclear weapons. That will change when I'm president of the United States.</p>	<p>Those pre-conditions would apply that we wouldn't legitimize with a face to face meeting, a person like Ahmadinejad. I have proposed a league of democracies, a group of people - a group of countries that share common interests, common values, common ideals, they also control a lot of the world's economic power. We could impose significant meaningful, painful sanctions on the Iranians that I think could have a beneficial effect. The Iranians have a lousy government, so therefore their economy is lousy, even though they have significant oil revenues. So I am convinced that together, we can, with the French, with the British, with the Germans and other countries, democracies around the world, we can affect Iranian behavior.</p>
<p>On Russia</p>	<p>Given what's happened over the last several weeks and months, our entire Russian approach has to be evaluated, because a resurgent and very aggressive Russia is a threat to the peace and stability of the region. Their actions in Georgia were unacceptable. They were unwarranted. And at this point, it is absolutely critical for the next president to make clear that we have to follow through on our six-party — or the six-point cease-fire. They have to remove themselves from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It is absolutely important that we have a unified alliance and that we explain to the Russians that you</p>	<p>I was interested in Senator Obama's reaction to the Russian aggression against Georgia. He doesn't understand that Russia committed serious aggression against Georgia. And Russia has now become a nation fueled by petro-dollars that is basically a KGB apparatchik-run government. I don't believe we're going to go back to the Cold War. I am sure that that will not happen. But I do believe that we need to bolster our friends and allies. And that wasn't just about a problem between Georgia and Russia. It had everything to do with energy. There's a pipeline that runs from the</p>
	<p>cannot be a 21st-century superpower, or power, and act like a 20th-century dictatorship. And we also have to affirm all the fledgling democracies in that region, you know, the Estonians, the Lithuanians, the Latvians, the Poles, the</p>	<p>Caspian through Georgia through Turkey. And, of course, we know that the Russians control other sources of energy into Europe, which they have used from time to time. It's not accidental that the presidents of Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine</p>

	<p>Czechs, that we are, in fact, going to be supportive and in solidarity with them in their efforts. They are members of NATO. And to countries like Georgia and the Ukraine, I think we have to insist that they are free to join NATO if they meet the requirements, and they should have a membership action plan immediately to start bringing them in. Now, we also can't return to a Cold War posture with respect to Russia. It's important that we recognize there are going to be some areas of common interest. One is nuclear proliferation. They have not only 15,000 nuclear warheads, but they've got enough to make another 40,000, and some of those loose nukes could fall into the hands of al Qaeda. This is an area where I've led on in the Senate, working with a Republican ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Dick Lugar, to deal with the proliferation of loose nuclear weapons. That's an area where we're going to have to work with Russia. But we have to have a president who is clear that you don't deal with Russia based on staring into his eyes and seeing his soul. You deal with Russia based on, what are your — what are the national security interests of the United States of America?</p>	<p>... are very concerned about the Russian threats to regain their status of the old Russian empire. Now, I think the Russians ought to understand that the United States will support the inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine in the natural process, inclusion into NATO. We also ought to make it very clear that the Russians are in violation of their cease-fire agreement. They have stationed additional troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was very clear, the Russian intentions towards Georgia. They were just waiting to seize the opportunity. So, this is a very difficult situation. We want to work with the Russians. But we also have every right to expect the Russians to behave in a fashion and keeping with a country who respects international boundaries and the norms of international behavior. Watch Ukraine. This whole thing has got a lot to do with Ukraine, Crimea, the base of the Russian fleet in Sevastopol. And the breakdown of the political process in Ukraine between Tymoshenko and Yushchenko is a very serious problem. Let's make sure that the Ukrainians understand that we are their friend and ally.</p>
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2nd Presidential Debate – Nashville, Tennessee, October 7

Foreign Policy	Obama	McCain
On Pakistan	<p>We have a difficult situation in Pakistan ... because we made a bad judgment going into Iraq in the first place when we hadn't finished the job of hunting down bin Laden and crushing al Qaeda. So what happened was we got distracted, we diverted resources, and ultimately bin Laden escaped, set up</p>	<p>Our relations with Pakistan are critical, because the border areas are being used as safe havens by the Taliban and Al Qaeda and other extremist organizations, and we have to get their support. Now, General Petraeus had a strategy, the same strategy -- very different, because of the</p>

	<p>base camps in the mountains of Pakistan in the northwest provinces there. They are now raiding our troops in Afghanistan, destabilizing the situation. They're stronger now than at any time since 2001. And that's why I think it's so important for us to reverse course, because that's the central front on terrorism. I do believe that we have to change our policies with Pakistan. We can't coddle, as we did, a dictator, give him billions of dollars and then he's making peace treaties with the Taliban and militants. What I've said is we're going to encourage democracy in Pakistan, expand our nonmilitary aid to Pakistan so that they have more of a stake in working with us, but insisting that they go after these militants. And if we have Osama bin Laden in our sights and the Pakistani government is unable or unwilling to take them out, then I think that we have to act and we will take them out. We will kill bin Laden; we will crush Al Qaeda. That has to be our biggest national security priority. Now, that I think has to be our policy, because they are threatening to kill more Americans</p>	<p>conditions and the situation -- but the same fundamental strategy that succeeded in Iraq. And that is to get the support of the people. We need to help the Pakistani government go into Waziristan, where I visited, -- and get the support of the people, and get them to work with us and turn against the cruel Taliban and others. And by working and coordinating our efforts together, not threatening to attack them, but working with them, and where necessary use force, but talk softly, but carry a big stick.</p>
<p>On Afghanistan</p>	<p>We're going to have to put some additional troops in Afghanistan. Gen. [David] McKiernan, the commander in Afghanistan right now, is desperate for more help, because our bases and outposts are now targets for more aggressive Afghan -- Taliban offenses. We're also going to have to work with the Karzai government, and when I met with President Karzai, I was very clear that, "You are going to have to do better by your people in order for us to gain the popular support that's necessary." I don't think he has to be a dictator.</p>	<p>Gen. Petraeus ... will really set the tone for the strategy and tactics that are used. And I've had conversations with him. It is the same overall strategy. Of course, we have to do some things tactically, some of which Sen. Obama is correct on. We have to double the size of the Afghan army. We have to have a streamlined NATO command structure. We have to do a lot of things. We have to work much more closely with the Pakistanis. But most importantly, we have to have the same strategy, which Sen.</p>

	<p>And we want a democracy in Afghanistan. But we have to have a government that is responsive to the Afghan people, and, frankly, it's just not responsive right now.</p>	<p>Obama said wouldn't work, couldn't work, still fails to admit that he was wrong about ... the surge in Iraq, and that's the same kind of strategy of go out and secure and hold and allow people to live normal lives. And once they feel secure, then they lead normal, social, economic, political lives, the same thing that's happening in Iraq today. So I have confidence that General Petraeus, working with the Pakistanis, working with the Afghans, doing the same job that he did in Iraq, will succeed and we will bring our troops home with honor and victory and not in defeat.</p>
<p>On Iran</p>	<p>We cannot allow Iran to get a nuclear weapon. It would be a game-changer in the region. Not only would it threaten Israel, our strongest ally in the region and one of our strongest allies in the world, but it would also create a possibility of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists. It's unacceptable. And I will do everything that's required to prevent it. And we will never take military options off the table. And it is important that we don't provide veto power to the United Nations or anyone else in acting in our interests. It is important, though, for us to use all the tools at our disposal to prevent the scenario where we've got to make those kinds of choices. And that's why I have consistently said that, if we can work more effectively with other countries diplomatically to tighten sanctions on Iran, if we can reduce our energy consumption through alternative energy, so that Iran has less money, if we can impose the kinds of sanctions that, say, for example, Iran right now imports gasoline, even though it's an oil-producer, because its oil infrastructure has broken down, if we</p>	<p>Our challenge right now is the Iranians continue on the path to acquiring nuclear weapons, and it's a great threat. It's not just a threat -- threat to the state of Israel. It's a threat to the stability of the entire Middle East. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, all the other countries will acquire them, too. The tensions will be ratcheted up. What would you do if you were the Israelis and the president of a country says that they are -- they are determined to wipe you off the map, calls your country a stinking corpse? Now, Sen. Obama without precondition wants to sit down and negotiate with them, without preconditions. That's what he stated, again, a matter of record. I want to make sure that we put enough pressure on the Iranians by joining with our allies, imposing significant, tough sanctions to modify their behavior. And I think we can do that. I think, joining with our allies and friends in a league of democracies, that we can effectively abridge their behavior, and hopefully they would abandon this quest that they are on for nuclear weapons. But, at the end of the day ... we can never allow a</p>

	<p>can prevent them from importing the gasoline that they need and the refined petroleum products, that starts changing their cost-benefit analysis. That starts putting the squeeze on them. I believe that we should have direct talks -- not just with our friends, but also with our enemies -- to deliver a tough, direct message to Iran that, if you don't change your behavior, then</p>	<p>second Holocaust to take place.</p>
	<p>there will be dire consequences. If you do change your behavior, then it is possible for you to re-join the community of nations. Now, it may not work. But one of the things we've learned is that when we take that approach, whether it's in North Korea or in Iran, then we have a better chance at better outcomes. When President Bush decided we're not going to talk to Iran, we're not going to talk to North Korea, you know what happened? Iran went from zero centrifuges to develop nuclear weapons to 4,000. North Korea quadrupled its nuclear capability. We've got to try to have talks, understanding that we're not taking military options off the table.</p>	
<p>On Russia</p>	<p>The resurgence of Russia is one of the central issues that we're going to have to deal with in the next presidency. And for the most part I agree with Sen. McCain on many of the steps that have to be taken. But we can't just provide moral support ... to the Poles and Estonia and Latvia and all of the nations that were former Soviet satellites. But we've also got to provide them with financial and concrete assistance to help rebuild their economies. Georgia in particular is now on the brink of enormous economic challenges. The other thing we have to do, though, is we've got to see around</p>	<p>I don't think that -- we're not going to have another Cold War with Russia. But have no doubt that Russia's behavior is certainly outside the norms of behavior that we would expect for nations which are very wealthy, as Russia has become, because of their petro dollars. I said before, watch Ukraine. Ukraine, right now, is in the sights of Vladimir Putin, those that want to reassemble the old Soviet Union. We've got to show moral support for Georgia. We've got to show moral support for Ukraine. We've got to advocate for their membership in</p>

	<p>the corners. We've got to anticipate some of these problems ahead of time. You know, back in April, I put out a statement saying that the situation in Georgia was unsustainable because you had Russian peacekeepers in these territories that were under dispute. So part of the job of the next commander-in-chief, in keeping all of you safe, is making sure that we can see some of the 21st Century challenges and anticipate them before they happen. Energy is going to be key in dealing with Russia. If we can reduce our energy consumption, that reduces the amount of petro dollars that they have to make mischief around the world. That will strengthen us and weaken them when it comes to issues</p>	<p>NATO. We have to make the Russians understand that there are penalties for these this kind of behavior, this kind of naked aggression into Georgia, a tiny country and a tiny democracy. And so, of course we want to bring international pressures to bear on Russia in hopes that that will modify and eventually change their behavior. Now, the G-8 is one of those, but there are many others. But the Russians must understand that these kinds of actions and activities are not acceptable and hopefully we will use the leverage, economic, diplomatic and others united with our allies, with our allies and friends in Europe who are equally disturbed as we are about their recent behaviors.</p>
	<p>like Georgia. We understand they're not the old Soviet Union but they still have nationalist impulses that I think are very dangerous.</p>	<p>It will not be a re-ignition of the Cold War, but Russia is a challenge.</p>