

OBAMA'S FOREIGN POLICY: A FORWARD LOOKING ANALYSIS

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According to many observers the Democratic presidential contender seems to act, on the foreign front, as if he is already in office. And indeed, most European foreign offices are now betting on an Obama presidency. On average, his lead in the polls over John McCain has remained steady through the summer, only to grow narrower in early September (though a recent Gallup poll gave John McCain a two point lead overall, the break-down of the electoral college system still places Barack Obama ahead for the presidency). Whether or not Obama comes out on top in November, one question remains hanging over his would-be presidency: the world's political and business leaders have yet to get a clear picture of what America's foreign policy might look like under an Obama administration.

Are we looking at a period of change or continuity in US foreign policy? It would seem that after using the Iraq issue to draw a wedge between himself and Clinton (who voted to authorize the war), Obama is coming closer to towing a centrist (some would say traditionalist or realist) line on other traditional foreign policy matters. The question, in many observers' minds, is whether Obama has the spine, and the vision, to manage tough challenges from America's adversaries, or whether his perceived "naiveté" might set him up for a tough awakening once in office.

1. The Question of Foreign Policy Experience

Obama's choice of Joe Biden for vice-president was meant to counter the criticism, voiced by John McCain and, before him, by Hillary Clinton during the primaries, that cast Obama as a foreign policy novice. While the two previous US presidents (Bill Clinton and George W. Bush) had little more foreign policy experience before they got into office, such criticism nonetheless had a stinging effect, especially in the light of John McCain's exceptional credentials both as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as a potential commander-in-chief.

Joe Biden, who was born before the end of World War Two and serves as the Senior Senator from Delaware, is the current Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In the early days after the September 11th attacks he was a hawkish Democratic voice on foreign policy, often appearing on the Sunday morning talk shows to remind Americans of the (pre-Jimmy Carter era) Democratic tradition of toughness in the foreign realm that marked the Kennedy era. While he was an early supporter of the Iraq war, and voted to give President Bush authority to use military force, he soon turned into the Democrats' most effective critic of the manner in which the Bush Administration was conducting military

operations. An outspoken, media friendly personality with a knack for stinging sound-bytes, Sen. Biden appears to have effectively shored up Obama's perceived inexperience in the foreign policy realm (in a similar way that Dick Cheney once balanced out George W. Bush's relative inexperience).

By contrast, John McCain's choice of Sarah Palin, the young 2-year Governor of Alaska, appears to have many Americans worried that, should the 72-year-old Republican fall ill, America would find itself with a near novice as a commander-in-chief.

Notwithstanding Palin's tremendous appeal among social conservatives in the small towns of America's mainland "Red" states (meaning the states that voted Republican in 2004), Obama appears to have found, in the choice of Joe Biden as a running mate, an effective a stop-gap measure against the chief-criticism that had been leveled against his candidacy in the realm of foreign policy. Biden is well known among the members Europe's foreign policy establishment, and he offers a familiar presence to the ticket that has State Department officials sounding confident in their ability to rekindle the pre-Bush administration guidelines that framed US foreign policy in the 1990s.

Now as for the substantive issues awaiting the next president, we have witnessed an unlikely "rapprochement" between the foreign policy statements coming out of the Obama campaign and the actions of the Bush administration. Iraq is a case in point:

2. The Iraq Theatre

Obama's campaign has focused on the candidate's promise of "change." On the foreign policy front, thus far, this message of change has mostly crystallized around the issue of Iraq, where Obama's promise to pull out US combat forces within 16 months of his taking office stands in stark contrast to the Republicans' previous efforts to avoid any talk of a deadline for withdrawal (a stance that has evolved into something closer to a framework for withdrawal agreed with the Iraqi government in recent weeks).

After winning the Democratic nomination, Obama has issued a number of "clarifications" on his Iraq policy aims. He admits that the surge, and the support for the "Sunni Awakening" councils has worked better than anyone expected, though he insists that the Iraq was was a strategic mistake to begin with, chiefly because it undermined America's ability to field more forces to Afghanistan, where he believes the chief challenge of the "war on terror" remains. Obama no longer rules out leaving behind enough military personnel to support counter-terrorist operations and protect US ex-pats working in Iraq. Such a commitment could require a higher force structure than may have been clear to Obama earlier on in the campaign. If the US wants to retain control of key airfields, and be in a position to prevent attacks on Iraq's oil infrastructure, while securing its nationals in Iraq's green zone and beyond, it may indeed be impossible to withdraw "all" combat units from that country without risking a sudden reversal of the gains made to date (including a significant decline in both Al-Qaeda and sectarian-driven violence, and a stark economic upswing fueled by high oil prices and a more open market economy).

Will Obama risk being the president who "lost Iraq," after the enormous investment the United States has (for better or for worse) made in that country's transition to democracy?

A well placed analyst in America's defense establishment cautions that Iran's relative restraint (compared to past high-level efforts to foment violence and destabilize Iraq's emerging government) may in fact stem from a medium-term calculation that the United States is more likely to disengage, and thus leave Iraq's government much more vulnerable to Iranian pressure, if the next few months remain relatively calm.

Hence the question: does Obama have a long term vision of the nature of America's relationship with Iraq? Would he intervene to defend Iraq's democracy if it came under threat? John McCain's message deals with those questions with a decisive "yes." From the Republican perspective, the more control the US can maintain in that country, the better. While they are also eager to draw down US forces in Iraq, their long-term objective, to secure

a stable and friendly and increasingly democratic and prosperous Iraq that would be a strong US ally in the region, has the advantage of being clear. Whether it is realistic given America's war-fatigue is of course another question, but insofar as clarity is valued by America's allies, and its electorate, the Republican position appears unblinking.

Whether or not Obama shares in this vision is far from clear. Beyond pushing for a withdrawal (which will be far more complex to execute than the public may be aware of, according a top US general speaking on conditions of anonymity) what is Obama's plan? And what level of risk is he prepared to accept for the sake of keeping his early campaign promise of a swift and complete withdrawal? The media is likely to keep him to that pledge, as are his core supporters, so there will be limited wiggle room once the withdrawal begins.

Depending on events in the ground in Iraq (including, most notably, the possibility of a rapid and unexpected increase in Iranian destabilization efforts after the withdrawal has begun) Obama might find that he has painted himself into a corner, where he would be unable to show the kind of flexibility that future challenges by Teheran may require. Rather, the initiative would be Iran's. If its leaders think it is a good idea to humiliate the United States during its withdrawal phase, and fear little or no consequences from bringing about such a scenario, what is to stop them?

3. Beyond Iraq – Change vs. Continuity in US Foreign Policy

Obama's recent "world tour" showed the US public that Obama could not only "look presidential" while abroad, but that he was welcome with an enthusiasm rarely shown to any previous US presidential contender.

But have the welcoming receptions Obama received in most European destinations, particularly in Germany, where his address had the crowd chanting his name, been driven by his substantive foreign policy statements? Or did they have more to do with his image, and the "friendlier" face he seems to project?

Just as Obama has been criticized on the domestic front (including by Hillary's campaign) for representing a change of "style rather than substance," the candidate's foreign policy pronouncements to date must be considered with care if we are to discern between those that purport to bring real changes and those that remain within the framework of an enduring and surprisingly consistent White House foreign policy traditions over several Democratic and Republican administrations.

Based on his statements to date, Obama appears more inclined to adopt a "realist approach," rather than so-called "moralizing" or "idealist" approaches that have been associated with the Neo-Conservative agenda of his predecessor (Bush had clearly adopted the Wilsonian mantra of working for peace by spreading democracy, through war if necessary, which is the same over-arching vision that guided two Democratic US presidents through two world wars. This doctrine was more closely associated with the Democratic Party than the Republican Party until the Reagan revolution embraced a strategy of active "rollback" against Soviet totalitarianism).

Obama's credentials as a realist include the praise he reserved for the first Bush administration for its decision to refrain from engaging in "regime change" during the first Gulf War. This hints at an approach that might well be more UN centered and multilateral in nature. As a result, we may be looking at a more "cautious" (or as Obama's supporters might put it, less "adventurous") US foreign policy strategy.

It is unclear as of yet how such an approach will affect US allies from Beirut to Tbilisi, who have come to rely on strong US support for their democratization efforts. To some of America's newest allies, there may be something of a dichotomy here between the image of idealism and hope Obama appears to incarnate, and his early foreign policy pronouncements, which do little to shore up their confidence in the support of the United States as they attempt to forge stronger bonds with the West. But perhaps the Obama camp would prefer to describe his approach as "practical" rather than "realist," since the latter

notion carries cynical associations that are generally inconsistent with the image their candidate seeks to project.

And perhaps the core “realist” versus “idealist” debate in US foreign policy is itself out-dated. But if a new paradigm is to emerge, the coming months will be critical in framing it as the two candidates clash on a range of foreign policy issues. Apart from his position on Iraq, Obama has been careful not to go into too much depth on other issues.

Obama was slow to react to the Russian invasion of Georgia, and his condemnation of Russia’s actions were weaker than those of President Bush and John McCain, who declared rather dramatically “we are all Georgians.” So while Obama is clearly more popular than McCain in Western Europe, his approach does not necessarily inspire optimism in some of the world’s more recent and fragile democracies.

Obama’s initial declaration that he was prepared to engage in direct talks with Iran and other traditional US foes without preconditions allowed his opponents to portray him as naïve and inexperienced. Interestingly enough, the Bush administration has since engaged Iraq in ever closer dialogue, and even plans to open a US interest section in Teheran. And Obama himself has insisted that he had no illusions about the regimes that the Clinton administration referred to as “rogue states” (before the Bush administration argued that they formed an “axis of evil” – a term that has since disappeared from Bush’s speeches). Obama has announced that he would come into such negotiations carrying “big sticks and big carrots.” Be that as it may, we are still far from the enunciation of an actual doctrine, or even a set of clear principles and goals when it comes to the candidate’s future approach to these so called “rogue states.”

So what does Obama stand for in the realm of international affairs? What does he believe in? On close analysis, the grand principles Obama enunciated in Europe and the Middle East do not mark a grand departure from enduring US foreign policy precepts. In fact, they reflect the likelihood that US foreign policy under an Obama administration will not be dramatically different from those pursued by the Bush and Clinton Administrations before him.

4. The Israeli-Palestinian Question

Before Obama’s trip to Israel, his candidacy had aroused significant suspicion within parts of America’s pro-Israel community. Would a man with the middle-name “Hussein,” which denotes unmistakable Muslim ancestry (though Obama is clearly a Christian), be a trustworthy ally of the Jewish State?

Some commentators had their doubts. In January of 2008, Ed Lasky of the *American Thinker* accused Obama of aligning himself with “people who are anti-Israel advocates,” (some of whom were members of his church who advocated sanctions against Israel, and other names cited include former Carter National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Anthony Lake, Susan Rice and Robert O. Malley – people who, though they have occasionally been critical of Israeli policies, would hardly describe themselves as anti-Israeli). Lasky’s article also cited other reasons to be suspicious of Obama, including the evaluation by a group of experts gathered by the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz*, which deemed Obama to be the candidate least likely to support Israel, and also the candidate most favored by the Arab-American Community.

Then Obama went to the wailing wall in Jerusalem and prayed, in a highly symbolic gesture. (note: he did not pray at the Temple Mount Mosque, but at the wall that has remained, for centuries, the symbol of the Jewish historical claim to the right to live in their ancestral land). Speaking in the town of Sderot, which has been targeted by missiles from Hamas-held Gaza, Obama further declared his “unshakable commitment to the Security of Israel.” In America proper, Hillary Clinton herself introduced him to America’s chief pro-Israel lobbying groups as a candidate worthy of their trust. Martin Peretz, the publisher of the *New Republic*, who had initially expressed doubts about Obama’s plausible Middle East policy, changed his mind after getting to know the man better. While suspicions may persist

in some quarters, Obama's actions and spoken words, as a candidate, to not offer much for his detractors on this dossier to sink their teeth into. Can he be trusted? That is a matter for individual American voters to decide, but considering America's strong, pro-Obama, Jewish liberal establishment, it may just be that the candidate's attractiveness to Arab-Americans does not, in the end, make him any less attractive to America's Jewish community.

On the wider issues that are of importance to Jewish voters, Obama has made increasing efforts to present himself as a dedicated "terror-warrior." While he has yet to be tested on that front, it appears that Obama's strength as a candidate lies less in the promises he makes, than in the aura of hope he is able to project even as he remains very cautious in expressing himself on specific foreign policy issues.

Obama has not attacked the Bush administration for its China policy (seen by Tibet and other pro-democracy activists as too compromising). Neither has he attacked Bush for not doing enough in Darfur (the way Clinton attacked Bush senior for his lack of effective action in Bosnia). And this, despite his pledge, to the citizens of Berlin, to give real meaning to the words "never again" when it came to dealing with genocide.

5. Toward Greater Unity in the Free World?

If Obama's Berlin speech is to serve as the benchmark for his emerging foreign policy vision, then we must heed that speech's central theme. After Obama praised the unity shown in Berlin by Western powers during the Soviet blockade of the 1950s, he challenged the crowd to draw inspiration from this episode in order to forge greater unity in facing the challenges of our time, including most notably on the terror front. Arguing for more troops to be sent into Afghanistan, and urging greater participation in this effort from European powers, Obama could suddenly be heard adopting a more hawkish outlook than might have been expected.

His pronouncement also included an exhortation to create a new security framework in Europe – one that might include the Russian Federation in a new form of security alliance – an ambitious goal that does not seem, as of yet, to yield any concrete proposals that deal with the intense competition for energy routes and resources that seems, in light of the recent Georgian war, to be a central issue in today's "East-West" power game. Nonetheless, it indicates that Obama is open to new, more inclusive strategies for dealing with the resurgence of Russian power over the former Soviet Union's satellite states. On this front we note a significant contrast with John McCain, who went so far as to exhort America's friendship and solidarity with the people of Georgia during his nomination speech at the Republican Convention (whereas Obama completely ignored the ongoing crisis in his own nomination speech)

If greater "Western" unity is Obama's principle goal, the Democratic candidate will have to consider very carefully what specific objectives he hopes to achieve with this unity, and whether they are fundamentally different from those pursued by his predecessors in the White House. Unity is not an end in itself, especially if it is pursued at the expense of a meaningful, concrete and effective policy to counter the trend toward increasing Russian neo-imperialist ambitions in its "near-abroad." So far, Obama's statements on how to deal with a resurgent Russia have been vague at best, and he will be pressed on more specific proposals as the debate heats up in October.

While vagueness may have served him well thus far, it may become somewhat awkward for the "candidate of change" to admit that his foreign policy pronouncements to date don't offer a significant departure from the past. For the groups and nations that have recently emerged from totalitarian rule, and whose very survival in some cases depend on America's support, it would be reassuring to hear that they do not stand to be abandoned in the near future.

6. The Bottom Line

In the end, much speculation and uncertainty revolve around this question: Is Obama any less committed than his opponent or his predecessor to the protection and the expansion of the democratic alliance?

If the Democratic candidate is perceived to be less committed to this goal across the line he may find himself in a difficult spot in the upcoming presidential debates, where McCain touts more Foreign Policy experience, clarity of vision and claims credit for a successful change of strategy in Iraq. No matter how unpopular the Iraq war is, Americans have shown in the last election that they still want to come out of this adventure as winners rather than losers.

But an interesting phenomenon may be at work, as Obama will more likely than not do his best to convince America's voters that he can be just as "tough" as the other side when it comes to defending America's interests and principles. Insofar as John F. Kennedy has been touted as a model by Obama, it might be worth recalling that Kennedy ran as a foreign policy hawk. He did not run against the US intervention in Vietnam (and though he ultimately had regrets over that intervention he initially increased US military involvement in the Vietnamese theatre). Kennedy was a tough cold warrior, not an ambivalent critic of the projection of US power abroad. He believed in peace through strength. If Obama wants to emulate the Irishman, he has his work cut out for him.

It is a central irony of the American two-party system that candidates who run on platforms of interventionism often end up less interventionist once in power, and (more importantly) vice-versa. For instance, it is hard to imagine the Democrats pressuring someone like McCain to be tougher or more interventionist in conflicts that involve US interests abroad. On the contrary, it seems that an Obama White House would come under virtually automatic pressure from Republicans to act tougher in asserting US power internationally. Ultimately, such pressures may play a greater role in the White House's decision-making process than any given president's style or pre-election pronouncements.

A McCain White House would have a tough time convincing the other side of the aisle to go along with any given intervention. An Obama White House would have the opposite problem, in that it would have to avoid appearing too weak. The ultimate test of an Obama foreign policy will thus rest in how the man adapts to the pressures of the office. While he may be better positioned to charm America's allies, he may also find himself more likely to be tested by America's foes.