

The US Election and the New Security Challenges

Written by Roland Dannreuther

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ROLAND DANNREUTHER, AUG 1 2008

The real issue about the new security agenda is not about whether it is needed. Practically everyone recognises that, without the all-encompassing Soviet threat, there has been a need to define and establish a new security framework. The 'new' security challenges are, though, rarely very new; they are generally issues which had been marginalised or were not given sufficient attention during the Cold War – the problems of low-scale but deadly civil wars, the insecurities driven by conditions of deep poverty, the increasing damage done to the environment, the lawlessness of international criminal organisations, the threat of sub-state groups engaged in terrorism, and the temptation for countries to develop weapons of mass destruction. Most of these security challenges are hardly 'new' and have a long and venerable history.

The issue of the new security agenda is not, therefore, about the need for it but about the *priorities* and *methods* to be adopted. Which of these security challenges are to be given greater or lesser priority? Where should resources be directed most urgently? And what methods are most appropriate for dealing with these challenges? At a more fundamental level, the issue is to answer the question posed by the Greek poet, Constantine Cavafy, 'And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians? They were, those people, a kind of solution'.

The United States, as the victor of the Cold War and the most powerful state in the international system, has adopted two radically differing approaches in answer to this. It is a choice between these alternative approaches that the presidential candidates, John McCain and Barack Obama, now pose in quite stark form. The first approach was followed through much of the 1990s and was based on a continuation and consolidation of the policies which successfully brought to an end the Cold War – policies based on creating the international confidence to deal with issues multilaterally and to focus on a wide-ranging security agenda. The second represents a fundamental shift from this, which was initiated in the late 1990s, towards asserting a more proactive US policy which would concentrate and prioritise two major security issues – global terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The substance and fact of this shift is well-known and hardly revelatory. What is interesting is the way that these two approaches reflect radically different conceptions of how stability is to be secured in IR. The first is based on the idea that stability is gained through a balance of power, where defence has primacy over offence, and where the reduced fear of attack induces the conditions for mutual trust and compromise. This is essentially the way the Cold War was brought to an end. Through a complex and tortuous process of arms control negotiations, strategic balance was gained between the Soviet Union and the United States which meant that neither side could risk attacking the other. Primacy of defence was gained. As fear of attack declined, so the conditions for mutual confidence and trust was provided. It was Gorbachev and Reagan who finally took this to its logical conclusion and brought to an end the iron wall of conflict and confrontation.

The Clinton administration represented continuity with this paradigm of international stability. The US was to be a balancing and not a preponderant power; a power committed to arms control and the need to promote defensive rather than offensive capacities; and a country engaged in multilateral diplomacy rather than unilateral assertion. In this context, the new security agenda was conceived in a broad and expansive manner, reflecting the interests in particular of the poor and developing countries, with emphasis given to challenges such as the proliferation of endemic civil wars, famine, poverty, disease and the environment. It is notable that, under the tutelage of Vice-President Al Gore, the US led the way in promoting the concept of environmental security.

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But in the late 1990s, even prior to 9/11, this approach to the post-Cold War security dilemma was challenged from a group which had also been severe critics of arms control during the Cold War and the whole idea of stability based on balance and the primacy of defence. Their main objection was that such policies permitted the Soviet Union to cheat and to gain strategic advantage by deception. In the post-Cold war era, they reiterated their fears that reliance on arms control and multilateral engagement would only permit new revisionist states to engage in systematic cheating and deception. It is here that the concept of 'rogue states' became popularised to identify potential cheaters, such as Iran, Iraq and North Korea. The issue of ballistic missile defences also became the rallying cry for the revisionist campaign, providing a policy focus on the presumed cheating of these 'rogue' states, their ambitions for WMD capabilities, and the need for the US to adopt a much more assertive strategy. And it was the revelation gleefully pronounced by Donald Rumsfeld, then head of a congressional panel convened to study this issue, that Iran in 1998 was much closer than thought to developing ballistic missiles which provided critical momentum to this campaign.

The advent of the Bush administration in 2000 represented the ultimate victory of this new revisionist paradigm in the US approach to the post-Cold War security agenda. The expansive security priorities of the Clinton era were now greatly attenuated – issues such as the environment, disease, civil wars and poverty lost their prominence. In their place, focus was given to challenger states, most notably the 'axis of evil' (Iran, Iraq and North Korea) but also implicitly including potentially anti-Western hegemonies like Russia and China. The primacy of defence was converted into the need for the US to gain offensive advantage. Missile defences became the mechanism to undermine the main bulwark of the Cold War strategic balance – the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. The need for balance in the international system became converted into the need for the US to maintain its preponderance and strategic supremacy, as explicitly stated in the *2002 National Security Strategy*.

The events of 9/11 only consolidated a paradigm shift which had already taken place. What 9/11 and the 'war and terror' did was to give increased urgency and to provide greater strategic freedom to pursue the implicit logic of this new security agenda. The focus was now on 'rogue states' – the presumed supporters and allies of the global terrorist networks – and their elimination. Afghanistan was the first point of attack. But this was always a foretaste to what the more serious strategic target of Iraq which was invaded in 2003. From the logic of this particular paradigm of international relations, Iran is the natural next target for coercive intervention.

The damaging consequences of this US strategy based on the primacy of offence and the promotion of preponderant power is not just in the bloody aftermath and civil war in Iraq. It is also seen in the wider fabric of international society. With strategic balance undermined, other great powers have become increasingly distrustful and have seen the need to increase their offensive capabilities. Under Putin, Russia became increasingly anti-Western and its military forces have been greatly strengthened. China has also become more rather than less illiberal and anti-Western as its economic and political power has dramatically grown. Even the European states, with their ties of transatlantic solidarity, have become increasingly estranged from the US and have sought to develop better military capabilities. In these conditions, pressing international challenges – such as climate change, WMD nonproliferation, arms control, and global poverty – have only become more difficult to resolve. Overall, the world has become a more dangerous and unstable place.

It is at this juncture that the US voters do have a genuine choice in terms of foreign policy between John McCain and Barack Obama. McCain, despite his more emollient view on the environment, remains committed to the Bush legacy of US foreign policy activism and appears even more hardline over Iran than the current administration. Obama represents at least a potential return to the Clinton paradigm of US foreign policy which would seek resolutions of the wide array of global security problems through negotiation and multilateral engagement. The choice finally made by the US electorate will have a defining impact not just on US national security but also on future global security.

Roland Dannreuther is at the School of Social and Political Studies, University of Edinburgh. Recent publications include *International Security: the Contemporary Agenda* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007)