

Obama's Foreign Policy Challenges

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KIERAN NEESON, DEC 9 2008

The election of Barack Obama as American President has seen unprecedented interest in American politics, not only domestically but also internationally. There is no doubt that he is a superb orator and with his message of change for which over 60million Americans voted for, we have witnessed history in the making. The promise of change was the key to his election victory. Change after 8 years of a Republican Presidency, not only within American society but in the conduct of their foreign policy. So what are the immediate foreign policy challenges facing the new Obama administration, and how will his style of leadership and conduct of foreign policy differ from that of the Bush administration?

It is generally accepted that the US popularity in the world is at an all time low. When asked if she could remember a time when the US was hated so much, former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright said, "Not in my lifetime... I feel very strongly about this country, and what an exceptional country it is. But I honestly think it is about as bad as I've seen it... I think Iraq will go down in history as the greatest disaster of American foreign policy – worse than Vietnam." [i] Can Obama reverse this unpopularity of America's standing in the world? Many elected him to do so. He has one asset no other President has had since Kennedy – high international support which may help. He has presented himself as pragmatic on foreign policy. This pragmatism is displayed in his speech in 2002 against the Iraq War,

"I don't oppose all wars... What I am opposed to is a dumb war... a rash war, a war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics... I know also that Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States, or to its neighbours, that the Iraqi economy is in shambles, that the Iraqi military is a fraction of its former strength, and that in concert with the international community can be contained until, in the way of all petty dictators, he falls away into the dustbin of history. I know that even if a successful war against Iraq will require a US occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences." [ii]

Obama also presents himself as an idealist and therefore would agree with an element of Bush's foreign policy – freedom's universal appeal, though he would differ when it comes to the use of force abroad to bring about freedom. The means employed to achieve the ends of US foreign policy is where Obama and his democratic administration differ from that of Bush. While Bush's means relied more on a unilateral use of force which was more state-centric, Obama favours a multi-lateral approach with a emphasis on non-state actors and non-traditional security threats. Obama believes that America is stronger and is more respected when it works with its allies and institutions in order to protect American power. The international system is looked through the lens of globalisation rather than a contest between states. States need to work together to find integrated and co-operative solutions to the various trans-national threats every state faces. His now famous Berlin speech in July 08 is a perfect example of this interconnectivity, when he spoke of the "dangers that cannot be contained within the borders of a country or by the distance of an ocean." [iii]

While it is acknowledged that the economic crisis will be the first major issue to be tackled head on, the plethora of important foreign policy issues will never be far from Obama's mind. In an Obama administration, grand U.S. foreign policy goals will likely remain the same: The US will still wants to discourage security competition in Europe and Asia, prevent the emergence of hostile great powers, promote a more open world economy, inhibit the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and expand democracy and respect for human rights. Since 9/11 the campaign against

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global terrorism has been the central aim of American foreign and defence policy and with Obama as Commander-in-chief we will witness a return to where it started, Afghanistan.

For the Obama presidency it is likely that the number of US troops in Iraq will decrease while the number in Afghanistan will rise as key decisions will be made on re-deployments. The Afghanistan/Pakistan region is central to US interests. It is the region where the 9/11 attacks were planned yet as of today there are around 5 times more US troops in Iraq than there are in Afghanistan. Obama wants to focus American energies on the region. This is evident given his decision to visit Afghanistan before Iraq when he toured the Middle East in July 08.

In a speech made also in July 08 Obama stated if elected president he would send more combat bridges to Afghanistan and focus on training their security forces, increase the non-military assistance in order to change the mindsets and livelihoods of the population in the hope that the economy would grow.[iv] He also wants to change the US policy on Pakistan by tripling non-military aid to the country and help build a strong democracy which in turn would help towards securing nuclear weapons from terrorists and rogue states. It is widely acknowledged that the Afghanistan/Pakistan region poses the greatest threat to US security. Recently the new Commander of US Central Command General David Petraus said extremism in Pakistani borderlands now poses an 'existential threat' to Pakistan.[v] Thus the primary focus of US foreign policy is back to fixing up after 9/11.

In relation to Iraq, Obama believes that the war was a strategic blunder and opposed it from the beginning. In his New Strategy for a New World Speech he stated that,

"This war distracts us from every threat that we face and so many opportunities that we could seize. This war diminishes our security, our standing in the world, our military, our economy, and the resources we need to confront the challenges of the twenty-first century. By any measure, our single-minded and open-ended focus on Iraq is not a sound strategy for keeping America safe."[vi]

He is on record as wanting to withdraw US forces from Iraq within 16 months with some troops being re-deployed to places such as Afghanistan. Given the decrease in violence in Iraq since the US 'surge' there has been greater responsibility of Iraqi affairs transferred to the Iraqi government themselves, this maybe possible. However, because it is a delicate situation any hastily withdraw of US forces may prove counter-productive as there is the potential for violence on a major scale to erupt again. It will be interesting to see Obama's decisions on his planned timetable for withdraw after consulting with the military leaders involved in policy planning in Iraq.

Iran will also be high up on the agenda for President Obama. In July 07 Obama said he would meet with the leaders of Iran and other rogue states such as Syria and North Korea without pre-conditions. Although now this stance has changed slightly to meeting them only after the proper ground work has been established and at a time and place of his choosing. It must be noted however, that the use of force against Iran has not been ruled out by Obama but he did say that "it would be a profound mistake for us to initiate a war with Iran."[vii]

Within the broader Middle East Obama wants to re-energise American efforts in the region, believing that there has been a lack of attention by the Bush administration. In his Foreign Affairs article in July/August 2007, Obama stated that if elected President he wants a clear and strong commitment to the security of Israel and identify and strengthen those who are committed to peace and isolate those who seek conflict and instability.[viii] In relation to Syria, a similar process to that of Iran will be pursued, that of diplomacy and pressure.

So what of a re-emerging Russia and a rising China? Obama believes the US should work closely with the 2 countries to address the major issues facing not only the US but the world, Climate change and spread of nuclear weapons. These issues are global problems which require global solutions thus working closely with these major powers is essential. Relations with China and Russia have been largely tranquil since 9/11, however this may change in the near future especially with Russia given the recent disagreements with the US over Georgia and the Polish missile defence. With China economic issues may prove to be the key in US/China relations. Obama has argued for a strategy combining engagement and balancing, and encourages China to play a greater role in finding solutions to global problems. He is noted as saying "we will compete with China in some areas and cooperate in

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others. Our essential challenge is to build a relationship that broadens cooperation while strengthening our ability to compete.”[ix]

Closer alliances and increasing cooperation between the US and Russia and China will have another advantage when it comes to another situation that merits close US attention in the new Obama administration, North Korea. Recently its leader Kim Jong Il has been reported as being in bad health thus the country faces an uncertain future and there is a risk that it will restart its nuclear program. It looks likely that the 6-party talks will remain the strategic platform, with China being the key in persuading North Korea to pursue a non-nuclear path.

The management of the US military and its use of force will be the central element to the success of any of the foreign policy challenges facing the new Obama administration. Obama wants to increase the number of US military personnel and increase their ability to fight insurgencies and advise foreign forces. In other words, he wants to increase the role of the non-conventional way of war. In his Foreign Affairs article Obama stated that, “The Bush administration responded to the unconventional attacks of 9/11 with conventional thinking of the past, largely viewing problems as state-based and principally amenable to military solutions.”[x] However, military solutions to these problem states have proven not to be the case in the post-Cold War world.

Obama has also shown a tendency to shift the focus of American foreign policy away from its traditional reliance on the use of force, to more of a strengthening of non-military elements of state-craft such as diplomacy and state-building. In his New Strategy for a New World he said, “Instead of pushing the entire burden of our foreign policy on to the brave men and women of our military, I want to use all elements of American power to keep us safe, and prosperous, and free... I will pursue a tough, smart and principled national security strategy, one that recognises that we have interests not only in Baghdad, but in Kandahar, and Karachi, in Tokyo and London, in Beijing and Berlin.”[xi]

However, Obama and many of his advisors have strong views on humanitarian intervention and given the fact that many African countries are in a volatile situation (we only have to look at the Congo in recent weeks), and what some people may believe is Obama's responsibility to protect, especially on the African continent, given his ancestral roots, the use of force maybe more prevalent. It will be difficult to predict how Obama would balance the prevention of humanitarian disasters against the widespread aversion to military intervention in the aftermath of Iraq. There may also be a strengthening of cooperation with institutions such as NATO and the UN to assist in addressing the issues in places like the African continent, Afghanistan, and Iraq. By doing so it is hoped these institutions would burden-share, help promote values, encourage economic growth, and address poverty and diseases.

The new Obama administration face these foreign policy challenges and more at the same time as US global power is declining. China, Brazil and India along with a stronger European Union make it inevitable that the US no longer calls the shots alone in this new dispensation. Globalisation requires more cooperation. Thus the concept of a single superpower world no longer fits.

Given Obama's message of change and the fact that he has presented himself as a pragmatist, focusing on diplomacy and partnership, many may be surprised about his style of foreign policy in the fact that it may not produce the dramatic shifts that they anticipate. Foreign policy requires careful planning which does not happen overnight. The US has to consider its geo-political position and will not want to make any rash changes in its foreign policy which may be seen by friend or foe as a sign of weakness.

Furthermore, it must also be noted that during Bush's 2nd term there was a move away from the unilateralist state-centric approach that dominated his 1st term in office, to more multilateralism with a focus on diplomacy in the style that Obama has advocated. In January 06 US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice introduced a document known as Transformational Diplomacy which set out how US foreign policy will be conducted in the final years of the Bush administration. There was a greater emphasis on diplomacy and working closely with alliances. Rice described its goal as, “working with our many partners around the world... and building and sustaining democratic, well-governed states that will respond to the needs of their people and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system.”[xii]

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Moreover, we only have to look at the examples of the change in Bush's 2nd term; the deal with North Korea to contain its nuclear arms development, the acceptance of the idea of a timetable for Iraqi withdrawal, contemplating diplomacy with Iran, and talks with some elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Unfortunately for Bush his 8 years in office will be remembered for the foreign policy of his first 4 years – the Bush doctrine of preventive war. Unless closely observed, the shifts in foreign policy in his 2nd term have gone somewhat un-noticed by the vast majority of people.

As mentioned above resolving the economic crisis will be the immediate challenge of the new Obama administration. But the many complex issues of US foreign policy will also be high on the agenda, and change on these issues is what the American people who voted for him are expecting, but the change may not be immediate. The euphoria that has surrounded his election victory may soon fade as he and his administration get to work on the change that he has promised. As National Intelligence Director Mike McConnell put it, “after the new President-elect excitement subsides after winning the election, it is going to be dampened somewhat when he begins to focus on the realities of the myriad of changes and challenges we are going to face in the future.”[xiii]

[i] Former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright, available on www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/Americas/us_elections_2008/7708893.stm 6/11/08

[ii] Barack Obama, Speech to anti-war rally, Chicago 16 Oct 2002 www.barackobama.com/pdf/obamalraqHandout.pdf 5/11/08

[iii] Barack Obama, The World Stands as One Speech, Berlin, 24 July 2008 available on <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/24/obama.words/index/html> 6/11/08

[iv] Barack Obama, A New Strategy for a New World Speech, Washington DC 15 July 2008 available on www.my.barackobama.com/page/content/newstrategy 5/11/08

[v] <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/05/asia.analysis/index.html> 5/11/08

[vi] A New Strategy for a New World Speech

[vii] See Democratic presidential Primary Debate Charleston South Carolina 23 July 2007 available on <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/07/23/debate.transcript/> 6/11/08

[viii] Barack Obama, Renewing American Leadership, Foreign Affairs July/August 2007 available on <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20070701faessay86401/barack-obama/renewing-american-leadership.html> 7/11/08

[ix] Ibid

[x] Ibid

[xi] A New Strategy for a New World Speech

[xii] Condoleezza Rice, Transformational Diplomacy Speech, January 2006, available on www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59339.htm 7/11/08

[xiii] National Intelligence Director Mike McConnell, <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/05/obama.challenges/index.html> 6/11/08

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Date written: November 2008