

Does a New National Security Team Mean a New Foreign Policy?

Written by Glenn Hastedt

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GLENN HASTEDT, MAR 20 2013

Not unexpectedly, Barack Obama ran into difficulties putting his new national security team in place although the extent of those problems may have surprised him. Facing what was expected to be a bruising confirmation hearing Susan Rice withdrew from consideration to be secretary of state after failing to gain support from key Republican senators. Well-liked Senator John Kerry was easily approved in her place. Former maverick Republican Senator Chuck Hagel did not withdraw his name and encountered intense questioning by his one-time Republican colleagues and opposition lobbying by pro-Israeli and pro-Gay groups. [1] Hagel's nomination was approved by the slimmest margin ever for a secretary of defense. John Brennan's nomination to be C.I.A. director was held captive to a sudden and passionate political debate over the extent of presidential powers to use drones (a policy area he had led) that found Republicans and Democrats on both sides of question. A filibuster led by Senator Rand Paul was ended and his nomination approved only after an agreement was reached with the White House.

No sooner had the political dust over these nominations settled when speculation began that Susan Rice would replace national security advisor Thomas Donilon at the end of 2013. To her critics this provides a back door to add Rice to Obama's foreign policy team since it does not require senate approval.

Opposition to Rice, Hagel and Brennan was rooted to a large degree in their personal foreign policy beliefs and Obama's foreign policy record putting their confirmation troubles in a different category from that of John Tower who was rejected by the Senate as George H.W. Bush's nominee for secretary of defense largely on personal grounds involving alcohol abuse and womanizing. Rice because of her public statements in the immediate aftermath of the attack at Benghazi incorrectly characterizing them as a spontaneous protest served as a surrogate target for Republican opponents of the Obama administration's policy in Libya and subsequent refusal to share information on those attacks with Congress. Fellow Republicans made Hagel pay a steep political price for his opposition to the Bush administration's policy toward Iraq and statements on Iran along with what was perceived to be lukewarm support for Israel and support for nuclear disarmament. Brennan had been among the leading candidates to be Obama's first director of the C.I.A. but he withdrew because of his connection with the Bush administration's detention and interrogation program.

What are we to make of this? How important is it that Kerry and not Rice is secretary of state and that Hagel and Brennan were confirmed? Are their past foreign policy positions a guide to what direction Obama's foreign policy will take in his second term? For answers we need to look beyond their views on foreign policy to the dynamics of foreign policy making in the Obama administration.

Presidential foreign policy managerial styles can be characterized in a number of ways. Zbigniew Brzezinski characterized Obama's three predecessors as having quite varied styles. Bush I was a top down manager; Clinton had a "kaffeeklatsch" approach to decision making; while Bush II was described as having "strong gut instincts" and a propensity for "dogmatic formulations" in making foreign policy.[2] Obama's decision making style during his first administration is characterized by many as combining a high structured decision making process in which competing views are aired and consensus is established in a deliberate fashion.[3] He is said to have brought about the most significant concentration of foreign policy decision making power in the White House since Richard Nixon.

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The manner in which Obama's style affected the foreign policy voice of cabinet officers is evident in Hillary Clinton's record as secretary of state. It is generally acknowledged that Clinton was an implementer and not policy initiator. She travelled the globe as the administrator's spokesperson, often acting as the "bad cop." Clinton was not without policy influence but it was constrained. She is credited with engineering the resumption of relations with Miramir and working to convince Obama to support operations against Libya. Her efforts in conjunction with C.I.A. Director David Petraeus to involve the U.S. more deeply on the side of Syrian rebels came to naught as Obama signaled his disinterest in this initiative.

Placed in this context the likelihood of Kerry, Hagel, and Brennan bringing about a significant change in the strategic direction of U.S. foreign policy on their own initiative is relatively minor. There are, however, two areas where the impact of their personalities and foreign policy views might be felt.

The first lies with increasing the ever-present potential for groupthink or similar psychological tendencies to short-circuit the exploration of foreign policy alternatives. All three are said to have strong personal relations with Obama and share his general foreign policy views. Hagel is the most outspoken of the trio and would be ideally placed to take the lead in maintaining a White House consensus on foreign policy positions in deliberations when dissenting alternatives are formally aired (Rice would also seem well suited to play this role should she become national security advisor).

The second area lies with shaping the structure and culture of the organizations they have become responsible for as they seek to establish their establish credibility and authority. Kerry enters a State Department to which Clinton made significant organizational changes such as a new Bureau of Economic Resources and placed allies in key positions of authority. Given his personal history as the son of a diplomat and his strong support for diplomatic solutions he should have little trouble gaining the support of Foreign Service Officers. His most telling contribution here may be in the production of the next Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, the first of which was produced under Clinton, which either builds on Clinton's changes or seeks to move the State Department in another direction.

Brennan, a C.I.A. career veteran, has argued for re-centering the efforts of the C.I.A. on analysis. While this change might be welcomed by intelligence professionals he faces a much greater challenge in responding to a classified Senate report on CIA harsh interrogation techniques that defines them as torture. Accepting that definition and taking corresponding disciplinary action holds the potential for creating major morale problems in the agency while not doing so will create problems for his relations with the Senate.

Hagel faces the most difficult challenge. Unwanted budget cuts loom on the horizon for the Defense Department and Hagel supported such reductions in the past. Sequestration may give him the opportunity to put those views into practice over the opposition of the military. The loss of their support here might be offset by his known interest in veterans' affairs. Upon being confirmed Hagel did reach out to the military in first two decisions. He called for reviewing the decision to award combat medals to drone operators and supported an expanded missile defense system against North Korea, both moves that could be expected to bring him support within the Pentagon. Still, where Leon Panetta was routinely supportive of the military Hagel promises a return to a more externally oriented secretary of defense with a close relationship to Obama as his power base.[4]

Perhaps the most interesting consequence of Hagel's tenure may be the reaction of the professional military. The notion of political neutrality central to the U.S. conception of civil-military relations has been badly frayed and may be completely done away with if the military allies with what is expected to be continued Republican opposition to Hagel in the Senate and engages in sustained public opposition to his decrees.

It has been argued that we have yet to see an Obama foreign policy and what we have seen so far is merely an extension of Bush II era thinking.[5] Whether or not we see a distinct Obama foreign policy in the next four years depends far less on the foreign policy views of Kerry, Hagel and Brennan (and perhaps Rice) than it does on Obama's foreign policy preferences, his political instincts and events in the international system. They were brought on board not to provide new thinking but because their views coincided with and supported those held by Obama. It

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is to the Obama White House we should look for signs of a new foreign policy.

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[1] See Jim Rutenberg, "Secret Donors Finance Fight Against Hagel, *New York Times*, January 16, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/us/politics/secret-donors-finance-fight-against-hagel.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[2] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

[3] James Pfifner, "Decision Making in the Obama White House," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41 (2011), 244-62; and Stephen Wayne, "Presidential Character and Judgment: Obama's Afghanistan and Health Care Decisions," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41 (2011), 291-306.

[4] Panetta's greatest contribution by many is seen as bringing about a cultural change within the military with his support of women in combat and changes in the Pentagon's sexual assault policy. See Jennifer Hlad, "Panetta's Legacy: Cultural Change," *Stars and Stripes*, February 11, 2013; while Donald Rumsfeld comes to mind as a recent secretary of defense whose power base was the White House some see Robert Gates as Hagel's most similar predecessor, see Max Fisher, "On Israel, Iran, and spending, Chuck Hagel looks a lot like Robert Gates," *Washington Post*, January 7, 2013. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/01/07/on-israel-iran-and-spending-chuck-hagel-looks-a-lot-like-robert-gates/>.

[5] Peter Beinart, "Why Hagel Matters," *The Daily Beast*, January 7, 2013. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/01/07/why-hagel-matters.html>

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