

THE AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY TRANSITION: BARACK OBAMA IN POWER

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On the eve of the inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States and with some uncertainty remaining about key appointments to his administration, one might conclude that it is premature to attempt an analysis of the directions in which his administration's foreign policies may take the United States. Yet, the presidential campaign was an unusually lengthy and vigorously contested one, and there have been extensive discussions by both the candidates and commentators on their global perspectives, with the result that there is a reasonable basis on which to offer an informed, though perhaps speculative, analysis of the likely foreign policy directions of an Obama administration. The picture that emerges is to some extent ambiguous, since clarity is often the first victim of political campaigns. Part of the dilemma of course is that Obama's foreign policy is what he and his cabinet appointees claim it to be, until such time as they take their first significant actions. Events always impact even the best plans, and both the U.S. and international financial crisis which emerged in the month prior to the election and the Israeli incursion into Gaza early in 2009 will certainly have significant consequences for the new administration.

Critics have focused on Obama's lack of foreign policy experience, most satirically captured in a political cartoon which appeared in the *Columbus Dispatch* at the time of Obama's high profile Middle East and European trip in July 2008. The

cartoon depicted a backpacker giving the high five to Obama; the caption read: "Dude! I'm studying international relations abroad this summer too!"¹ Yet, what is most striking is that once one puts a good deal of the rhetorical flourishes aside, the similarity between the stated goals of the Obama and McCain foreign policies is striking. Where they differed during the campaign, and here they differed fundamentally, is in how they would reach those goals. Richard Holbrooke recently captured those fundamental differences with his contention that Obama is committed to an open, forward looking diplomacy in response to a world in transition, while McCain appears trapped in the past.²

The relative importance of foreign policy in the presidential campaign was not static. Indeed foreign policy issues took a sharp turn between 2007 and November 2008. At the outset of the primary and caucus campaigns, the main focus of debate on foreign policy, especially in the Hillary Clinton-Obama camps, was the status of the war in Iraq. Republican contenders appeared determined to avoid the subject as far as possible and to distance themselves from any association with the George Bush presidency. Over the course of the primaries and then post-convention campaigns, domestic issues increasingly became the focus of debate, although how to deal with Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran's nuclear program, and Russia's new aggressiveness, especially following the Russian intervention in Georgia, remained at the heart of debate. Once Obama and McCain had been confirmed by their respective party

¹ *New York Times* (July 27, 2008), Week in Review, p. 2.

² One of the clearest statements of the similarities of the foreign policies of McCain and Obama, as well as Hillary Clinton since the analysis was made prior to the end of the Democratic Party primaries, is by Cindy Williams, cited in Barry Posen, "A Grand Strategy of Restraint," in Michele Flournoy and Shawn Brimley eds., *Finding our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy*, Center for a New American Security, Solarium Strategy Report (June 2008), p. 90, n.8. For the opposite perspective, see Richard Holbrooke, "The Next President: Mastering a Daunting Agenda," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 5 (September/October 2008), pp. 2-24.

conventions and the real campaign began, the foreign policy debate continued to focus on those issues. Obama offset the allegations of foreign policy inexperience with his choice of Senator Joe Biden, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, as his running mate, while McCain sought to shore up his support with the Republican base with his selection of Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska. She brought nothing to the McCain ticket on the foreign policy agenda, although over the next weeks she sought to compensate for her transparent inexperience with attacks on Obama as allegedly soft on terrorism. The subsequent presidential and vice-presidential debates tended to cast less light on differences of substance on foreign policy than on who was best equipped to deal with the foreign policy challenges; who would deal most effectively with al-Qaeda and the Taliban; whether a more open foreign policy dialogue with problem states, from Iran and North Korea to post-Fidel Cuba, was the right direction; which candidate had been most supportive of the troops in Iraq; who had supported the 2007 troop surge in Iraq; and whether or not there should be a timetable for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and re-deployment to Afghanistan. Senator McCain, who voted in favour of U.S. military action in Iraq in 2003, yet who was equally determined to distinguish between his views and those of President Bush, could only contend that he had been consistent in arguing that the war had been mishandled, except for the troop surge which he supported and which he consistently argued had been successful. Barack Obama was advantaged on the issue of Iraq by the fact that he had not been in federal politics in 2003 and could claim, rightly, that he had publicly opposed the war, beginning with a very public address in Chicago before an audience of some two thousand people in Chicago's Federal Plaza.³ The two candidates differed

³ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, p. 348.

fundamentally on the relative importance of Iraq to the war on terror and to the implications of U.S. troop withdrawal. In a pre-convention address in June 2008 McCain stressed that "If our troops are ordered to make a forced retreat, we risk all-out civil war, genocide, and a failed state in the heart of the Middle East."⁴ Conversely Obama was consistent in contending that Afghanistan was the critical battleground in the war on terror and stressed that the United States and its allies needed to focus its resources there. Iraq he contended, is not going to be a perfect place, and we don't have unlimited resources to try to make it one." Obama's concerns about the Iraq war went well beyond the short term, however, since his main criticism of the Bush administration was its failure to develop a viable, coherent national security policy, based on a clear set of guiding principles.⁵

Where Senators McCain and Obama stood on foreign policy and what the foreign policy implications are of an Obama presidency have to be understood within the context of a post-Cold War and post-9/11 international environment. Since at least the end of the Cold War and certainly since 9/11 policymakers and academic analysts have increasingly spoken about national security threats and challenges which may be considered non-traditional, in other words not solely the threat of state to state challenges, not just the danger of nuclear attacks, but also such issues as poverty, environmental degradation, international organized crime, narcotics and arms smuggling, large scale migrations, illegal immigration, and non-state actors engaged in terrorism. All of these are issues which transcend national boundaries and are recognized to require a multilateral response rather than the unilateralism and pre-

⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, June 2, 2008. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/16395/>. Accessed November 6, 2008.

⁵ Council on Foreign Relations, July 15, 2008. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/16791>. Accessed November 6, 2008. Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, p. 357.

emptive diplomacy and military action that has tended to characterize US foreign policy during the George Bush presidency. Former National Security Advisor under President Clinton Anthony Lake has referred to this orientation in foreign policy as “post-realist.”⁶

The evidence from the past year and a half of the presidential campaign suggests that Barack Obama has come to appreciate that post-modern or “post-realist” mindset and understands that challenges in foreign policy have changed. It may be his age and the fact that he was still very young when the cold war ended; it may also be that he has attracted to his foreign policy team equally young people who share or have guided his approach, but he is clearly not caught up in the straightjacket imposed by the East-West tensions of the 1945-1989 years. The same cannot be said of John McCain, although at times in the course of the campaign he appeared to have been struggling to overcome his own times and personal experiences. Former Secretary of Defense Colin Powell’s very public endorsement of Obama in late October 2008 reinforced the extent to which Obama had convinced a major foreign policy leader in the country that he understood the needs of the next decades and McCain did not. Powell’s endorsement of Obama was in many respects a stinging rebuke of McCain, since Powell was generally known to be a friend of the Republican candidate as well as one of his foreign policy advisers.

Obama’s broad philosophical orientation in foreign policy was also reflected in the key people who nurtured his ideas and helped him to formulate his foreign policy position. Those individuals became the leading forces on foreign policy in his campaign. His first main foreign policy adviser, Samantha Power, the distinguished

⁶ Nicholas Lemann, “World’s Apart,” *The New Yorker* (October 13, 2008), p. 115. Analysts have drawn attention to the three hundred strong Obama foreign policy group of advisors intended to shore up the candidate’s lack of experience in the area.

Pulitzer Prize winning scholar at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, resigned early in 2008 in the midst of controversy surrounding her reference in a British media interview to Hillary Clinton as a “monster.” That comment aside, Power’s depiction of Obama’s foreign policy orientation was also problematic, and it may have reflected Obama’s own ambiguities on important foreign policy issues early in his campaign. Obama’s blogging opponents leapt on Power’s presentation in her *New Statesman* magazine interview concerning Obama’s position on meeting the heads of state of controversial powers. She initially indicated that Obama would meet with Ahmadinejad of Iran, as well as the presidents of Syria and North Korea and added that he would be prepared to meet with any elected heads of government, including Abbas of Palestine but excluding Hamas. The journalist pointed out that Hamas was in fact elected and that the Fatah party under Abbas had been defeated at the polls.⁷

With Power’s departure from the campaign, a leading figure became Susan Rice, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. Rice served on Clinton’s National Security Council and as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs during the Clinton presidency. She was also a John Kerry foreign policy adviser in 2004. She is one of several Clinton era foreign policy Democrats to have broken- perhaps not very publicly - with the Clintons and supported Obama. Rice found Hillary Clinton’s foreign policy position lacking. Speaking of Senator Clinton’s 2007 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Rice indicated that Clinton’s goal of “restoring” American power was rooted in the past but that Obama had offered “a more substantive foreign policy platform” which was more

⁷ Ed Lasky blog, March 6, 2008 on ameircanthinker.com. Accessed 29/10/08.

“forward looking.” Rice suggested that Senator Clinton’s vision appeared to be limited to little more than “getting out from under the Bush years.”⁸

Other advisers on the Obama team included Dennis Ross, a former Middle East peace negotiator and, like Rice, a member of the National Security Council under Clinton; Richard Danzig, who was Secretary of the Navy under Clinton; real newcomers included Mark Lippert, an Obama Senate staffer, and Gregory Craig, a lawyer who managed Bill Clinton’s impeachment defense. Perhaps more surprising but also among the most influential in putting together the Obama team, however, was Anthony Lake. Lake was hardly a newcomer to the challenges which the next president will face. He was a Vietnam War dove and served as Clinton’s first National Security Adviser. In the post Vietnam War years Lake’s cautious approach to the use of power gave way to a stronger commitment to realpolitik, an orientation that is evident in his writing over the past decade, particularly in his 2000 book *Six Nightmares: The Real Threat to American National Security*.⁹ Obama and his advisers are well aware of the dangers of a Democratic President appearing to be too soft on defense issues. Obama’s selection of Biden as his running mate was further indication of his sense of the need for a focus on diplomacy without ignoring the reality of power politics. Biden reinforced an Obama administration’s evident willingness to be tough on defense and security. Considered a liberal interventionist, Biden has tended to be an advocate of a proactive foreign policy.

⁸ Quoted in the *New York Sun*, January 28, 2008.

⁹ (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000). Lake’s views on the need for more than a soft-power approach to U.S. foreign policy is also evident in the Council on Foreign Relations report on Africa which he chaired: *More than Humanitarianism: A Strategic U.S. Approach to Africa* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006).

He was one of the leading advocates, for instance, of a Clinton intervention in the former Yugoslavia.¹⁰

Obama's nominee to serve as Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, played an important role in shaping the discourse on foreign policy within the Obama campaign. Like her namesake Condoleeza Rice, though no relation, Susan Rice is African-American. She was one of the lead authors of the so-called Phoenix Initiative report, entitled *Strategic Leadership: Framework for a Twenty-First Century National Security Strategy*. Rice argued that the report broke away from "such traditional concepts as containment, engagement and enlargement and rejects standard dichotomies of realist power politics versus liberal idealism."¹¹ The strategic priorities identified in the report are those which were repeatedly echoed by Obama during the campaign. They included: Counter-terrorism; nuclear proliferation, climate change, oil dependence; in regional terms the Middle East and East Asia. Writing in the *New Yorker* Nicholas Lemann suggested that the report seemed to concede that US foreign policy in the post-Bush years needs to be cast less in terms of American hegemony and military power than in terms of international cooperation. The report actually talks of power as being "diffuse."¹²

Obama's speeches and writings, including *The Audacity of Hope*, have mirrored the orientation of the Rice report, and its central theme that the United States needs to build a new international consensus to address global threats to security. In *The Audacity of Hope* Obama wrote primarily about his childhood in Indonesia, and he correctly suggested that it is dangerous to generalize from the experiences of one

¹⁰ On Biden see Ryan Lizza, "Biden's Brief," *The New Yorker* (October 20, 2008), p. 49.

¹¹ Lemann, "World's Apart," p. 112.

¹² Lemann, "World's Apart," p. 112.

country. Yet he added: “in many ways Indonesia serves as a useful metaphor for the world beyond our borders – a world in which globalization and sectarianism, poverty and plenty, modernity and antiquity constantly collide.” He also wrote candidly about the roots of hostility abroad to the United States, including “occasional” U.S. “tolerance” for “tyranny, corruption and environmental degradation when it served our interests.”¹³ As early as his April 2007 speech in Chicago he spoke of the threats to security posed by narco-trafficking in Latin America, diseased food on international markets, the preaching of hatred in religious schools in Pakistan, dramatic climate change, or the proliferation of weapons of mass annihilation. He concluded: “the threats we face at the dawn of the 21st century can no longer be contained by borders and boundaries.”¹⁴

At the outset of the campaign, months prior to the beginning of the primaries, Obama published the requisite article in *Foreign Affairs*, in which he outlined his approaches to international relations.¹⁵ Entitled “Renewing American Leadership,” the article focused on what Obama continued to contend in subsequent months, the obvious need to restore American prestige in the world. He proposed to accomplish this goal not solely or even primarily by building American military power but rather by ensuring that America was seen to stand and fight for the freedoms “sought by billions of people beyond our borders.” Such notions are older than the Republic in the “American” approach to the world. They echo the idea articulated by the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, when he suggested the “American”

¹³ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Vintage, 2008), p. 330.

¹⁴ Obama, “Remarks of Senator Barack Obama to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs,” April 24, 2007.

<http://usforeignpolicy.about.com/od/2008presidentialrace>. Accessed August 28, 2008. Obama made similar comments about the nature of transnational threats in *The Audacity of Hope*, in which he expressed concern that in the aftermath of 9/11 and the successful overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan the Bush administration did not follow through with a “steady, measured” policy designed to address the new challenges. Pp. 343-44..

¹⁵ Barack Obama, “Renewing American Leadership,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 4 (July/August 2007).

experiment would be a “beacon on a hill,” providing an example of freedom the rest of the world, an approach which has been referred to by scholars as “Redeemer Nation.” Although Obama clearly emerges from the liberal side of the American political tradition, his belief that the United States has a responsibility to “lead and uplift” the world is actually also consistent with the approach of the neo-conservatives who dominated American foreign policy in the Reagan and George W. Bush years. They too cast U.S. policy in terms of a sense of mission to export American values and institutions. Obama pulls back somewhat from the terminology of the neo-cons, but his policy values are active ones. He has praised his predecessors in the White House for leading the world, for “championing” new approaches, for “creating” new institutions and organizations, “providing” new leadership. Such action words imply an active foreign policy and also possibly a more interventionist foreign policy than many of his more liberal supporters anticipate. Justin Logan of the Cato Institute concluded on the eve of the election that “Obama is anything but a noninterventionist.”¹⁶ Logan’s interpretation is reinforced when one considers what Obama said when he first opposed the war in Iraq in 2002: “I am not opposed to all wars. I am opposed to dumb wars.” He added in that address: “I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East.”¹⁷

Obama’s breadth of vision, his optimism and his capacity to reach out even to hostile powers has been refreshing; yet concerns remain about the ways in which he will respond to more traditional major power threats. As he takes office the only

¹⁶ Jason Logan, “Two Kinds of Change: Comparing the Candidates on Foreign Policy,” *Policy Analysis* (October 14, 2008), p. 1. Conservative commentator Robert Kagan very early in the presidential campaign also noted this orientation in Obama’s foreign policy. “Obama the Interventionist,” *Washington Post* (April 29, 2007).

¹⁷ Obama remarks, October 2, 2002, <http://www.barackobama.com/2002/10/02>. Accessed October 15, 2008.

concrete evidence available to assess that issue is the nature of his response to the Russian intervention in Georgia over South Ossetia and the contrast with Senator McCain. McCain's response blended his cold war heritage of seeing Russia as malevolent- 'I looked in Putin's eyes and saw KGB'- in other words a moralistic response that would have made Woodrow Wilson proud, and a kind of hard nosed realism which led him to call on international organizations to get Russia out of Georgia, even urging that Russia be expelled from the WTO and G-8. Obama on the other hand avoided a clearly-defined response, yet one that consistently leaned toward a peaceful and negotiated resolution of the conflict. At first he cast no blame on Russia. He subsequently appealed to Russia to withdraw and sided with Georgia. In his most elaborate statement he denounced the level of force used by Russia and called on the United States and European nations to support the people of Georgia and "speak out" against the aggression. Once he and his advisers had been able to cobble together a more coherent position, Obama continued to stress that although Russia's actions in Georgia had created a "serious new security threat" Russia today is not the former USSR and thinking of the resurgent Russia in Cold War terms would be a regressive approach. Instead Obama proposed a range of responses in Eastern Europe to improve American security: encouraging the Atlantic alliance to speak with one voice on Russian actions; reducing the dependency on Russian oil and natural gas of a number of European nations; encouraging a deeper integration of East European countries, including Russia, into the global system; engaging Russia directly on such issues as nuclear proliferation, arms reduction, and expanded trade and investment.¹⁸ Obama's approach to the Georgia crisis tended to reflect his preference for longer term solutions

¹⁸ Barackobama.com/issues/foreign_policy. Accessed October 31, 2008.

to problems rather than rapid and hard line reactions. Whether that approach had he already been in office would have satisfied the American public is open to question.

The Obama campaign spelled out rather fully the foreign policies his Obama administration intended to pursue toward specific regions of the world and on specific issues. One of the countries which will assume increasing importance in the next few years, not only because of its emerging military strength but also because of its economic importance to the United States, is China. As with other U.S. administrations an Obama administration will find itself walking a fine line between on the one hand condemning China for unfair trade practices and serious violations of basic human rights and on the other maintaining a constructive relationship.

Although China did not feature prominently in the presidential debates the Obama campaign through the primaries took a cautious approach to the emergence of the People's Republic as a major power. In late May 2007, at the very outset of his campaign, Obama indicated that while China offered great opportunities it also posed "serious challenges," and that it should be the policy of the United States to do "all that it can to ensure China's rise is peaceful, and, if it remains so, the U.S. should welcome China's continuing emergence and prosperity." Although he did not indicate at the time precisely what the opportunities were he later stressed the potential of China's rapid economic growth as a potential "boost to the global economy" and market for U.S. exports, adding that it was essential that China play by international trading rules, specifically ending its practice of manipulating its currency value, a practice that provided China with unfair competitive advantage.¹⁹ He did not indicate what the policy should be in the event the contrary should prove to be the case. He subsequently

¹⁹ Obama statement May 23, 2007, www.barackobama.com, accessed September 9, 2008.

elaborated on his earlier statement, indicating that it would be the policy of his administration to actively engage China, ensure there is a “constructive relationship to foster peace and prosperity,” and “draw China further into the international system.” He cautioned that the U.S. needed to “remain vigilant” about China’s growing military capacity and to encourage China and Taiwan to resolve the differences in a peaceful manner. Although that last statement might have implied a lack of commitment to Taiwan, his campaign reinforced the commitment to the One China policy and to the terms of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act. Obama indicated that although he did not advocate the use of force to resolve disagreements between the People’s Republic and Taiwan he did stress that the United States could not stand idly by in the event there was an effort to coerce Taiwan into accepting the PRC’s terms. Reiterating an argument he had advanced in May 2007, Obama noted that the pursuit of this policy “means maintaining our military presence in the Asia-Pacific region, strengthening our alliances, and making clear to both Beijing and Taipei that a unilateral change in the status quo in the Taiwan Strait is unacceptable.” In the course of the presidential campaign Obama also responded to concerns about China’s human rights record at home, including in Tibet, and abroad, specifically China’s failure to use its influence to end the Sudanese government’s genocidal practices as well as its support for repressive regimes in Iran, Burma and Zimbabwe.²⁰ In short, the Obama approach toward the PRC and the Republic of China is the traditional one; there is no evident shift in direction.

Relations with Europe in general, with the possible exception of Tony Blair in Britain, reached a low point during the Bush administration, even with the efforts that President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice made early in his second term

²⁰ Ibid.

to mend fences. The reaction of European governments to the July 2008 Obama visit to London and Berlin underlined the challenges any new president will face in seeking to regain European confidence. Speaking in lofty tones about the shared destiny of the United States and Europe, he did little to enlighten European leaders on a range of defense and trade issues which have been divisive, from environmental policies, a longstanding conflict over U.S. poultry exports, and the place of Turkey in the European Union to relations with Russia, Iran and Afghanistan.²¹ In his Foreign Affairs article in mid-2007 Obama pledged to “rebuild the alliances, partnerships, and institutions necessary to confront common threats and enhance common security.” He committed to rebuilding a strong NATO, largely if not solely to increase the European engagement in the Afghanistan war. Obama’s approach to NATO, what is known as a policy of enlargement, is consistent with U.S. post-Cold War policy, seeking to transform NATO from a Cold War security structure to what he refers to as “a global partnership for peace and security.” European countries have been reluctant to date to endorse fully the American approach even in Afghanistan, with the result that one of the major tests of an Obama administration will be the extent to which it is able to bring Europe to adopt the American vision of a transformed NATO. The global financial crisis has added an additional dimension to the need for close cooperation between the United States and Western Europe, as do the conflict in Afghanistan and the Israeli-Palestine/Hamas conflict which erupted at the end of 2008.

The policy of enlargement does not apply only to the role of NATO. Obama committed to building a more effective partnership with the European Union in general for the promotion of constructive economic relations, obtaining the support of Europe to

²¹ *The Globe and Mail* (July 25, 2008), p. A10.

stop Iran's nuclear weapons program, exploring with Europe opportunities to deploy missile defense systems to Europe to defend against a possible nuclear capable Iran, and expanding cooperation in such areas as counter-terrorism policies, promoting disarmament in the former Soviet Union, and restoring a strategic partnership with Turkey. The Obama campaign made clear that it would consult Russia on possible cooperation on missile defense in Europe but would not countenance Russia having a veto over initiatives deemed to be vital to American national security. With respect to Turkey, Obama is critical of the Bush administration's policies, which in Obama's view have undermined Turkish support for the United States and the West. As the most democratic and Western-oriented Muslim country as well as a NATO ally, Turkey is viewed as vital to American national security interests in the region. Obama has thus proposed to bring together Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish leaders in an effort to negotiate an agreement that will protect Turkey's territorial integrity and reduce the threat posed by the separatist Kurdish Workers Party.

Iran's nuclear weapons program poses the most serious threat to U.S. national security and to stability in the Middle East. The emphasis which the Obama campaign placed on exploring with Europe the deployment of missile defense systems in Europe is one response to that threat, but Obama has also been clear that he does not want to deploy unproven technology on a unilateral basis. Obama has drawn attention to the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act which he introduced in the Senate in May 2007 in an effort to pressure foreign companies conducting business in Iran, a measure similar to the Helms-Burton legislation of the Clinton years targeted at foreign companies doing business in Cuba. Obama has also called on European countries to stop extending

large-scale credit guarantees to Iran. None of this is a departure from the policies of the previous administration. Where Obama does depart from the Bush administration is in his commitment to conduct direct talks with Iran, a diplomatic approach that is more compatible with the European perspective. How an Obama administration would respond to intense pressure from Israel to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapon delivery capability remains to be determined. Certainly, throughout the campaign, including in his July 2008 trip to the Middle East, Obama stressed his commitment to Israel, not only on the Iranian nuclear proliferation issue but also on Palestinian terrorism and the status of Jerusalem.²²

The war in Iraq declined in significance during the course of the primaries and post-convention campaigns, overshadowed in particular by the financial crisis by October. Yet, dealing with Iraq and Afghanistan must be priorities for the new administration, and Obama has been clear where he stands on both. In early 2007 at the outset of his campaign Obama argued in a Washington speech that his counter-terrorism strategy had five elements: getting out of Iraq and on to Afghanistan and Pakistan; “developing the capabilities and partnerships we need to take out the terrorists and the world’s most deadly weapons; engaging the world to dry up support for terror and extremism; restoring our values; and securing a more resilient homeland.” Speaking in Chicago early in October 2007 Obama made a commitment to remove American forces from Iraq “within 16 months” of his inauguration, leaving in place only a sufficient American force to protect American diplomats and carrying out targeted strikes on al Qaeda.²³ His overall counter-terrorism program includes increasing the

²² *National Post* (July 24, 2008), p. 1.

²³ Speech of October 2, 2007, BarackObama.com. accessed October 31, 2008.

counter-terrorism capability of the American military, improving intelligence gathering at home and overseas, enhancing intelligence cooperation between U.S. agencies and foreign intelligence and law enforcement agencies, and improving the integration of federal agencies responsible for stabilizing and rebuilding Iraq. In January 2007 Obama introduced in Senate the Iraq War De-escalation Act which was designed to draw down American troop commitments in Iraq and increase American diplomatic efforts. That legislation was vetoed by President Bush, but Obama indicated that this approach would be his “first priority as president.”

Whether as President Obama will in fact employ precisely that strategy in Afghanistan remains to be seen but In order to reallocate military resources to the flagging conflict in Afghanistan an Obama presidency will have no choice except to draw down troops in Iraq. During his campaign he indicated that he would increase non-military funding to Afghanistan by \$1 billion; he argued that although the military contribution is critical so is social and economic development and improved infrastructure. Obama indicated that the increased funding to the Afghanistan war would be tied to improved performance expectations by the Afghan government and would also be used to curtail opium poppy cultivation and to train the Afghan police and military.²⁴ A phased withdrawal from Iraq in the first year and a half of his term will be essential if he is to be consistent with his assessment of the real challenges to American national security in the region.

Obama has been careful not to signal that his Iraq policy or any of his initiatives which might be considered “soft power,” would lead to criticism that he is not supportive of the military. Rather, he has argued strongly that if anything the Iraq war along with

²⁴ BarackObama.com. Accessed October 10, 2008.

other U.S. overseas commitments have severely sapped America's military flexibility, noting that there was by the fall of 2008 not a single combat brigade on reserve in the United States, that the Army alone was short an estimated three thousand captains and majors, and, more disturbing, some 58% of recent West Point graduates had indicated they would not be pursuing military careers.²⁵

Obama also committed his presidency to a range of other initiatives designed to undercut terrorism and complement the military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and his approach is premised on a perspective that was not shared by the Republican candidate, that is that the United States bears some of the responsibility for the negative ways in which it is viewed internationally, especially in the Muslim world. To support this argument, the Obama website cited the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, which reported that 80% of people in predominantly Muslim countries have a negative view of the United States. To counteract both the negative views of the United States and the influence of extremists Obama indicated his intention to establish a \$2 billion Global Education Fund to be used primarily to assist some of the estimated 100 million children globally who have no access to formal education and who are considered vulnerable to extremist propaganda, especially that offered by radical Muslim madrasas. He also committed to doubling U.S. foreign aid to approximately \$50 billion a year by 2012, funds which would contribute to building democratic institutions, reducing poverty, and improving health and education. Such initiatives would also complement Obama's intention to expand America's public diplomacy activities in the Arab world, drawing on the strategies developed immediately after World War II.

²⁵ BarackObama.com. Accessed October 31, 2008.

In response to withering international as well as domestic criticism of the Bush administration's use of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center Obama pledged to close the facility. Obama's view has been widely shared, including among such leading Republicans as former Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. In addition to closing the Detention Center Obama has indicated that he will not permit the application of the Military Commissions Act, which was used by the Bush administration to circumvent the Geneva Conventions. Obama indicated that those prisoners who were currently detained would either be prosecuted in a fair manner, detained under conditions consistent with the laws of war, or if not prosecuted transferred to their home countries.

Less urgent European issues in the Obama foreign policy agenda include Northern Ireland, Cyprus, and the Balkans. On Northern Ireland, since there is already a power sharing agreement in place, an Obama administration is committed to promote economic development. With respect to Cyprus, where the Obama campaign has viewed a resolution of the longstanding conflict between Turkish and Greek Cypriots as critical to Turkish entry into the European Union, Obama is committed to providing leadership which will lead to the negotiation of a political settlement. He has argued that a successful settlement would ensure that Cyprus remain a single country with two distinct communities, each occupying its own geographic area, and with agreement on such delicate issues as property, refugees and security. On the Balkans Obama has indicated that his administration will cooperate with European allies to protect the rights of Serbs and their religious sites in an independent Kosovo.

Obama faltered somewhat during the campaign on the slippery shoals of Cuban policy. Early in the primary contest, Senator Clinton critiqued Obama for being too willing to liberalize American relations with a post-Fidel Cuban government. Obama either underestimated the response of the traditionally Republican Cuban-American community to his seemingly liberal initial approach or, conversely, he saw an opportunity to attract a younger generation of Cuban-Americans who are less obsessed with the Castro regime than their parents and grandparents. Whatever his thinking early in the campaign it was evident by August 2008 that he recognized the need to appear more traditional on Cuban relations. As polls indicated that Florida might be within the Democratic Party grasp Obama moved to a more cautious and centrist position on Cuba. On the eve of the Democratic Party convention in late August his position was more measured, arguing in an article in the *Miami Herald* that it was important for the United States to maintain pressure and leverage on Cuban authorities as the country adjusted to a government without Castro. Obama did advocate lifting any restrictions on travel to Cuba by Cuban Americans as well as on remittances to family members, but he reiterated the need to maintain pressure on the Cuban government to encourage democratization. On the eve of the November election, the Obama campaign continued to argue, however, that the U.S. would move to normalize relations with Cuba and ease the embargo if a post-Castro government took the appropriate actions, including: freeing all political prisoners.²⁶

From the outset of his campaign Obama promised a new departure, one of increased engagement, with Latin America. A cynical explanation of that orientation

²⁶ Michael Duffy, "Obama's Foreign Policy Reset," *Time*, August 23, 2008. On Cuba, see Barack Obama.com/issues/foreign_policy. Accessed October 31, 2008.

would view the initiative as a response to domestic political factors, recognizing that he needed to woo the Hispanic vote away from Senator Clinton in the primaries. Yet, he has shown familiarity with and commitment to Latin American and Caribbean challenges. He criticized the Bush administration for its excessive focus on counter-terrorism and a military approach to addressing such problems as international narcotics traffic. Obama's policy orientation in this area appears to be similar to that of Presidents Carter and Clinton before him, even though Clinton was more closely identified with the Helms-Burton legislation on Cuba and Plan Colombia in addressing narcoterrorism in the Andean region. Obama has committed to rebuild diplomatic links through "aggressive, principled, and sustained diplomacy in the Americas from day one." He has singled out democracy promotion, strengthening civil society, energy security, grass roots development and a trade policy which help to create more American jobs, enhance American security and improve labour and environmental standards.²⁷

Obama was less expansive during the campaign in indicating how he will deal with the most pressing challenge in Latin America after Cuba; that is, the orientation of Venezuela under President Hugo Chávez. The Cuba-Venezuela link has been complicated in the past year by the growing ties between Chavez and Russia, building on the already increased linkages which Chávez and the Peoples Republic of China have established. Given Venezuela's importance to international oil markets and the commitment of an Obama presidency to reducing foreign oil dependency, coming to terms with Chavez is a matter of considerable national security concern for the United States. Obama's response to Chavez thus far has been a rather feeble commitment to

²⁷ Barackobama.com/issues/foreign_policy. Accessed October 31, 2008.

restore America's "traditional leadership" in Latin America to offset Chavez's anti-American rhetoric and policies.

Obama's appointments and nominations to his key foreign policy positions are indicative of both the political constraints under which he must work as well as his foreign policy commitments and orientation. His selection of Robert Gates to continue as Defense Secretary will provide clear continuity in defense policy, even though Gates has spoken of the need for the United States to avoid the "militarization" of its foreign policy and the need to be more flexible in its responses to global challenges. Gates has also articulated far more concern with democratic change and human rights issues than his predecessors in the Bush administration. Obama's selection of Hillary Rodham Clinton as Secretary of State suggests more about domestic politics than it does about Obama's foreign policy preferences, but her appointment is unlikely to inaugurate any shift away from pragmatic, national self-interest policies. In her presentation to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during her confirmation hearing in mid-January she did seek to strike a new cord on policy. Referring to the new administration's policy orientation as "Smart Power," she stressed that the United States needed to make more effective use of all the tools at its disposal - diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural. Reaching across party lines she appealed for a return to bipartisanship in foreign policy. In what could only be interpreted as a critique of the Bush administration's policies she stressed that foreign policy must be based on "a marriage of principles and pragmatism, not rigid ideology, on facts and evidence, not emotion or prejudice." She referred on several occasions to the need to keep the United States and its allies secure, the need to promote prosperity at home and abroad and to

strengthen America's leadership role in the world. With reference to the current Israel-Hamas confrontation, she articulated traditional support for Israel, couching that support in the context of empathy for innocent civilians who have been the victims of conflict and the need for an approach to the Middle East which goes beyond that specific conflict.²⁸ In short, there is no indication of a dramatic departure in policy; nor was one expected.

One of the unknowns is the extent to which Clinton's bitterness over the criticism of her by Obama's foreign policy staff during the campaign will isolate any of those individuals from having an impact on policy. Susan Rice, Bill Clinton's Assistant Secretary of State for Africa and Obama's nominee as ambassador to the United Nations is a case in point. Obama's selection of Both Gates and Clinton will work to restore frayed relations with Europe. Obama's appointment of former NATO commander Brig General (ret) James L. Jones as National Security Advisor will reinforce the commitment to improving European relations, and it also signals the importance the administration will place on increasing NATO's role in the Afghanistan conflict. In the area of international trade policy, Obama's selection of New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson as Secretary of Commerce was an astute political move because of his prominent status within the Hispanic community in the United States; the initiative also signaled his support for trade liberalization since Richardson had been instrumental in garnering support for Bill Clinton's NAFTA negotiations. Unfortunately at the time of writing, Richardson had withdrawn his name from consideration because of a pending investigation into his business practices.

Foreign policy was not the main issue in the election by the time Americans went to the polls, with voter attention focused more on the domestic economy and financial

²⁸ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28624112/>. Accessed 14/01/09.

crisis. That is the natural order of things in American elections as Bill Clinton discovered in time to win the presidency. Yet, once in office Obama as president will have to face not only the challenges of gradual withdrawal from as well as stabilization of Iraq, an increased commitment to Afghanistan, preferably with a higher degree of commitment from his NATO partners, and the need to deal with the dangers of nuclear proliferation in Iran, but his administration will have to do so in the midst of the most serious global financial crisis in decades. In the context of global financial challenges which go well beyond conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama is certain to find it difficult to balance his commitments to increased funding for social, economic and military programs with his stated intention not to increase taxes on the middle class. In spite of those dilemmas which have been occasioned by recent events, an Obama presidency, if it remains true to its promise, is certainly destined to provide a more humane, balanced, multilateral, consultative and diplomatic approach to foreign policy than the nation has experienced over the past eight years. As with all U.S. administrations, Obama's will from time to time have to make hard choices between idealism and realpolitik. He has consistently rejected any tendency toward isolationism rather than engagement. The test of his presidency will be how effectively he is able to balance these conflicting tendencies in United States foreign policy.²⁹

²⁹ In *The Audacity of Hope* Obama is particularly critical of liberal isolationists. Citing a Pew Research Center Poll, he noted that liberals appear to want to focus only on withdrawal from Iraq, stopping the spread of AIDS and working more closely with U.S. allies, an approach in which he finds merit but stresses that it does not constitute a coherent foreign policy. See pp. 358-59.