



**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG**

Büro Washington

Dr. Almut Wieland-Karimi
1023 15th Street NW, # 801
Washington, DC 20005 USA
Tel.: +1 202 408 5444
Fax: +1 202 408 5537
fesdc@fesdc.org
www.fesdc.org

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The American Elections: Prospects for a New US Foreign Policy

Richard Rubenstein¹

- All candidates, Republican and Democrat, perceive the Bush administration's foreign policy as a failure and share the goal of changing the course of US relations with its allies.
- Candidates differ along party lines with respect to the war in Iraq. The Democrats promise to begin withdrawing troops, whereas Republicans promise to wait until the war "has been won."
- Democrat or Republican, the new president will continue to emphasize America's unique role as military and diplomatic power, and will not change this underlying assumption.
- The new president, regardless of party, will significantly change the tone of American foreign policy. However, disproportionate military spending will persist, contradicting rhetorical emphasis on peaceful conflict resolution.

Predicting the foreign policies that American presidential candidates will embrace after attaining power is rather like trying to foresee the course of a marriage by analyzing the wedding ceremony. Where domestic issues like health insurance or tax reform are concerned, the candidates are accustomed to outlining programs which, however vague or impractical they may be, give at least an inkling of what they might attempt to accomplish once in office. But in the traditionally bipartisan arena of foreign affairs, politicians are wary of making specific com-

mitments, particularly if they imply substantial shifts in the direction of US foreign policy. As presidential candidates from Adlai Stevenson to John Kerry learned in the past, to be considered indecisive, naïve, insufficiently nationalistic, or "soft" on the latest threat to American security is the electoral kiss of death. As a result, statesmanlike declarations, patriotic poses, and sonorous slogans tend to replace specific programs, making prediction of a candidate's post-election behavior particularly hazardous.²

(Un)Common Ground? Democratic and Republican Agreement

This election year presents an unusual situation, since the outgoing president is an unpopular figure with historically low approval ratings whose foreign policy is deemed a failure overall by candidates of both parties. Despite differences between Republicans and Democrats over the justice and conduct of the war in Iraq (a matter to be discussed a bit later), all major candidates decry the lowering of United States prestige around the world, the weakening of traditional alliances, an erosion of America's position as global economic leader, the persistence of anti-Western terrorism, and the rise of new threats to "American interests" in the Islamic world and elsewhere. Whether this consensus on the need for change will produce significant alterations of policy, and the likely nature of these alterations, are questions worth pondering despite the candidates' reluctance to provide us with detailed answers.

Strong evidence of a consensus for change is provided by the leading Republican candidates, none of whom finds much reason to praise the incumbent Republican president. "Polls indicate that the United States is more unpopular now than at any time in history and increasingly viewed as pursuing its narrow self-interest," declares John McCain, Republican presidential candidate. In response, he calls for efforts "to restore our mantle as a global leader, reestablish our moral credibility, and rebuild those damaged relationships that once brought so much good to so many places."³ This critique is not much different from Hillary Clinton's – "The tragedy of the last six years is that the Bush administration has squandered the respect, trust, and confidence of even our closest allies and friends"⁴ – or from Barack Obama's characterization of the administra-

tion's foreign policy as "tragically misguided."⁵

Other Republicans generally refrain from attacking Bush quite so directly, but their implicit criticisms are virtually indistinguishable from those of McCain or, for that matter, from those of the Democrats. All advocate modernizing and expanding the US armed forces, "revitalizing" American diplomacy, strengthening tattered alliances, reorganizing the civilian agencies concerned with foreign affairs, and creating new multi-lateral agencies to transfer resources to developing nations – in particular, to "moderate" leaders and agencies in the Islamic world.⁶ McCain places particular emphasis on reviving the US-European alliance: "The bonds we share with Europe in terms of history, values, and interests are unique. Unfortunately, they have frayed. As president, one of my top foreign policy priorities will be to revitalize the transatlantic partnership." In this respect, his remarks are indistinguishable from those of Hillary Clinton: "We must reestablish our traditional relationship of confidence and trust with Europe."

Points of Democratic and Republican Disagreement

There are real foreign policy differences between the candidates, of course, particularly concerning the Iraq War. The Democrats agree that the war was misconceived, unnecessary, and poorly prosecuted, and promise to withdraw combat troops from Iraq beginning during their first year in office. The Republicans assert that a large-scale troop withdrawal cannot begin until the war has been "won" – that is, until the level of violence has declined to the point that the Iraqi army and police can be safely trusted to maintain order. But even here, one must be careful not to overstate the candidates'

differences. Like their Democratic rivals, the Republicans understand that the war has become extremely unpopular with voters.

Declaring last year's "troop surge" a success, they have approved an immediate drawdown of some combat forces, while asserting their determination to hold the Iraqi government to its promises to reconcile with the Sunni community, distribute oil revenues equitably, and take responsibility for internal security. For their part, the Democrats oppose withdrawing US forces "irresponsibly." Unlike Congressman Dennis Kucinich, the former candidate who favored an immediate and unconditional pullout, both Obama (who initially opposed the war) and Clinton (who did not) voted in Congress to continue funding the occupation. Moreover, while eschewing permanent military bases, both candidates advocate maintaining a continued US military presence in Iraq to protect diplomats and civilian workers, provide training and support to the Iraqi army, and fight al Qaeda-style terrorists.

It is probably true, as *The Economist* maintains, that "Democrats would try harder than Republicans to bring more troops home faster."⁷ But one can easily imagine situations in which a newly-elected Democratic president might decide not to withdraw troops "precipitously," or in which a newly-elected Republican leader might decline to "stay the course" as promised. What if Moqtada Sadr's powerful Mehdi Army were to renew its armed struggle, and the al-Maliki government were to collapse? Would President Obama or Clinton abandon Iraq, its resources, and its people? Would President Romney or McCain commit new American forces to an escalating, potentially endless war? We do not know the answer to such questions, quite frankly, because the candidates' foreign policy formulations leave essential structural issues unrecognized and undetermined. The problem is that no candidate of either party (with the exception of ex-candidate Kucinich) has identified or attempted to deal with the underlying causes

of the Iraq War and other recent imperial misadventures. The defect causing the decline of American influence and reputation is generally considered to be purely subjective: a mistaken attitude or philosophy of the Bush administration and its neo-conservative supporters.

A Unique Nation: No Real Rhetorical Shift?

The Democrats inveigh against Bush's "unilateralism" and over-reliance on military solutions to political problems. Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee agrees that "The Bush administration's arrogant bunker mentality has been counterproductive at home and abroad."⁸ All candidates promise to be more respectful of traditional diplomatic methods, less quick to pull the trigger, and more sensitive to the interests and needs of other peoples. But a central issue – the American quest for global hegemony and control over key natural resources – is obfuscated by the rhetoric of "leadership" and a quasi-religious insistence upon America's uniquely virtuous role in the world.

One may expect this of the Republicans, with their strong support among conservative religious nationalists. Former Republican presidential candidate Romney quotes Shimon Peres approvingly on the US role in Iraq: "You need to put this in context. America is unique in the history of the world. During this last century, there was only one nation that laid down hundreds of thousands of lives of its own sons and daughters and asked for nothing for itself." "We are a special nation," agrees candidate McCain, "the closest thing to a 'shining city on a hill' ever to have existed." But the Democrats sing a similar song. According to Barack Obama, (with Clinton nodding approval), "The American moment is not over, but it must be seized anew. To see American power in terminal decline is to ignore America's great promise and historic purpose in the world." Of course, one can characterize this as mere

mere campaign rhetoric designed to provide reassurance and inspiration to a disenfranchised electorate. At the same time, though, this sort of deliberate ambiguity conveys a strong subtextual message that the United States is a unique nation that plays a special role on the global stage. All candidates, whatever their political party or philosophy, seem to view the period of the Cold War as a golden age, when American power was irresistible and the United States was respected around the world. Republican or Democrat, their self-proclaimed mission is to restore its lost supremacy.

The result is a species of political schizophrenia. We want to be more diplomatic and multilateralist, but we must “lead.” We want to be more peaceful, but we must increase the size and capability of the world’s most lethal armed forces. Breaking with fellow Republicans, McCain abjures all forms of torture, but actively supports a war that has made Iraq unbearable for millions of innocent civilians. Challenging fellow Democrats, Obama declares that he will hold diplomatic discussions with America’s adversaries as well as with her allies, but when called “naïve” by his rivals, he responds that he will not hesitate to use force unilaterally against anyone posing an “imminent threat” to “our vital interests.” In similar fashion, Clinton insists that diplomacy and war are part of a single strategy. “There is a time for force and a time for diplomacy; when properly deployed, the two can reinforce each other.”

There is little evidence, in short, that any candidate has considered the possibility of a multilateral or non-hegemonic world order as an alternative to American supremacy.⁹ Regardless of political party or philosophy, all accept the Hobbesian notion that the alternative to single-power hegemony is anarchy. This foreshortened perspective afflicts even liberal intellectuals like the editor of *Foreign Policy* magazine, who declares in a recent issue that world leaders

are “hungry for America,” since they understand that

...though the United States may sometimes use a heavy hand, the alternatives are much worse. Few want to see the world’s stage led by autocratic regimes like Russia or China. An ineffectual Europe does not offer much in the way of leadership. And, short of these options, there are few possibilities besides living in an anarchic vacuum.¹⁰

This grim worldview, to which all major candidates subscribe, not only makes alternatives to American domination seem utopian, it also denies the possibility that diplomacy may be more than the continuation of war by other means. The idea that diplomats and independent facilitators can help parties in conflict *transform* their struggle by identifying and ameliorating the conflict’s systemic causes is not part of their intellectual equipment, perhaps because they do not wish to recognize the quest for hegemony itself as a systemic cause of violence. As a result, it is hard to know what to make of their pledges to return to traditional diplomacy and to use force only as a “last resort.” One searches their speeches in vain for creative new approaches to problems involving Israel/Palestine, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Russia, Venezuela, or other nations and peoples implicated in actual or potential conflict with the “city on a hill.”

Predictions for the Future

On the basis of this discussion, I think it is possible to make two predictions. First, a new administration in Washington will change the tone and shift the emphasis of American foreign policy. A president of either party will attempt to rely more on diplomacy and to use American military forces more judiciously than the Bush administration did. He or she will wish to rebuild tattered alliances, participate more willingly in

multilateral initiatives, and increase the US contribution to international development efforts. In the continuing struggle for influence between the US State Department, the CIA, and the Department of Defense, a new regime will probably attempt to give the State Department's views greater weight. (But note that the Democrats, who have made a major issue of President Bush's failure to apprehend Osama bin Laden and smash the al Qaeda network, can hardly be expected to rein in the CIA or restrain the Defense Department's Special Forces.)

Second, these changes, while more than superficial, will be less than substantial. The main reasons for this have already been suggested. Unless the president-to-be has secretly adopted a new paradigm of world society (always a possibility, although a remote one), the new administration's efforts to maintain American hegemony will inevitably subvert its intention to act more collaboratively and peacefully in the world. What some call "smart power" is simply a variation on the old paradigm, and subject to the same contradiction. The problem was never that President Bush was stupid, as so many of his critics maintained, but that he was a prisoner of outworn imperial ideas and practices.

This is not to say that we are without hope. In time, perhaps quite soon, the intolerable costs of attempting to maintain US military and political supremacy in an era of unprecedented globalization and diversification will become apparent both to the American people and to its leaders. It is that eventuality, rather than any change of residents in the White House, which presents the possibility of a significant change in America's international relationships.

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¹ Richard E. Rubenstein is University Professor of Conflict Resolution and Public Affairs at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University in Virginia.

² A few examples: Woodrow Wilson gained the presidency in 1916 by declaring himself the candidate of neutrality in World War I ("He kept us out of war" was his famous campaign slogan). "Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign war," promised President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940. In 1964, one year before committing 500,000 American troops to Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson won election by running as the "peace candidate" against the militantly hawkish Barry Goldwater. And eight years after that, Richard Nixon, the self-proclaimed nemesis of International Communism, went to Beijing to make peace with Mao Tse-dong and Jou En-lai.

³ John McCain, "An Enduring Peace Based on Freedom," *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2007.

⁴ Hillary Clinton, "Security and Opportunity for the 21st Century," *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2007.

⁵ Barack Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2007.

⁶ See, e.g., Mitt Romney, "Rising to a New Generation of Global Challenges," *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2007.

⁷ "The World in Their Hands: How the Candidates Would Handle the Rest of the World," *The Economist*, 27 November 2007.

⁸ Mike Huckabee, "America's Priorities in the War on Terror," *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2008.

⁹ For a non-candidate's attempt to raise the issue of multilateralism – or at least "trilateralism" – see Parag Khanna, "Waving Goodbye to Hegemony," *The New York Times Magazine*, 34 *et seq.*

¹⁰ Moises Naim, "Hungry for America," *Foreign Policy*, January-February 2008, 111-112.