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## What Can America Expect from President Obama in Foreign Policy?

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In April I shared my thoughts about what America could expect in foreign policy from a John McCain presidency.<sup>1</sup> Now that Senator Barack Obama is the Democratic nominee for president and has chosen veteran Senator Joe Biden, current chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, as his vice presidential running mate, it is time to consider what U.S. foreign policy may look like should the Obama-Biden ticket win the general election in November.

First, nobody should completely write off Senator McCain yet because to many American voters (and some foreign observers) he represents stability. You at least know where you stand with McCain, due to his lengthy Washington career and extensive international travel. Barack Obama represents a completely fresh challenge—as many Americans of all political stripes have learned this year. To some foreign leaders, Obama's election might prove unsettling given his relative youth (age 47; only Theodore Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Bill Clinton were younger presidents) and his limited experience in international affairs. And some observers feel that Sen. Obama has not fully demonstrated how he would handle a major crisis. By contrast, Sen. McCain is well known and has made his views clear over a number of years. With Barack Obama, who knows for sure? Yet, that may well prove to be his edge in this very unusual political year and beyond.

On the level of personal appeal, Barack Obama is extremely popular both at home and overseas in places such as Western Europe and Southeast Asia (where he spent part of his youth). In part this is because he is the antithesis of George W. Bush. In particular, Obama opposed the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and has been very critical of administration mismanagement of the war ever since. But he is also a young non-white with the middle name Hussein. This sends out all sorts of fresh signals, especially among people who have grown tired of the neo-conservative, unilateralist agenda followed by the Bush administration. So there is a feeling, both at home and abroad, that Obama would be a far less arrogant president, willing to speak with Europeans and Asians as equals rather than inferiors. This accounts for the 200,000 cheering people who showed up in Berlin to hear him speak last summer, even before he was officially nominated by his party. (The McCain campaign has tried to disparage this impressive event by portraying Obama as a mere “celebrity,” not a serious statesman. One suspects hypocrisy and jealousy here: if John McCain were presently able to draw a supportive crowd of 200,000 people, either abroad or at home, he and the GOP would acclaim it as a clarion call.)

One of the best guides to Barack Obama's foreign policy views is an article he wrote last year in *Foreign Affairs*.<sup>2</sup> Here one finds themes that Sen. Obama has often reiterated on

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<sup>1</sup> *MWSR* 2008.04.01 <[www.miwsr.com/2008/20080401.asp](http://www.miwsr.com/2008/20080401.asp)>

<sup>2</sup> “Renewing American Leadership,” *Foreign Affairs* (Jul/Aug 2007) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0816.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0816.htm)>.

the campaign trail: moving beyond Iraq, rebuilding America's partnerships, restoring trust in America, combating global terrorism, and halting the spread of nuclear weapons. But one important topic that both Obama and McCain have written about in *Foreign Affairs*<sup>3</sup> that has drawn surprisingly little comment—revitalizing and expanding the military. Obama proposes expanding U.S. ground forces by 65,000 soldiers for the army and 27,000 for the marines, a total increase of over 90,000. McCain is advocating an even greater increase of 150,000 troops. Both proposals would require much time and money, the latter likely to be in very short supply in next year's federal budget.

While campaigning and during their first presidential debate on 26 September, Obama and McCain have traded political accusations (and insults) regarding each other's foreign policy positions. Their records and proposals, however, reveal a more nuanced picture. For instance, while Obama has staked out a distinct position far more grounded in open discussions and negotiations with world leaders (including Iran and North Korea), he has been very hawkish on Afghanistan and Pakistan, saying that as president he would if necessary take unilateral military action there to eliminate key al-Qaeda terrorists such as Osama Bin Laden. He is also committed to the full destruction of al-Qaeda as a terror network.

Of course, front and center in the foreign policy/national security debate is Iraq, on which the nominees' views differ sharply. Obama has called repeatedly for withdrawal of combat brigades within sixteen months, but leaving behind an unspecified number as an antiterrorist force. This consistently held position on the Iraq war issue has won over many American voters who are tired of the war and want the United States' troops out of Iraq (and maybe even the Persian Gulf). However, these same supporters need to remember that Sen. Obama supports the Afghanistan war and has said the drawdown in Iraq will allow the U.S. to redirect "badly needed" troops into Afghanistan, where parts of the country have fallen to the Taliban. In point of fact, the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated badly and Obama has indicated that as president he would deploy new brigades and increase nonmilitary aid to the unstable country.

Of all the differences between Obama and McCain on foreign policy and national security, none is more revealing than the issue of whom a president should talk to, when, and under what conditions. This was a key point of contention in their first debate. Obama's assertion that he would be willing to talk without preconditions has been revised saying that talks would first be at the Secretary of State level (in line with recommendations made by Henry Kissinger and others). Obama, who sees this openness as a way to clarify the U.S. position and to draw more support from overseas allies critical of the Bush administration's unilateralism, has been careful to note the difference between talking and negotiating. His position, while still controversial, has resonated with Americans tired of being criticized as arrogant abroad.

Pragmatism is still a guide for Obama in his quest for the White House and in his foreign policy positions. On Iraq, many of his advisers have quietly indicated that he will not call for an immediate and precipitous drawdown in troops if it would hopelessly destabilize the country, so the sixteen-month timeline is not etched in stone. To his credit, Sen. Obama has said he would be as careful getting out of Iraq as the Bush administration was

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<sup>3</sup> Obama (note 2 supra); McCain, "An Enduring Peace Built on Freedom Securing America's Future," *Foreign Affairs* (Nov/Dec 2007) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0801.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0801.htm)>.

“careless getting in.” Even though McCain has spoken forcefully in support of the surge, there seems to be little doubt among political observers—and even many Republicans—that the U.S. military cannot long remain in Iraq at current levels. The cost in casualties and resources is too great, especially in light of pressing domestic-economic problems.

Both Obama and McCain must also face changing public opinion about the Iraq war and its importance to national security. Does this mean Obama has the edge? Maybe. Obama’s camp has had some success in painting McCain’s positions as a continuation of the Bush policies, which polls show are unpopular. One reason Obama has a decent chance of winning the foreign policy debate is that Americans are not nearly as frightened today as they have been in recent years.

Of course, Obama and McCain are in agreement on some foreign policy questions: both would close the Guantanamo Bay detention facilities; both say Iran cannot be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons even if that means military intervention; both would continue America’s close ties with Israel; both favor continued foreign aid. Nor are they far apart in regard to Africa, favoring increased funding for AIDS relief and malaria eradication, and, on Darfur, proposing sanctions and a no-fly zone.

Asia too is going to have a much higher profile in American foreign policy under either an Obama or McCain presidency. The rising economic superpowers, China and India, will make Asian affairs much more prominent the new president’s thinking and policy. One big difference is that Barack Obama has shown a capacity to build coalitions and to be a good networker/organizer, and his approach to China and India would be less adversarial McCain’s. Accordingly, these two powers may prefer to see Obama in the White House.

Barack Obama is offering the most sweeping and visionary foreign policy critique we have heard from a presidential nominee since Senator Robert Kennedy in 1968. However, every presidential candidate’s foreign policy promises are, at best, an imperfect guide to his actual actions in office. A better indicator of presidential behavior is a candidate’s roster of advisers.<sup>4</sup> (If Americans and the media had paid closer attention to George W. Bush’s cadre of foreign policy advisors—Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld—the invasion of Iraq would have come as less of a surprise.) Obama’s foreign policy advisers come from diverse backgrounds: former mainstream aides to Democratic leaders like Tom Daschle and Lee Hamilton (Denis McDonough and Ben Rhodes, respectively); veterans of the Clinton administration’s left wing (Tony Lake and Susan Rice); a human rights advocate who helped write the Army’s and Marine Corps’ much praised counterinsurgency field manual (Sarah Sewall); and a retired general who helped run the air war during the invasion of Iraq (Scott Gration). Press accounts suggest a committed, intellectually coherent, and united foreign affairs team. Time will tell whether that assessment is fully warranted, but the team members do share the formative experience of firm opposition to the war in Iraq, even when criticized for it by their colleagues, journalists, and many in the foreign policy establishment. Interestingly, all opposed the Iraq war because they judged that the invasion and occupation ran counter to the goal of destroying al-Qaeda. The Obama foreign policy team has made a point of rejecting President Bush’s “politics of fear” in favor of crafting a new global strategy doctrine featuring human “dignity promotion” as an antidote to the condi-

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<sup>4</sup> See Ari Berman, “The Democratic Foreign Policy Wars,” *The Nation* (21 Jan 2008; online 3 Jan 2008) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0817.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0817.htm)>.

tions of misery that have bred anti-Americanism and prevented freedom, justice, and prosperity from taking hold. So Sen. Obama and his team are attempting an overhaul not just of American foreign policy but of the very way Americans think about foreign policy.

Obama and his foreign policy team hope to replace the Bush Iraq War mindset with an ability and willingness to see the world from different perspectives. The Obama team feels “dignity promotion” can unite many strands of foreign policy thinking. Obama’s advisers argue that U.S. national security depends in large part on this “dignity promotion,” without which the United States will never be able to destroy extremists like al-Qaeda or other agents of terrorism around the world. Extremists will always be able to exploit conditions of misery, making continued U.S. involvement in conventional warfare an increasingly counterproductive exercise (e.g., killing one terrorist creates five more in his place). Obama sees the dignity promotion approach as the foreign policy anvil against which he can bring down the hammer on al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Barack Obama’s foreign policy advisers are pleased to be facing John McCain, because their candidate’s victory in November would be a mandate for the sweeping foreign affairs overhaul he promises. This presidential election provides, for the first time in a very long time, a choice between radically divergent visions of U.S. global engagement. If Sen. Obama does win the general election, he will face foreign policy (and domestic) problems so formidable as to threaten to overwhelm even the most experienced, competent executive and national security team. Iraq is still a nightmare and al-Qaeda will not sit still forever in its safe havens. To propose rebooting U.S. foreign policy now, as Obama wants, is, to say the least, ambitious. Furthermore, many U.S. military leaders consider Obama an unknown quantity, unlike John McCain.

An Obama victory in November will bring a complete break with the failed agendas and painful legacies of the Bush administration. Americans will see significant changes in their government’s positions on torture, climate change, Iran, Iraq, and the Middle East peace process generally.

Barack Obama is a phenomenon in American politics. He has ignited an enthusiasm among young people not seen since Robert Kennedy’s assassination. And for a world dangerously alienated from American political leadership, Obama’s supporters feel he offers a new face that could dispel negative assumptions about America—and in that sense boost the nation’s standing and security.

But these are symbolic qualities. In the end, Barack Obama, if elected president, will have to answer in his own mind some key national security questions, as have others in the Oval Office before him. What, for America’s survival, must he seek to prevent no matter how painful the means? What, for America to be true to itself, must he try to accomplish no matter how small the international consensus, and, if necessary, entirely on our own? What wrongs must America correct? What goals are simply beyond our capacity? The success of the next president’s administration will hinge on these complex foreign policy issues.