

The Obama administration and US strategic policy
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37

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What do we know about the new US administration's strategic worldview after its first months in office? Barack Obama has cast himself in the model of a 21st-century Lincoln, retracing the final stages of Lincoln's train journey to Washington for his inauguration ceremony, and taking his oath on the Lincoln bible. Expectations are high that the new president will be able to surmount daunting challenges; expectations inflamed by Obama's own life-story, his soaring rhetoric and his trademark chants at election rallies of 'yes, we can'. He campaigned as an outsider from Washington's elites, and spoke for much of 2008—a little less so after the election—as though the traditional roadblocks of Washington politics could be overcome by populism and effort.

But, in office, Obama faces staggering hurdles to the implementation of his agenda. Transforming domestic policy will be hard enough—Lincoln had to fight a civil war to get what he wanted. And 21st-century presidents can't be as absorbed in domestic politics as their predecessors were in the 1860s. For one thing, the US is currently committed to a global leadership role in a way that it never was during Lincoln's day. Obama is not about to pull back from that role; he talks of 'renewing' American global leadership, not of abandoning it. He speaks of a 'new vision of leadership in...[a] world that has lost trust in our purposes and our principles.'¹ But he cannot quickly resolve a range of intractable issues that now crowd the international agenda.

Principal determinants of US strategic policy

The 'mechanics of empire'², the durability of the framing mechanisms in US strategic thinking³, and the consistency of US interests in the world—the 'long poles' in the US strategic tent—ensure that US strategic policy post-World War II has typically been marked by a relatively high degree of continuity across different administrations. That is also likely to be true of this transition. Over the years of the Bush presidency, we have seen US strategic policy become focused upon a set of long-lived problems, including the 'Long War' against terrorists and their backers, reformation of the Middle East, and nation-building in unpromising environments. It seems unlikely that Obama can free himself from any of those problems in the near term.

Still, it would be wrong to conclude that election outcomes don't shape US strategic policy. The policy settings of the US government sometimes shift in important ways precisely *because* elections bring new 'ideational frameworks'⁴ to prominence. George W Bush initially moved US policy away from the liberal internationalist policies of his predecessor, Bill Clinton, and towards more 'realist' settings. Subsequently—post 9/11—he moved US policy away from that realist framework and towards a 'primacy' framework. So presidential choices do matter.

Further, Obama's decision-points and constraints are different to those Bush faced. Obama's agenda, for example, will be constrained by the global economic crisis in a way Bush's wasn't. The crisis will reawaken many of the concerns about 'strategic solvency' that had begun, vulture-like, to circle the ambitious Bush agenda in its later years. And it will generate renewed interest, within Washington and beyond, in grand economic strategy, and in the calculation of relative gains between regions (will Asia as a whole fare better than Europe?) and countries (will China find itself better placed than the US to wield strategic influence around the sub-regions of Asia?). Moreover, the crisis itself might well be interpreted as a broader reflection of US decline: as Director of National Intelligence, Dennis Blair, told a congressional committee in late February, the crisis posed a particular challenge to US global leadership, 'since we are generally held responsible for it.'⁵

The administration is still in its early days. But there are three direct indicators of US strategic behaviour to which analysts can turn for initial evidence about future policy directions. Those indicators are:

- what the administration says
- what the administration does
- the people that it appoints to key positions.

Saying...

Obama insisted in his inauguration speech that he wasn't like George Bush. Vice-President Joe Biden took the same message to the Munich Security conference, taking great care to spell out the changes in the core operating principles of US policy. He said that the US would:

- work in partnership where it could and alone only where it must
- strive to act preventively, rather than preemptively, to avoid the ultimate choice of war or inaction
- stretch out a hand to those who unclench their fists.

Those messages—essentially in favour of multilateralism, diplomacy and engagement—provide some concrete examples of the ways in which Obama's administration intends to differ from Bush's.

Some of Biden's specific comments, about 'pressing the reset button' with Russia for example, also suggest a theme of 'undoing' previous tensions. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech to the Asia Society in New York in mid-February seemed to reinforce that point, describing the US relationships with key Asian states as 'indispensable relationships' for America's future—a marked change from earlier US language about its own role as the 'indispensable nation'. So, the words, at least, point towards a less unilateralist and a more engaged and consultative America.

But if the language of engagement is more fulsome than it was under Bush, US strategic priorities seem to have changed little. Clinton's statement in mid-January to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, for example, listed a set of challenges and opportunities that would have been remarkably familiar to anyone following US foreign policy debates in recent years. If we work on the assumption that the most important issues appear first in her statement, then her speech suggested an ordering of US priorities that runs as follows (in descending order): Iraq and Afghanistan, the Middle East, terrorism, Russia, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, alliances, China, the global economic crisis, the US hemisphere, Africa, climate change, energy, AIDs, education, hunger and human rights.

Similarly, when Dennis Blair offered the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence a 'tour of the strategic landscape' in late February, his ordering of the key issues was: the global economic crisis, terrorism, violent extremism from the Middle East to South Asia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, weapons of mass destruction, Asia's rise, China, India, Russia, the US hemisphere, Africa, environmental security, and threats to the US information technology infrastructure.

Obama's own inauguration speech was, at heart, basically a reclamation of American ideals. But his opening paragraphs noted that the nation was 'in the midst of crisis', 'at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred', at a time when its economy was 'badly weakened'.⁶ From a variety of statements, then, it would be reasonable to conclude that US strategic priorities continue to focus on the big problems, and so far the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan remain at the centre of US interest—alongside a rapidly-escalating global economic crisis.

Deciding...

In terms of actions, the messages have been a little more mixed. Biden visited Europe, Clinton went to Asia and Obama went to Canada, so it looks like a full-court press is underway to re-warm relationships with a mix of old and new partners. The US is clearly signalling that it will remain engaged as a global player with broad interests. And the decision to create 'special envoys' for the particular trouble spots of the Middle East and Afghanistan–Pakistan, reinforces the point made above: that Washington continues to prioritise that region.

On the more specific topic of countering 'violent extremism' (apparently the preferred terminology rather than the 'War on Terror', despite Obama's 'war' reference in his inaugural address), the administration has been judiciously selective: ordering the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp within a year, closing the CIA's secret prisons as well as abolishing torture, yet maintaining both the practice of 'rendition' (capturing terrorist suspects and moving them across state borders) and the US missile strikes on suspected al-Qaeda facilities in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

The decision to set an end-point—31 October 2010—for the US combat role in Iraq, but to leave in place beyond that date up to 50,000 troops (of the 140,000 there now) in non-combat roles, plus an unlimited number of security contractors, again suggests a degree of caution in strategic policy making. Progress in Iraq has been hard-won, and Obama is not going to risk its unravelling.

Indeed, the increased Afghanistan troop commitment suggests Obama is hoping to replicate one of Bush's successes: the surge in Iraq. Obama is trying to imply an Afghanistan 'endgame'—albeit a distant one—in much the same way that an Iraqi 'endgame' now looms. True, a resolution in Afghanistan would also depend on additional factors: increased troops from NATO allies, enhanced cooperation from Pakistan in policing the border region, better governance in both Kabul and the provinces, and the training of Afghan national security forces equipped to deal with insurgency. But Obama seems to be trying to simplify the problem by lowering expectations of what a satisfactory outcome might look like, downplaying the Bush administration's push for democratisation in favour of the less ambitious, more pragmatic objective of containing terrorism.

Still, on many issues we have neither a clear set of statements nor much guidance from policy decisions. We don't know how the administration thinks about ballistic missile defence, NATO expansion, or modernisation of the US nuclear arsenal. The administration talks of 'pressing the reset' button with Russia, but it isn't clear what that might mean for actual shifts in US policy—especially since the Russians seem to have rejected the administration's offer to cancel the scheduled ballistic missile defence deployments in Europe in exchange for greater Russian help in stopping Iran's nuclear and missile program. Further, it's too early to tell what the follow-on to the START agreement might look like. The administration remains committed to securing nuclear materials world-wide, but that's scarcely new.

Similarly, we haven't yet seen much detail about how it will manage its key bilateral relationships, nor what its expectations will be of alliance burden-sharing. We don't know what it thinks about key global and regional institutions, nor how it envisages the path of reform in regard to same—although it's clear the G20 holds an increasingly important place in US thinking as a vehicle for managing the global economic crisis. And it says it favours 'tough, direct diplomacy' with Iran and North Korea, but leadership problems in Pyongyang make such a course uncertain, and even a more 'direct' approach to Tehran might be problematic under the watchful gaze of Tel Aviv.

We also don't know its views on regional security architecture, although Clinton's visit—to Japan, South Korea, China and Indonesia—suggests a more adroit cultivation of Asian security partners than we have seen for some years. This administration seems more attracted than its predecessor to multilateralist solutions to Asia-Pacific security puzzles, though some of that interest might well find expression in 'minilateralist' (very small multilateralist) structures specifically optimised to cope with particular challenges. Kurt Campbell, Clinton's nominee for the post of assistant secretary of state for East Asia, has previously canvassed⁷ both a greater US 'presence' in Asia, and a more dedicated focus on the US-China-Japan triangle, as means of managing the shifting balances in Asian geopolitics.

In particular, we don't yet get a sense of how Obama will cope on hard tests, like another 9/11. Bush's presidency was completely transformed by a major terrorist incident in the US, and it would not strain the bounds of credulity to think Obama's might be too.

Some of those uncertainties can only be answered with time. The administration itself does not yet have a complete set of answers to the problems facing it. Events will likely drive particular issues. For example, Obama is set to attend the NATO Summit in France and Germany in April in order to discuss the future of NATO in the 21st century, including the challenges faced in Afghanistan and counterterrorism. It is NATO's 60th anniversary: and perhaps the occasion for a new 'grand design' if the president wishes to push one.

Appointing...

What do Obama's key appointments tell us about the new administration? Clearly, he has appointed a range of capable and experienced personnel to the principal foreign policy, defence and security portfolios in his cabinet: Gates, Clinton, Jones, Blair, Panetta, Holbrooke, and Mitchell. The team is talented and competent, but time will tell which personalities predominate; indeed, we can't even be sure that in pressure situations it will be a 'team'.

In terms of the recognised 'tribal' structure of the Democratic party,⁸ the predominance of the globalist tribe is especially pronounced in the new administration. The 'come-home-America' tribe (essentially the George McGovern wing of the party in the days of the Vietnam war), and the 'American skeptics' (whose roots trace to the New Left movement of the 1970s and 1980s) aren't represented in the key appointments. In that sense, Obama has opted for the recognised 'engager' side of the party rather than the 'disengager' side. True, domestic priorities might well find better expression as the global economic crisis tightens its grip, and the White House website is already heavily weighted in favour of domestic issues. But at least initially we see an administration that wants to remain a global player.

More intriguingly, and within the 'engager' side of the party, we do not see the 'Truman democrats' tribe—the 'liberal hawks' of the Cold War—well represented. The 'Scoop' Jackson/Joseph Lieberman wing of the party now seems weak, its agenda perhaps tainted by the Bush presidency. Robert Gates seems to have been held over in the one logical place (Secretary of Defense) that the Truman Democrats might have regarded as clearly theirs.

The globalist tribe dominated the Clinton presidency. Globalists believe in the power of economic and technological globalisation, and in a progressive international agenda, stress the need for the US to prepare for a more multipolar world with diverse power centres, and believe institutions are important instruments for transnational issue management. Their dominance of the cabinet suggests Obama feels most at home with that worldview. It might also suggest his discomfiture with 'hard' military options. And that, in turn, would imply that the left-wing of American politics more broadly is still where US analysts Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier assessed it was in the 1990s: uncertain about how to marry progressive policies with American power.⁹ In the 1990s, that uncertainty showed up in three different policy areas: democracy promotion, free trade, and use of force. Those might yet prove potent battlefields once again within the party.

Even if the Obama team does have a clear set of answers on that marriage, in practice, its aspirations are likely to run into structural constraints, such as:

- trying to rebuild US leadership at a time of comparative financial and economic weakness
- trying to reform institutions when many institutions are, to all intents and purposes, unreformable
- trying to recut the grand bargains between the great powers for the 21st century.

The United States and Australia

We don't know that the president has focused much on the sound, well-established working relationship that Washington enjoys with Canberra. Prime Minister Rudd's forthcoming visit to the White House might well be the catalyst for such a consideration. But we suspect Obama sees no major tensions within the current relationship, and might see the visit as an opportunity for a broader discussion of how Australia sees the changing security dynamics both in Asia and across the globe.

Still, Australia would be unwise to rest on its traditional laurels. Gordon Brown's visit to Washington seems to have had rather less 'ceremony' about it than previous such visits by British leaders, prompting some journalists to speculate that Obama might well see a world of fewer best friends, but also fewer worst enemies. If so, the administration could be pushing the 'reset' button on a wider set of relationships than merely the US–Russian one. Such a perception would certainly fit with the theme of 'post-partisanship' that occasionally surfaced during Obama's campaign.

How might the US–Australia relationship be reset? Many of the dominant issues on the US strategic priority list are also of interest to Australia, so it would be merely sensible if Australian policy were aimed at maximizing the intersection of our interests and Obama's agenda; congruent interests are typically a more effective glue in international partnerships than traditions. But some nuances of differentiation might occur in the ordering of Washington's and Canberra's strategic priorities, with the latter more inclined than the former to prioritise Asia—especially the rise of the Asian great powers—and the need for a better regional security architecture there.

Some suggest that Obama will use the meeting to 'pop the question' of a larger Australian military commitment to Afghanistan. That's possible. As we noted above, the Middle East and Afghanistan are important priorities for Obama. And his theme of reinvigorating existing alliances, and seeking new partners to address contemporary challenges means such a request is certainly on the cards. But he has also previously stressed Afghanistan as a NATO challenge, and he might want to get the big part of the Afghanistan puzzle into place at the NATO summit before worrying much about Australia. The Americans know Australians are reflexive strategic extroverts: their real puzzle is how to draw more reluctant players into making more substantial contributions to global security.

Conclusion

We do not expect any early resolution of a question that has troubled the US since the end of the Cold War: how is the US best able to fulfill its role as global leader? Obama himself is a globalist and a visionary, but he is also cautious. Clearly, he wants to 'rebrand' US power and reset relationships in the wake of the Bush presidency, even though we do not yet see much evidence of a major shift in US strategic priorities.

The global economic crisis is now so entrenched that his handling of it seems likely to define his presidency, at least for the next four years. But it seems unlikely to be the only test he will face. Major geopolitical issues do not stop occurring simply because of economic crises: indeed, those issues might even be sharpened by the growing crisis. Australia has an opportunity to start the relationship off on the right foot; by talking about the big-picture challenges that now confront both the US and Australia, and by reassuring Washington of our own commitment to active partnership in a complex world.

Endnotes

- ¹ Barack Obama (2007), 'Renewing American leadership', *Foreign Affairs*, 86,4: 2-16, at 4.
- ² John Hillen (2004), 'The mechanics of empire', *Orbis*, Winter issue: 171-183.
- ³ Walter Russell Mead (2002), *Special providence: American foreign policy and how it changed the world* (New York: Routledge); Russell Weigley (1973), *The American Way of War: a history of United States military strategy and policy* (Indiana: Indiana University Press).
- ⁴ Colin Dueck (2004), 'Ideas and alternatives in American grand strategy, 2000-2004', *Review of International Studies*, 30: 511-535.
- ⁵ Dennis Blair (2009), 'Transcript', Hearing of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence: Annual Threat Assessment, Washington DC, 25 February: 8.
- ⁶ Barack Obama (2009), 'Inaugural address', Transcript, *New York Times*, 20 January.
- ⁷ Kurt Campbell, Nirav Patel, and Vikram Singh (2008), *The power of balance: America in Asia*, (Washington DC: Centre for a New American Security).
- ⁸ Kurt Campbell and Derek Chollet (2006-07), 'The new tribalism: cliques and the making of US foreign policy', *The Washington Quarterly*, 30, 1: 193-203.
- ⁹ Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier (2008), *America Between the Wars: from 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: Public Affairs): 318.

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