

US Strategy in the Global and Regional Context

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Every new president brings change to US foreign policy, but what is more remarkable is the essential continuity of US goals and interests across administrations, especially with regard to the Middle East. So it may not surprise you that I believe that we will see considerable continuity of US Middle East policies under the Obama administration, foremost among these, the unshakable US support for Israel and its security.

I am not a member of the Obama transition team, nor do I speak in any way for the president-elect, but I venture a prediction: the new administration will be just as strong in its support of Israel as have those of the recent past. Why do I say that? President-elect Obama had a strong, if short, record on Israel as a US senator. He made strong statements in support of Israel both during the campaign and after he was elected. He has appointed a strongly pro-Israel secretary of state in Hillary Clinton, and the same can be said about his chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel. Very importantly, Congress remains firmly supportive of Israel and its special relationship with the US, and all indications are that the new president is and will remain closely attuned to Congressional thinking. It is most unlikely that he would want to get out of step with Congressional Democrats regarding Israel. While I would anticipate differences in emphasis and approach from those of the Bush administration, I feel quite comfortable that the Obama administration will not reflexively adopt the Bush administration's mantra of eight years ago – namely, if the previous administration did it, we will change it.

A few thoughts regarding what US policy will and should look like. The principal threats to US interests – and consequently, the Obama

administration's goals – will likely remain constant. A recent report by the Brookings Institution's Managing Global Insecurity Project best summarizes these threats: "The 21st century will be defined by security threats unconstrained by borders – from climate change, nuclear proliferation, and terrorism to conflict, poverty, disease, and economic instability."²

I wish to focus on two of the more immediate challenges: the proliferation of terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Terrorist groups like al-Qaeda have the ambition to conduct mass terror, but so far not the means. Iran, however, the leading state sponsor of terrorism in the world today, may soon have both. Pakistan has at least four major terrorist groups operating within its borders, three different power centers, and a full nuclear weapons arsenal. A recent report of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission stated that if one were to map the geography of terrorism and WMD, all paths would lead to Pakistan. North Korea remains a serious concern, even if it has faded a bit from the spotlight as the Six-Party process has moved forward. Even during the Six-Party talks, North Korea apparently did not hesitate to jumpstart a nuclear weapons program in Syria. If those talks break down – and perhaps even if they don't – who can feel comfortable that North Korea would not willingly supply nuclear material and weapons technology to whoever will pay.

I'm encouraged by President-elect Obama's commitment to look at regional approaches and multilateral solutions to these issues. I am also very encouraged that the new president clearly understands the need for the United States to resuscitate its leadership role in global nuclear nonproliferation and arms control and disarmament. At the same time, I am convinced that Mr. Obama fully understands the strategic challenge that Iran presents to the international community as well as the unique nature of the threat it poses for Israel.

The war in Afghanistan and the problems in Pakistan are a good illustration of the interconnectedness of foreign policy and the need for a more regional, rather than nation-by-nation approach. Our Pakistan policy cannot be considered in isolation from our Afghanistan policy, or our India

1. Brookings Institution, "Managing Global Insecurity: A Plan for Action," http://fsi.stanford.edu/publications/managing_global_insecurity_a_plan_for_action/.

policy, for that matter. We have to find new ways to address the instability on both sides of a largely theoretical Afghan-Pakistan border.

It is time for Islamabad's rulers to realize that home-grown and home-supported terrorist groups are as much a danger to themselves as they are to India or Afghanistan. After 9/11, Saudi Arabia gradually came to this realization, and it began making progress in its domestic struggle with al-Qaeda; I hope Pakistan will do likewise. US policy will clearly require more accountability from Pakistan in its military operations on its side of the Afghan-Pakistan border and certainly regarding what it does with US financial and military assistance. I expect, and will push for, greater US efforts to promote more Pakistani counter-insurgency capability, instead of the US enabling more capability against India.

The interconnectedness of the terrorist world was made clear in Mumbai. The terrorists' motives reflect the ideological flow of extremist ideas between the Middle East and South Asia. This interconnectedness was symbolized by the purposeful attack on the Chabad House, tucked away on a small street and ideologically about as far as one could conceivably get from nationalist struggles between Pakistan and India.

As to the Middle East itself, our primary goals will not change much, though our methods and approach probably will. We will seek to deny Iran nuclear arms, but we will likely do so in part through dialogue. We will continue the focus on Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts that this administration began with Annapolis. We will continue to support moderate Arab leaders, such as Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad. We will likely continue to pursue political liberalization in the Arab world, but with less fanfare and more caution than did the previous administration.

As chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, my overwhelming priority is Iran. Many American leaders, including President-elect Barack Obama, have called the prospect that Iran will develop or acquire nuclear arms "unacceptable." The president-elect in fact has said he "will not allow" this to happen. That is the right perspective, but we will have to move at warp speed if we are to succeed at preventing Iran from going nuclear.

Because our current approach is on a trajectory to failure, the US – with or without its partners – should engage Iran in dialogue, but this dialogue should be of limited duration, say, eight to twelve weeks, unless Iran

complies with the demand of the international community that it suspend its uranium enrichment program. And even if dialogue fails, I believe the effort will have been worthwhile, for we will have significantly boosted our international support for whatever course we choose to follow next.

We have no time to lose. We should not wait for the Iranian elections before embarking on this effort. Sequencing is important here. Prior to dialogue, the US, with single-minded focus, should attempt to secure the support of its P5+1 partners for a program of crippling sanctions should the talks fail. Should that prove impossible, the US would have to seek to organize a joint sanctions effort coordinated with at least several of Iran's key economic partners, including France, Italy, Germany, and India. Throughout the duration of these sanctions efforts and of dialogue with Iran, the military option must remain on the table.

The Saban Center recently produced a report that raises the prospect of a "US nuclear umbrella" for Israel or for the wider region. As widely understood, this means in effect a US declaration that an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel would be met with a devastating nuclear attack on Iran by the US. I have no idea if the Obama team is considering such a declaration, as reported in the Israeli press last week, but this concept raises a number of questions: Would it be wise for the US to make such a declaration? Would it be a credible threat and an effective deterrent? Is the mere discussion of this idea defeatist, an acknowledgment to the world that we have lost hope of preventing Iran from becoming nuclear arms-capable? What about the idea suggested by then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton that not only Israel, but all the US's Arab friends should be gathered under this umbrella? Would a "non-nuclear umbrella" provide deterrence? These questions deserve deliberation.

I would urge the Obama administration to give Iran the highest priority in all its bilateral relations. In the case of Russia in particular, it is critical that we establish a set of priorities to guide our relations. Iran should be at the top of that list of priorities. In my view, that is far more important for US national interests than the pace of new missile defense emplacements in Eastern Europe or rapid expansion of NATO.

As for the Congress, we will work closely with President Obama in developing the appropriate urgent approach to the Iranian nuclear program. We will stand ready to provide legislative backing for the administration's

efforts, whether through stricter sanctions laws, resolutions embodying statements of national policy, or incentives for Iranian good behavior.

The unique partnership – the “special relationship” – between the US and Israel will remain intact. I believe the assistance levels foreseen in last year’s Memorandum of Understanding will be fully realized. When candidate Obama spoke of his “strong commitment to make sure that the bond between the United States and Israel is unbreakable today, tomorrow, and forever,” I believe he means it. At the same time, I am quite sure that he will vigorously pursue peace efforts between Israel and the Palestinians, and Israel’s responsiveness to those efforts will be an important factor affecting the tone and substance of bilateral relations.

Regarding the Palestinian territories, the new administration will quite likely continue some of the policies started by this administration – the effort to train and equip Palestinian security forces, the effort to isolate Hamas, the improvement of governance and economic conditions on the ground for the West Bank. The emphasis on dismantling unauthorized outposts, restricting growth of settlements, and enhancing access and freedom of movement on the West Bank may well be greater than it has been under the Bush administration. I believe the new administration will also press wealthy Arab states to contribute far more than the meager amounts they generally have thus far.

One of the issues that have never been addressed adequately in the peace process is incitement to hatred and violence. I think we need to start with textbooks. Palestinian textbooks will reflect a Palestinian view of history, but they should not project gratuitous hatred of Israelis and Jews. I think the international community needs to support a review of Palestinian textbooks and be willing to support the development of new ones.

As for Syria, I expect the new administration to probe whether intensified diplomatic engagement with Damascus can succeed in driving a wedge deep into the Syrian-Iranian alliance and erode the Asad regime’s support for Hizbollah and Hamas. I also anticipate that the administration will explore the prospects for Israeli-Syrian peace, although this will depend significantly on the attitude of the new Israeli government.

In no way have I attempted to provide a comprehensive review of expected foreign policy initiatives of the new administration. For example, I cannot imagine an Obama administration not bringing new ideas and

policies to the table on genocidal violence in Darfur, conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, or the despotic and cruel governance in Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Latin America will also get new attention.

In pursuing our national interests and a better, safer world, there is one factor I cannot quantify or calculate. Does the international response to Barack Obama's election, its historical nature, the excitement and goodwill that it has engendered, combined with the President-elect's intellect, discipline, and manner and the quality of his foreign policy/national security team, enhance our ability to achieve our very daunting set of foreign policy challenges?

The Obama administration and all of us who have foreign policy responsibilities will face a remarkably difficult set of challenges on January 20. With the help of our friends, we will have to choose wisely, for the lives of our citizens, and those of our friends, will depend on our doing so.