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What's Different About the Obama Foreign Policy?

The continuities with Bush are striking. But what happens when diplomacy fails?

By [ELIOT COHEN](#)

President Barack Obama has put some miles on Air Force One. He and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have made major foreign policy speeches. The national security team is in place. It's time to make a preliminary judgment about Mr. Obama and the world. Just how different is this administration's foreign policy from its predecessor? And will such departures where they exist make much difference?

Set aside the administration's conceit of "smart power," since only fools (read: Team Obama's predecessors) would prefer stupid power. Continuity is the dominant note.

The Iraq drawdown moves more quickly and definitively than the Bush administration had desired, but it is not the repudiation the folks from MoveOn.org desired. The Bush-appointed Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and his Bush-promoted generals have implemented a build-up in Afghanistan that began in the last years of the previous administration. Strikes within Pakistan from unmanned aerial vehicles continue, and the administration reassuringly laces its rhetoric about al Qaeda with words like "eliminate," "destroy" and "kill."

Relationships with Europe have warmed. But that defrosting also began in the last years of the Bush administration, as it secured an increase in French forces in Afghanistan while easing that country's re-entry into NATO, and backed a European-led response to the Russian invasion of Georgia.

Middle East peace process? Sure. Special envoys instead of large peace conferences, but the idea is the same.

Multinational diplomacy? Continuity there too, judging by the stacks of ineffective U.N. resolutions on North Korea and Iran.

Increased emphasis on foreign aid? We will see if the Obama administration can top the large and effective AIDS relief effort in Africa launched by President George W. Bush.

The rhetoric about the core of American foreign policy also remains consistent. Consider Mrs. Clinton's recent speech at the Council on Foreign Relations. "The question is not whether our nation can or should lead, but how it will lead in the 21st century." Not much bashfulness about American pre-eminence there. "We will not hesitate to defend our friends, our interests, and above all, our people vigorously and when necessary with the world's strongest military." Suspiciously muscular. And what animates the whole? "Liberty, democracy, justice and opportunity underlie our priorities." Hardly Metternichean realism at work.

As for modesty about what America can do, Mrs. Clinton said this: "More than 230 years ago, Thomas Paine said, 'We have it within our power to start the world over again.' Today, in a new and very different era, we are called upon to use that power." Sentiments to make an unrepentant neoconservative blush.

A few differences, however, do stand out. Mr. Obama has pledged to close Gitmo, once he figures out what to do with

the enemy combatants detained there. Whereas the Bush administration only grudgingly accepted the perils of climate change, preferring the invisible hand of high energy prices and entrepreneurial innovation to combat it, the Obama administration has embraced cap and trade, with windfalls to favored clients and hidden taxes galore. It remains to be seen how Team Obama will bring the burgeoning Indian and Chinese economies, with their vast production of carbon, into a system of controls.

The Obama administration has shunned a free trade agreement with a critical democratic ally, Colombia, out of deference to its union constituencies—even as it tries to mend fences with Hugo Chávez's Venezuela. It decided to begin its Middle East peacemaking by picking a gratuitous fight with another close ally, Israel.

It has also committed itself to the fantastic notion of abolishing nuclear weapons. It took the first step along that path to nowhere by starting an arms control process with Russia, without any evidence that doing so would produce Russian cooperation on anything at all, although it would further degrade America's nuclear arsenal.

Mostly, though, the underlying structure of the policy remains the same. Nor should this surprise us: The United States has interests dictated by its physical location, its economy, its alliances, and above all, its values. Naive realists, a large tribe, fail to understand that ideals will inevitably guide American foreign policy, even if they do not always determine it. Moreover, because the Obama foreign and defense policy senior team consists of centrist experts from the Democratic Party, it is unlikely to make radically different judgments about the world, and about American interests in it, than its predecessors.

Differences in the execution of policy, however, make all the difference. Take, for example, outreach to Iran.

The Bush administration mulled this, and even tried it, diplomats warily meeting Iranians in various venues. But when Mr. Obama said to the leaders of Iran and other despotisms, "We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist" he did not expect to find the Supreme Leader's paws sticky with the blood of freshly slaughtered protestors. Remarkably, rather than adjust the policy, the administration almost immediately released five Iranian "diplomats"—in truth, members of the Revolutionary Guard Corps—that we held in Iraq.

The Iranian policy shows a faith in diplomacy that might be understandable coming from process-obsessed diplomats who live for *démarches*, talking points, working groups, back channels, dialogues and summits.

But this policy will soon encounter the reality, a looming choice between war with Iran or acceptance of its status as a nuclear power. Is the administration prepared to act if diplomacy fails, as so often it does?

The confidence in diplomacy reflects a deeper theme here, namely, the repudiation of the Bush era. Even as stubborn facts cause the administration to claim many of the same executive privileges (e.g., a proper secrecy about some CIA activities) as its predecessor, and continue or expand the same policies, it suffers from its desire to be un-Bush.

Believing (incorrectly) that the Bush administration did not do diplomacy, it does so promiscuously, complete with such tomfoolery as a misspelled reset button given to the Russian foreign minister. Abhorring Bush's freedom agenda, it will avoid anything of the kind until, of course, being Americans, the president, the vice president or the secretary of state blurt out their faith in universal ideals, and their indignation at the behavior of thugs, dictators and tyrants.

The biggest difference between the Obama and Bush administrations, though, is Messrs. Obama and Bush, or rather, their images at home and abroad. Mr. Obama is popular, and he dominates American foreign policy.

Brimming with confidence in his abilities and certain of the rightness of his views, he has undertaken a wildly ambitious agenda at home and abroad. He will bring peace between Arab and Israeli, wean Iran from its nuclear ambitions, restructure the international financial system, set us on the path to the abolition of nuclear weapons, reconcile Islam and Christendom, and end global warming, while introducing universal health care at home and bringing the country out of the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Lord Salisbury, British prime minister and foreign secretary in the last years of the 19th century, famously defined foreign policy as the art of drifting "lazily down a stream occasionally putting out a diplomatic boat-hook to avoid collisions." This does not suit our times. But the patter of applause from a press whose sycophancy would embarrass a Renaissance court should not hide the dangers inherent in Mr. Obama's style, which is characterized by an easy

assumption of foreign policy omniscience and omnicompetence.

Some of his ambitions will come crashing into ruin, and surely ghastly surprises lie athwart our path. The Bush administration, many of its critics said, fell victim to hubris, the fatal arrogance punished, according to the ancients, by the goddess Nemesis. The Greeks would understand the irony if we discovered that cold-eyed lady, always hovering closer than politicians realize, turning an increasingly disapproving gaze on today's White House.

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