Change, continuity, or both?

Taking stock of Obama's first-year foreign policy

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fter campaigning on promises to withdraw from Iraq, "finish the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan," build a diplomatic coalition against nuclear proliferation, "curb Russian aggression," and stand up for "the blogger in Iran," President Barack Obama has learned that conducting US foreign policy is more difficult than simply critiquing it (Obama, 2008, August 28; Obama, 2008, July 24).

Has his on-the-job training yielded a year of change or continuity—or a little of both?

Continuity

There is a surprising amount of continuity between Obama and his predecessor in several key foreign-policy areas. This is partly the result of major adjustments after George W. Bush's first term which led to mild successes at the end of Bush's second term.

For example, the Bush administration's revamped counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq brought about a more stable security environment¹ and enabled Bush to begin the drawdown that Obama promised.

Stability in Iraq (i.e., reductions in civilian casualties and attacks on coalition forces) also allowed Washington to refocus on the growing problems in Afghanistan and Pakistan (commonly referred to as "AfPak"). The drone strikes in the AfPak theatre, for example, began under Bush and have intensified under Obama. In addition, we now know that the AfPak plan announced by the Obama administration in March 2009, which featured more troops and a sharper focus on counterinsurgency, was largely developed in the final months of the Bush administration and handed off to Obama's national security team (Cheney, 2009, Oct. 21). Even after months of deliberation last autumn, Obama's re-review of that plan did not change much about the policy.

Moreover, the insurgency in Iraq and the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan had a constraining effect on the Bush administration's capacity to apply its post-9/11 doctrine of regime change and preventive war in other problem states, such as Syria, Iran, and North Korea. As a result, the Bush administration relied on diplomatic avenues² in its second term, which is what Obama promised to do as president (see, for example, Saine, 2008, Nov. 14).

Another important reason for continuity in the related areas of foreign policy and defence policy flows from the simple fact that Obama hired Bush's defence secretary, Robert Gates, who carried out the surge strategy in Iraq and helped plan the revised mission for AfPak. Defence spending has continued apace. The Bush administration's last defence budget was \$578 billion. The Obama administration's first defence budget was \$636 billion (Boles, 2009, Dec. 16).

In addition, Obama chose a relatively hawkish secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, who supported the Iraq

war as a senator and talked tough on Iran as a presidential candidate.

Continuity was also forced upon the Obama administration by the behaviour of certain regimes.

North Korea, for instance, tested a nuclear weapon and long-range missiles during Obama's first year in office, just as it had during the Bush administration. As a result, the new administration could not easily engage in the promised one-on-one talks with no preconditions.

Likewise, Iran remained defiant, flouting appeals from the International Atomic Energy Agency to verify that its nuclear program is not being used to develop nuclear weapons. When evidence of a secret Iranian nuclear-fuel manufacturing plant came to light in September 2009, French president Nicolas Sarkozy challenged Obama to get serious. Obliquely dismissing the young president's "dream of a world without nuclear weapons," Sarkozy reminded Obama that "we live in a real world, not a virtual world" (Sarkozy, 2009). He then detailed the growing dangers in the real world:

Since 2005, Iran has violated five Security Council resolutions ... An offer of dialogue was made in 2005, an offer of dialogue was made in 2006, an offer of dialogue was made in 2007, an offer of dialogue was made in 2008, and another one was made in 2009 ... What did the international community gain from these offers of dialogue? Nothing. More enriched uranium, more centrifuges ... There comes a time when facts are stubborn and decisions must be made.

In short, it appears that Sarkozy's tough talk on Tehran, Iran's brutal response to the so-called "Twitter Revolution" that shook the Islamic Republic in 2009, and the regime's defiance on the nuclear issue may have forced Obama to deviate from his plan of diplomatic engagement without any preconditions. Indeed, Obama himself conceded during his 2010 State of the Union address that "the Islamic Republic of Iran is more isolated" (Obama, 2010).

Change

To the extent that there has been change in US foreign policy, it has largely been rhetorical and stylistic, which is not insignificant. How a president says something can be as important as what he says.

During his inauguration, Obama vowed to embrace "the tempering qualities of humility and restraint"

(Obama, 2009a), and he has conveyed this in his use of the spoken word.

Where Bush sought to isolate and in some cases punish rogue regimes, Obama promises engagement. "Condemnation without discussion," he says, "can carry forward only a crippling status quo. No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door" (Obama, 2009d). To be sure, events have largely forced Obama to keep engagement in the realm of rhetoric for now, as noted above, but Obama wants to offer the "open door" to regimes that have been shut out.

Where Bush used the phrase "war on terror" routinely, the Obama administration has made a concerted effort to expunge the "war on terror" phraseology from official pronouncements. Federal agencies are using the banal "overseas contingency operations" instead (Wilson and Kamen, 2009, Mar. 25).

Where Bush was caricatured as waging a war against Islam, Obama has gone to great lengths to promise "a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world" (Obama, 2009c).

Whether or not this change in style and tone will yield tangible policy benefits remains to be seen, but it appears to have contributed to a change in global attitudes towards America, which can have a salutary effect. Opinion of the United States has gone up around the world: in Canada from 55% favourable in 2007 to 68% in 2009; in Britain from 51% to 69%; in France from 39% to 75%; in China from 34% to 47%; and in India from 59% to 76% (Pew Research Center, 2009).

To be sure, there have been some genuine changes on the foreign policy front, the most significant of which have affected America and its allies.

For instance, Obama does not seem to share the protrade predisposition of the Bush administration.

The president's stimulus package—the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)—included "Buy American" provisions that raised concerns in Canada, Europe, and Japan. Although fears of a full-blown trade war were initially tempered by a compromise that kept the "Buy American" language but added an important caveat requiring that the measures be "applied in a manner consistent with US obligations under international agreements" (Reuters, 2009, Feb. 12), problems persist.

As the *Washington Post* reports, one provision requiring the use of US steel and iron in ARRA projects has negatively impacted Canadian companies (Shin, 2009, Aug. 11). When an Ontario-based water-treatment

company was blocked from bidding on an ARRA project, cities in the province passed measures promising to block US-based companies from bidding on projects north of the border (Shin, 2009, Aug. 11).

In addition, US trade agreements with South Korea, Panama, and Colombia have stalled. Obama reportedly told South Korean officials that "we have a lot of work to do" before the languishing free trade deal can move forward (Glionna and Nicholas, 2009, Nov. 19). And Commerce Secretary Gary Locke bluntly noted last November that "trade agreements are going to have to wait," conceding that "the administration is focused on a very aggressive and very tight legislative agenda" (Kennedy, 2009, Nov. 13).

In Europe, Obama has tried to "reset" the US-Russia relationship. Not coincidentally, he scrapped Bush-era plans for a permanent ground-based defence against missile threats—plans that had been endorsed by NATO and host governments in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Of course, those plans angered the Russian government. Hence, when Obama announced his scaled-back approach to missile defence, the expectation was that Moscow would respond with a concession of its own. Instead, Dmitry Rogozin, the Russian ambassador to NATO, declared, "The Americans have simply corrected their own mistake. And we are not duty-bound to pay someone for putting their own mistakes right" (Pan, 2009, Sep. 18).

Both continuity and change

Finally, at the intersection of foreign policy, national security, and domestic policy, Obama ordered the closure of the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay (commonly known as "Gitmo"). Yet even this policy change highlights the continuity between Bush and Obama, albeit in an unintended way.

Obama's decision was welcomed overseas, but those being held at Gitmo were not. Although the European Parliament passed a measure calling on EU members "to be prepared to accept Guantanamo inmates," individual European countries are not jumping at the chance to open their borders to Gitmo's residents (European Parliament, 2009).

The Dutch government refuses to accept any Gitmo inmates, while a Czech official argues that the Gitmo headache "is primarily a US responsibility" (Donahue and Neuger, 2009, Jan. 26; European Parliament, 2009). The British foreign secretary says his country has "already

made a significant contribution to the closure of Guantanamo" (Donahue and Neuger, 2009, Jan. 26).

The American people oppose the plan to shut down Gitmo and move the detainees into the United States by a two-to-one margin (Jones, 2009)—and understandably so. Of the 198 detainees at the facility, the Pentagon says dozens should not be released due to the danger they pose to US interests (Morgan, 2009, Jan. 13).

Moreover, of the approximately 800 detainees that have cycled through Gitmo since 2002, at least 61 have returned to their jihad (Morgan, 2009, Jan. 13). In fact, one former Gitmo inmate is now second in command of al Qaeda in Yemen (Worth, 2009, Jan. 22). That branch of al Qaeda has been very active recently—the failed Nigerian airline bomber was trained by Yeminis—so active that Obama recently suspended the transfer of Gitmo detainees to Yemen.

It was on January 22, 2009, two days into his presidency, that Obama issued his directive to close the Gitmo detention facility "no later than one year from the date of this order" (Obama, 2009b). However, Gitmo is still holding dozens of suspected terrorists, just as it was during the Bush administration—yet another indication that there has been more continuity with the previous administration's foreign policy than Obama's supporters expected and less change than his opponents feared.

Notes

1 Increasing levels of stability in Iraq are documented in the Brookings Institution's Iraq Index. See http://www.brook- ings.edu/saban/iraq-index.aspx>.

2 The clearest example of this is the Bush administration's approach to Iran during its second term, which was characterized by its allowing the Europeans to pursue the so-called "diplomatic track" rather than confronting Iran in a manner similar to the way Iraq was confronted in 2003.

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