Sieps
Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies

European Policy Analysis
JANUARY · ISSUE 1-2009

John K. Glenn[1]

Foreign Policy Challenges for the Obama Administration

Abstract

This European Policy Analysis reviews the foreign policy challenges for the new U.S. administration. President Barack Obama faces a formidable set of international challenges including wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the prospect of a nuclear Iran, a resurgent Russia, and a short calendar for a new treaty on climate change. On each of these issues, Europeans have the potential to play a key role as allies. President Obama has called for the mending of relations with Europeans, but the ability of the United States and Europe to address these pressing foreign policy challenges will be constrained by the financial and economic crisis. This analysis will review the Obama administration's vision for foreign policy and analyze the major challenges on the foreign policy agenda, considering opportunities for U.S.-European engagement and looking ahead to prospects for the future.

1. Introduction

In the past eight years, the image of the United States abroad has declined sharply, with deep disagreements over the war in Iraq, allegations of secret CIA prisons in Europe, and concerns about human rights violations in the U.S. detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. For example, according to the Transatlantic Trends survey, while 64% of Europeans viewed U.S. global leadership as "desirable" in 2002, only 36% of Europeans viewed U.S. leadership as "desirable" in 2008 and 59% viewed it as "undesirable."[2] It is perhaps unsurprising then that Senator Barack Obama campaigned for U.S. president on the pledge "to secure America andrestore our standing" in the world [3].

Seventy-three per cent of Americans reported a favorable opinion of President Barack Obama on the eve of his inauguration[4], and he will need this enthusiasm to handle a daunting list of foreign policy challenges including wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the prospect of a nuclear Iran, a resurgent Russia, and a very short calendar for a new treaty on climate change. Given the current financial crisis, it seems certain that Obama will try to focus on the economy at the beginning of his administration, but foreign policy challenges are unlikely to wait until the economy has recovered.

---

[1] John K. Glenn is Director of Foreign Policy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Please direct all correspondence by e-mail, jglenn@gmfus.org.

[2] Transatlantic Trends is a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Compagnia di San Paolo, with additional support from the Fundação Luso-Americana, Fundación BBVA, and the Tipping Point Foundation. The survey is based on a representative sample of public opinion of 1,000 people in the United States and twelve European countries: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. For results based on the national samples in each of the 13 countries surveyed, one can say with a 95% confidence that the margin of error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus three percentage points. For results based on the total European sample, the margin of error is plus or minus one percentage point. Europe-wide figures are weighted on the basis of the size of the adult population in each country.

[3] Material for Obama's stances on foreign policy challenges is drawn, unless otherwise attributed, from the official website, www.barackobama.com.

[4] http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2008/president/us/obama_favorableunfavorable-643.html

2. The national context

President Obama has underscored his approach to foreign policy with the argument that the United States cannot solve current challenges by itself, that "in the twenty-first century, our destiny is shared with the worlds, from our markets to our security." He has called for combining anew the tools of hard and soft power, mending relations with allies, and redressing the decline in the image of the United States abroad. When introducing his national security team, he indicated he would pursue "a new strategy that skillfully uses, balances, and integrates all elements of American power, our military and diplomacy, our intelligence and law enforcement, our economy and the power of our moral example." This approach has been associated with the concept of so-called "smart power," a phrase repeated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her Senate confirmation hearings, which seeks to complement U.S. military and economic power with investments in public diplomacy and development. [5]

How much of a change in U.S. foreign policy will this represent? Many Europeans and left-leaning Americans seem to hope that Obama will be a kind of "anti-Bush," and, rather than acting unilaterally and preferring military solutions, he will act multilaterally and prefer diplomacy. Others, by contrast, predict a reinvigorated hawkishness by the Democrats as part of an effort to be strong on defense, caricatured by William Safire as "invade and bomb with Hillary and Rahm." [6]

Obama's selection of his national security team suggests that neither those who hope for left leaning multilateralism nor those who expect right leaning hawks are correct. The nominations of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, James Jones as National Security Advisor, and Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense have widely been seen as a sign of a centrist foreign policy. Despite policy differences among them in the past, none of these individuals bring to the job national security philosophies or doctrines that could be expected to clash. Rather they are seen as likely to pursue pragmatic solutions to foreign policy challenges. In her testimony for her Senate confirmation hearings, Senator Clinton declared, "foreign policy must be based on a marriage of principles and pragmatism, not rigid ideology, on facts and evidence, not emotion or prejudice."

Questions have been raised about how President Obama will manage a national security of strong personalities who have expressed policy disagreements in the past (often referred to as a "team of rivals," a term historian Doris Kearns Goodwin used to describe President Lincoln's cabinet of former-challengers). While it remains to be seen how smoothly the national security team will work together, it would be unrealistic to expect the absence of conflict, given the history of differences within presidential cabinets of both parties. The question is rather whether the inevitable disagreements will be managed well or not. Some have suggested that, rather than a team with a unified view or doctrine, it may be better to understand them as a "functional" team with differentiated responsibilities, with Secretary Gates responsible for managing Iraq and Afghanistan, General Jones for managing relations with the military, and Secretary Clinton for U.S. diplomacy.

3. Foreign Policy Challenges

In his inaugural address, President Obama identified the main United States foreign policy priorities at the outset of his term, saying his administration will "begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan" and "work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat and roll back the specter of a warming planet." Each of these foreign policy challenges merit deeper discussion than this paper can provide, and indeed have been the subject of numerous policy briefs in their own right. In the sections that follow, this paper will review these issues in light of the prospects for transatlantic cooperation and scenarios for the future, highlighting significant questions and uncertainties that remain.

3.1. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

The war in Iraq has been and will likely continue to be the top foreign policy issue in the United States, an issue that has been notably absent from the transatlantic agenda in recent years. Violence, measured in Iraqi civilian and U.S. troop deaths, fell significantly in Iraq following the "surge" adopted by President Bush in the summer of 2008, but these security gains remain fragile and the central government is weak. Nonetheless, the Iraqi parliament ratified a Status of Forces agreement on November 27, 2008 that lays out the terms for an end to U.S. involvement in Iraq, setting a date of 2011 by which American soldiers must have left Iraq, and Iraq formally assumed control over the Green Zone in Bagdad in January 2009.

The situation in Afghanistan, by contrast, has deteriorated in recent months. Violent attacks have risen, the Karzai government appears corrupt and ineffective, and little has been done to address the issues of poppy production and narcotics. Serious concerns have been raised about its border with Pakistan where insurgents are mobilizing for attacks, at a time when the ability of Pakistan's new civilian government to control terrorist

[5] See the Center for Strategic and International Studies Commission on Smart Power, co-chaired by Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye, http://www.csis.org/smartpower/

[6] http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/14/magazine/14wwln-safire-t.html, referring to Hillary Clinton and Rahm Emanuel, President Obama's chief of staff.

groups inside its borders, or even possibly its own nuclear weapons, appears uncertain.

President Obama argued as candidate for president that the "decision to invade Iraq diverted resources from the war in Afghanistan," which he asserted is the central battleground for dealing with international terrorism. Contrary to President Bush and Senator John McCain's plans to maintain troop levels, Obama declared his intention to begin a "responsible and phased" withdrawal of American combat troops intended to create opportunities for Iraqis to take control of their country and to make the necessary political compromises for the future. On the second day of his presidency, President Obama met with his Iraq advisors and ordered them to begin planning for U.S. troop withdrawals.

President Obama has called for a gradual redeployment of up to 30,000 U.S. forces from Iraq to Afghanistan to improve security, highlighting the need for a regional solution involving Pakistan and India. Obama has argued that an increase in troops alone will not solve the challenges in Afghanistan but may stabilize the situation to permit a reformulation of strategy. Both Secretary Gates and National Security Advisor Jones bring extensive experience on Afghanistan from their positions during the Bush administration. Jones served as NATO commander when it took over the coalition of international forces in Afghanistan in 2003 and last year chaired an Atlantic Council report that declared "the international community is not winning in Afghanistan."

While seventeen of the EU's 27 member states have participated in the mission in Iraq, many of Washington's strongest allies have drawn down their troops including Poland, which withdrew its last troops in 2008, and the United Kingdom, where Gordon Brown has called for a removal of all troops by 2010. Europeans have been engaged in Afghanistan since the overthrow of the Taliban, but there have been repeated conflicts over strategy, prompting Defense Secretary Robert Gates to worry that some Europeans have conflated the two missions and fail to recognize their own national interests in stabilization in Afghanistan.[7] While a "comprehensive approach" that integrates reconstruction and combat is the official policy of NATO, European public debate has tended to emphasize a dichotomy between an opposition to military force and support for economic reconstruction. For example, while 64% of Europeans supported their participation in reconstruction efforts, only 30% supported committing their countries' troops to combat the Taliban. Americans by contrast were supportive of both reconstruction and combating the Taliban.[8]

Differences over strategy in Afghanistan have raised questions about burden sharing among NATO members, with Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom expressing concerns that their troops are bearing the brunt of casualties while others maintain caveats on military engagement. In his speech as a presidential candidate in Berlin in the summer of 2008, Obama stated clearly that he would expect more from Europeans, that the "Afghan people need our troops and your troops, our support and your support to defeat the Taliban and al Qaeda, to develop their economy, and to help them rebuild their nation."

How will Europeans respond to calls from the new U.S. administration for increased contributions in the region? While France has stated it will re-join the military wing of NATO and sent 700 additional troops to the region, German politicians have repeatedly expressed reservations about increasing troop commitments in advance of parliamentary elections in September 2009. Public opinion highlights the need for a renewed debate on Afghanistan that changes the perception that countries can choose between supporting combat or economic reconstruction. President Obama and European leaders need to draw on expert consensus in the field to build public support for a comprehensive approach that integrates both aspects of stabilization.

One of the key questions is whether the recent security gains in Iraq will lead to greater political stability, permitting the planned peaceful reduction of U.S. forces as President Obama envisions. At the same time, while few dispute the need for greater security in Afghanistan, others warn that an escalation of troops have a counterproductive result and lead to greater disaffection among an Afghan population already cynical about the Karzai government. Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan has no history of central authority and it remains unclear what form stabilization and reconstruction will take.

3.2. The prospect of a nuclear Iran

An Iran with nuclear weapons has been described as unacceptable and unavoidable, raising difficult questions about the policy options available to President Obama and the international community. Despite vast energy reserves, Iran has built a program for the enrichment of uranium which it states it needs to provide peaceful nuclear power for its citizens. Emboldened by instability in Iraq, its traditional rival in the region, Iran has refused to accept international observers for a verifiable accounting of its nuclear program. Debate about the prospects for a nuclear Iran were strongly influenced by a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate in 2007 asserted that Iran had discontinued a program for building a nuclear bomb in 2003, but Iranian President Ahmadinejad has continued to display Iran's progress in uranium enrichment that could produce weapons grade material. Experts now estimate it may be one year away from being able to produce a nuclear bomb.

---

[7] "Gates Presses Europeans to Back Afghan Mission," Deutsche-Welle, February 9, 2008.

[8] Transatlantic Trends 2007.

The Bush administration, after refusing to negotiate with Iran at the start of its presidency, began to cooperate with the EU-3 led by France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in 2006 in pressing for sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council. Although it continued to insist that Iran halt its nuclear program before the United States participate in negotiations, the Bush administration eventually sent Under Secretary of State William Burns to attend a meeting of the EU-3 and Iran in Geneva in 2008. Despite occasional European concerns about a possible U.S. military strike against Iran in recent years, Defense Secretary Robert Gates repeatedly declared that a military strike was not under consideration and there is no evidence of U.S. actions to prepare for such a strike. Rather, the United States has emphasized the need for European banks and the private sector to restrict trade and financial investments in Iran.

President Obama declared that he will pursue a policy of engagement, that he is willing to negotiate with Iran without preconditions and believes that the international community has not exhausted its non-military options in dealing with Iran. Negotiations with Iran would aim to reach a "comprehensive settlement" whereby, in exchange for promises to forego its nuclear program, the United States would consider restoring diplomatic relations with Iran, economic investments, and Iran's membership in international organizations such as the WTO.

Will Iran accept such a bargain if negotiated directly with the United States, and what will President Obama do if negotiations fail? Iran's presidential election in June may mean that it is not likely to be predisposed towards such a bargain in the coming year. Differences remain between Americans and Europeans about what to do if negotiations should fail. When asked which strategy they would most favor to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons should diplomatic efforts fail, 47% of Europeans felt diplomatic pressure should be increased but the option of military force should be ruled out, while 49% of Americans felt diplomatic pressure should be increased and the option of military force should be kept on the table.[9] This gap may be the result of differences in understandings of diplomacy, but it highlights the difficult nature of renewed engagement in the wake of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

3.3. A resurgent Russia

Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 crystallized a growing perception that Russia was becoming more willing to assert itself in the international arena without concern for international approval. The Western response highlighted the limited options available for influencing Russia, which continued to consolidate its position as the key energy supplier for Europe. The financial crisis in fall 2008 has altered the policy terrain for dealing with Russia, although the precise nature of the impact remains uncertain. Its economic power appears to have weakened along with the dramatic fall in oil prices and drop in share prices in Russia companies, even as Russia continues to be a key player on challenges such as nuclear proliferation in North Korea and Iran through its veto on the UN Security Council.

President Obama has been critical of Russia's recent actions, asserting a commitment to territorial sovereignty with reference to Georgia and qualified support of the missile defense program. Yet he has also asserted, "Russia today is not the Soviet Union, and we are not returning to the Cold War," and called for an approach that recognizes the multi-faced nature of the U.S. relationship with Russia. This would involve balancing criticism of Russia's aggressive actions with direct engagement on issues of mutual interest such as nuclear non-proliferation.

The American and European publics appear to share concerns about Russia, with majorities expressing concerns about Russia's role in the Middle East, Russia's behavior towards its neighbors, and Russia's role as an energy provider.[10] Yet Russia may be an area where transatlantic perceptions are likely to diverge, given differences in economic dependence upon Russia. German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, for example, recently called on President Obama in an open letter to "take Russia's President Medvedev at his word" about his desire for a new cooperation, a stance greeted by some in the United States with skepticism in light of the perception that Vladimir Putin remains the central authority figure in today's Russia.[11]

What impact will the financial crisis have upon Russia's ambitions? Russia's declining economic power could lead it to become less confrontational, seeking investment from the West to compensate for its declining stock market and cash reserves, or it could lead Russia to become even more aggressive, using the West as an external enemy to justify aggressive, even isolationist policies. Early signs suggest little evidence of a similar Russian willingness to cooperate with the West, even as Venezuela, for example, appears to be moving away from threats of nationalizing foreign investments to what the New York Times has called "quietly courting Western oil companies once again."[12] President Medvedev's speech on the day following the U.S. presidential election in November called for NATO to retreat from its plans for enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia, as well as the missile defense system in East Central Europe.

How will European energy dependence shape its policies toward Russia? The options for diversifying sources of

[9] Transatlantic Trends 2008.
[10] Transatlantic Trends 2008.
[11] http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,600721-2,00.html
[12] http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/world/americas/15venez.html?hp

energy for Europe remain in the medium to long term, and Russia's halting of gas delivery to Ukraine in January this year suggests that it has not grown less willing to exploit European energy dependence. President Obama and European leaders have been encouraged to engage Russia on new treaties to replace the expiring Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty with the aim of reducing the perception of confrontation.

3.4. A new climate treaty for Copenhagen

The United States' withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change was one of the key issues in the rift in transatlantic relations under the Bush administration, which challenged the premise of climate change in its early years. While the Bush administration remained opposed to mandatory emissions reduction targets, public debate in the United States shifted over the course of the Bush presidency to reflect consensus on the need for change, shaped in part by the disaster following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and both candidates for U.S. president called for progress on addressing climate change in the 2008 elections. Although some EU members have been criticized for failing to meet their commitments on climate change in recent years, the European Union secured agreement in December 2008 to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 20% of 1990 levels by 2020, an agreement reached through a compromise addressing concerns about the costs for European heavy industry and new member states dependent on coal. The prospects for a new treaty were launched at the 2007 Bali climate summit, in which the Bush administration participated and which called for a new treaty to be negotiated by the end of 2009 at a summit to be held in Copenhagen.

President Obama has vowed to "make the U.S. a leader on climate change," declaring that "delay is no longer an option."[13] He has called for an economy-wide cap and trade program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 80% below 1990 levels in 2050 and linked his economic plan to the creation of new "green" jobs in the energy sector. The calendar however will be tight for managing a new treaty in Copenhagen, even if he wishes to move quickly. At this point it is unclear how quickly his climate team will be ready to work on a new treaty which must be approved by the United States Senate under the U.S. Constitution. For President Obama to make commitments on a new treaty in Copenhagen, he will first need to secure legislation in Congress that sets limits and goals for reducing emissions. It remains uncertain whether an eventual agreement on reduction of emissions at the national level will match commitments that have already been made by states such as California. While the Democrats hold a majority in the U.S. Senate, they do not have the 67 votes needed to approve a treaty.

Concerns about energy security and the financial crisis create additional pressures upon negotiating a new treaty involving measures involving higher costs for industry which lawmakers may be reluctant to endorse in an economic downturn. Questions about economic competitiveness will be raised not only in the United States or Europe but also among developing countries like Brazil, China, and India, whose participation will be central to the prospects for a new treaty. There is widespread agreement on the need for policies to help developing economies meet emissions reductions targets, including aid for new technology and adaptation, but concerns about economic competition with China, for example, are likely to recur in the current economic climate.

Given these pressures, President Obama and European leaders may be compelled to seek agreement on a new framework of targets and incentives that would sustain progress toward a new treaty even if its final form would be negotiated after 2009. The compromises needed to secure agreement among EU members should make them sympathetic to the competing economic and geographic interests that President Obama will face in the U.S. Congress, but public diplomacy will be needed on all sides to convey progress as well as the way forward.

4. Prospects for the future

Barack Obama's approach to foreign policy has been welcomed cautiously by many at a time when the international community faces intractable challenges. At the same time, questions remain about what appealing phrases like "smart power" and "pragmatism" will look like in practice. As Roger Cohen wryly observed, smart power sounds "better than dumb power, of which we've had a dose. Dumb power estranges friends, privileges force, undermines United States credibility and proclaims war without end."[14] Although part of Obama's success as a presidential candidate was his ability to synthesize challenging, even competing, views on issues, he will have to make hard choices as president.

"Managing expectations" has become the mantra to explain how the new administration will proceed, seeking to dampen unrealistic hopes for rapid change on intractable problems while maintaining optimism in the impact of a new face in the White House in the United States. The foreign policy challenges facing President Obama are deep and in many cases interlocking. Even prior to the election, many observed that there would be no quick solutions awaiting the new president, who was

[13] http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/president_elect_obama_promises_new_chapter_on_climate_change/
[14] http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/opinion/15cohen.html?ref=opinion

likely to have little room for maneuver in the international arena. The impact of the economic crisis may be felt most directly in dealing with Russia and the prospects for a new treaty on climate change, but it will remain a constant challenge for President Obama to balance competing demands upon him, as well as the complexities of relations with U.S. allies.

Sixty-one per cent of French, 55% of German and 51% of British respondents said in 2008 that they believed Barack Obama will improve transatlantic relations[15], but it remains unclear whether his personal popularity can or will translate into additional contributions from Europeans on foreign policy challenges. While it may have been relatively easy for Europeans to say no to George W. Bush, Obama still faces hurdles. In Germany, for instance, recent polling showed clearly that 80% would refuse a request for additional troops in Afghanistan.[16]

Much of what President Obama can accomplish in the short term is a change in tone, which he sought to begin with his inaugural address. The signing of executive orders to close the detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba on his second day of office suggests that he will fulfill his campaign promises for a break with the policies of the previous administration, even if he also understands the legal complexities of dealing with the remaining detainees. Many in the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world will be watching closely in the coming months to see how President Obama manages the formidable foreign policy challenges he faces at a time when he will be constrained by economic crisis ●

[15] Transatlantic Trends 2008
[16] "Germany to Obama: We Will Resist Calls for More Troops," Deutsche-Welle, September 11, 2008