

Restoring Global Leadership

US Foreign Policy under Barack Obama

Peter Rudolf

In the last four decades, no incumbent US president has faced such a formidable array of problems and challenges as Barack Obama does today: two wars being fought simultaneously, nuclear-armed Pakistan in a state of precarious stability, Iran possibly soon to be developing its own nuclear weapons program, relations with Russia in a difficult phase. And all that at a time when the scope of options for foreign policy are severely constrained by the economic and budgetary consequences of the financial crisis. In this context, the goal on which Barack Obama has set his sights looks extremely ambitious: that of renewing American leadership in the world. What understanding of the US role underlies this project, and how will this vision of restored American leadership shape foreign policy?

During their electoral campaigns, both John McCain and Barack Obama expressed the view that the US is the guarantor of international stability and an indispensable force for international order. The fact that this idea of maintaining American global leadership requires no justification in the public discourse reveals just how strongly US foreign policy ideology is defined by an understanding of the US role as a globally hegemonic one. This understanding is undergirded by vast resources of power, which tend to be underestimated against the backdrop of the current financial and economic crisis and the emerging discussion of a decline in US power. Today as in the past, the US holds a pre-eminent position in the international system through the combined force of superior

“hard” military, economic, and technological resources.

Indispensable leadership role

For Obama and his advisors, US leadership in international relations is crucially needed at present. In their view, “this century’s threats are at least as dangerous as and in some ways more complex than those we have confronted in the past.” These threats come from weapons of mass destruction and global terrorist operations, from weak states, extreme poverty, repressive regimes and the instability they create, but also from global warming. The necessity they see for American leadership is premised on the interdependence between American security and prosperity and the

security and well-being of people in other countries: "The United States should provide global leadership grounded in the understanding that the world shares a common security and a common humanity. We must lead not in the spirit of a patron, but the spirit of a partner." For Barack Obama, leadership means above all leading by example. Accordingly, he argues that the US must first regain its international credibility, particularly by closing Guantánamo and clearly rejecting practices of torture.

In his foreign policy program, Barack Obama shows a strong leaning towards a liberal, multilateral conception of US global leadership. Basically, this means reviving the role of a liberal or "benevolent hegemon" underlying US global policy after 1945. The role of global leader also brings with it specific expectations: other states allow a global leader to exercise greater influence, but also expect it to provide collective goods. Thus, on the one hand, global leadership entails particular obligations, but on the other, a global leader can use its material resources to pursue national interests unilaterally. If it behaves in a similar way to the US under President George W. Bush, the foundations of its leadership role and the institutions through which this leadership can be performed in a legitimate way will be undermined.

Barack Obama's ideas are situated in the tradition of international leadership in service of a "global good." While US leadership under President Bush was strongly focused on, and indeed reduced to the "global war against terror," Barack Obama's idea of leadership transcends this conception. It is thus no coincidence that he refers rhetorically to Franklin D. Roosevelt and the idea of the new world order upon which American leadership after 1945 was based, before being overtaken, if not replaced by the containment of communism in the Cold War: "Our global engagement cannot be defined by what we are against; it must be guided by a clear sense of what we stand for. We have a significant

stake in ensuring that those who live in fear and want today can live with dignity and opportunity tomorrow." In his choice of the words "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want," Barack Obama is harking back to the "four freedoms" that President Roosevelt proclaimed in his speech before Congress on January 6, 1941, as the basis for a new world order. Indeed, some of Obama's advisors would like to see the emphasis on "dignity" and thus human rights in foreign policy as defining a foreign policy doctrine of the new administration. Although his foreign policy also includes the goal of building democratic societies, the overriding theme for Barack Obama is freedom: "In the 21st century, progress must mean more than a vote at the ballot box—it must mean freedom from fear and freedom from want." In this spirit, Obama wants to double foreign aid by 2012 to 50 billion dollars per year.

In comparison to George W. Bush and even John McCain, Obama may sound less idealistic or moralistic and more realistic. But Barack Obama too stands in a foreign policy tradition in which ideals and interests, morality and power are indivisibly bound together. It is due to this moral self-conception, but also due to the hegemonic role-conception with its special responsibility for the stability of the international system that the use of military force cannot be limited to protecting the American population and its vital interests in cases of an actual or impending attack. From this perspective, the use of military force should be considered not only for self-defense but also in response to humanitarian catastrophes and in service of "common security" as the foundation for global stability. As a maxim for the deployment of armed forces beyond cases of self-defense, President-elect Obama has indicated that he plans to make every effort to garner the support and involvement of other states.

A new multilateralism

US leadership after 1945 was characterized by the effort to persuade other states to embrace its normative world order concepts. For US foreign policy after the Second World War, the guiding precept was multilateralism. Consequently, the US worked to build institutions whose rules would apply equally to all. The willingness of the United States to participate in international organizations did indeed set American leadership apart from all other forms of hegemonic power. The vision of a multilateral order was not based on naive idealism, as the realist critique claims, and it did not just provide rhetorical ornamentation for power politics. Multilateralism after 1945 was rather the calculated policy of a world leader that kept its own unilateral actions in check in the interest of a multilateral order; one that also allowed other states the opportunity to bring their own interests to bear.

Given the long-term power shifts in the international system and new global challenges, the US as a global power has for some time faced the task of adapting the multilateral structures it created to a changed international environment in order to maintain its leadership role. Barack Obama wants to strengthen existing institutions of global governance but also to create new institutions to integrate emerging powers—and in so doing, to pass on some of the costs of American leadership through the integration of other countries into multilateral institutions. He thus emphasizes the importance of giving aspiring powers like India, Brazil, Nigeria, and South Africa “a stake in upholding the international order.” In Obama’s view, the US should take on a leadership role within the United Nations (UN), also in implementing institutional reforms. The US can only play this role, however, when it meets its financial commitments to the UN. With regard to the International Criminal Court, Obama has taken a position of cautious waiting, which reflects his consideration for the concerns of the US military. He has

stated that it is too early to commit to signing the Statute of Rome: the court is still young, and its activities should be observed further before a decision is made.

In view of China’s rising power and the American role in East Asia, the Obama administration faces the question of whether to work on creating new multilateral security structures in the region, into which China could be integrated—in exchange for China recognizing the US role as a guarantor for regional stability. During his election campaign, Barack Obama announced his intention to create a “more effective regional framework” in Asia, building on the diverse bilateral relationships and the Six-Party Talks on North Korea. He would thus follow on ideas already developed under the Bush administration to expand the framework of these meetings further into a permanent security forum.

Sharing the burdens

The US view of multilateralism is a highly instrumental one: multilateralism is an instrument of effective global governance but also a way to pass on costs to other states. In Barack Obama’s political program, a stronger multilateral orientation also means calling allies to take on more responsibility. One example is the discussion of a new Iraq coalition that would include all those with a stake in a stable Iraq—in other words, the EU as well. In Obama’s policy statements, the idea of partnership with Europe—a partnership that serves the interests of a secure America—is strongly emphasized. In them, there echoes a trace of nostalgia for a time when Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and other presidents were allegedly so successful in mobilizing European support because they were respected and admired in Europe. Obama points to the unilateral, arrogant policies of the Bush administration as the cause of the problems in European-American relations. He argues that the allies should be treated with respect, but that they should also be urged to take on greater

responsibility: “A more responsible and cooperative America will look to Europe to uphold its own responsibilities on issues such as Afghanistan, Iran, terrorism, Africa, and the environment.”

Barack Obama and his advisors still have not stated whether and how other states will be convinced to take on more responsibility and share the burdens of securing stability in the Persian Gulf. In view of the planned troop reductions in Iraq and increasing concerns about nuclear weapons in Iran, the question of a restructured regional security system in the Persian Gulf could become a major theme of transatlantic relations. Proposals for such a system have already been developed by think tanks close to the Democratic Party. The idea that an American military presence in the region is necessary to guarantee the free flow of oil and to maintain regional stability is seldom called into question in the US. But how can the financial costs of this US security policy role be reduced and the political burdens accompanying a stronger US presence in the region be diminished? One answer proposed in the American debate goes like this: by creating a collective regional security structure that would allow the burden to be shared. According to this idea, states within the region and European states, as well as China and India, would share the costs and maintain a military presence. This would allow the US to reduce its military presence to a minimum, that is, effectively to pre-1990 levels. Countries within the region, including Iran, would be invited to join this regional security system.

US leadership in climate policy?

If the US wants to regain its credibility as a global power, it will have to take on a leadership role in climate policy as well. After all, international leadership is based on the ability to play a decisive role in providing global public goods. If the US cannot substantiate its claim to global leadership on a question of such great

international importance as climate change, then its legitimacy will be severely undermined. It is thus only logical that climate policy plays a central role in Obama’s plan to reassert the legitimacy of US leadership. “Getting our own house in order” has featured in several of Obama’s statements on his political platform, and he has stated that the US must get more involved in developing international agreements—both within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change but also in a new “Global Energy Forum” consisting of the G-8 countries and Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and South Africa.

The forum is to provide temporary support to the process in the UN, where the objective is to work out a Post-Kyoto Protocol for the period after 2012. In this forum, where the largest greenhouse gas emitting nations would come together, stronger pressure could be placed on China and India—so the expectation goes—to take responsibility for reducing their greenhouse gas emissions. Involving these states in binding agreements is one of the central US demands. If this is not achieved, an Obama administration will probably not enter into binding international commitments in a new Climate Protection Agreement. The new administration will first have to wait and see what Congress sets as targets for emission reductions. In any case, the US will fail to reach the European target of reducing emissions by the year 2020 to a level of 20% below 1990 levels. The US population and the country’s emissions levels have seen such rapid growth that the target of reducing emissions to 1990 levels by 2020 would create sizeable costs. A law to this effect, supported by Obama, failed in the Senate in June 2008.

Visionary leadership:

A world without nuclear weapons?

An important element of political efforts to renew American leadership is to take on a credible role in nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation policy. Reducing the

threat of nuclear weapons is of universal interest and not solely an issue of US security policy. Barack Obama has embraced the idea—one might even say the concrete utopia—of complete nuclear disarmament, the idea of a world without nuclear weapons: “Here’s what I’ll say as President: America seeks a world in which there are no nuclear weapons.” At its core, this is the objective of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which has never been taken seriously; it was the much-derided vision of Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s. This vision took on renewed dynamism and greater seriousness in early 2007, when a group of prominent foreign and security policy experts from both US political parties, including Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, campaigned for this idea. They called for the US to lead in achieving international consensus on the goal of creating a world free of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, they argued that the US should use an ambitious strategy of disarmament and nonproliferation to combat the threat of an increasing number of nuclear-armed states, and the potential of nuclear weapons coming into the hands of terrorists as well. The fundamental logic underlying this idea—that a nonproliferation regime could only be maintained if the US and other nuclear weapons states were themselves to show serious intentions of disarmament—was quickly met with critique from other security experts. The counterargument is that changes in the US nuclear strategy would not induce states like North Korea, Iran, India, or Pakistan to abandon their nuclear weapon programs, and that as long as the possibility of nuclear weapons exists—and that knowledge cannot be utterly eliminated—the US will need nuclear weapons as a deterrent.

However, Barack Obama’s goal is not unilateral nuclear disarmament. In his view, as long as nuclear weapons exist, the US will need to maintain a strong nuclear deterrent. His project revolves around taking the commitment to nuclear disarmament

resulting from the NPT seriously. He has pledged to work together with Russia to achieve a “dramatic” reduction in nuclear arsenals, to expand the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty to include the rest of the world, and to work to negotiate a global ban on the production of weapon-usable fissile material. Obama argues that by pursuing these objectives and demonstrating willingness to comply with these rules, the US would improve its chances of effectively pressuring other states to follow suit.

Barack Obama has thus set an ambitious goal for his presidency, but what strategy will he need to achieve it? The main precondition for any credible diplomatic initiative would certainly be a drastic change in US nuclear policy. There is no doubt that the number of nuclear weapons has declined and the mixture of these weapons has changed since the end of the Cold War. But reviews of nuclear policy under President Clinton and then under President George W. Bush have by no means led to a drastically reduced role of nuclear weapons in US security policy. From the Pentagon view, a large number of nuclear weapons is necessary as a precautionary measure vis-à-vis Russia and China. Under President Clinton, nuclear weapons took on the function of deterring the possible use of biological and chemical weapons. The subsequent Bush administration initiated the development of new nuclear weapons that could be used to destroy deeply buried bunkers, a program met by considerable opposition in the US Congress.

Following the argumentation of Ivo Daalder, who was in charge of the non-proliferation working group within Obama’s foreign policy advisory team during the election campaign, the first step the new president should take would be to make a clear statement that in the future, US nuclear weapons will serve only as a deterrent to nuclear aggression by other nations. Taking this firm position would allow a dramatic reduction in the number of nuclear warheads from approximately 7,000 to about 1,000 mostly sea-

based and thus nearly invulnerable weapons. This unilateral step would lend credibility to nonproliferation policy and pave the way for work on a much stricter and more comprehensive nuclear control regime. The function of such a regime would be to oversee fissionable nuclear material of all kinds. The US would have to comply with this universal nonproliferation regime itself in order to set an example to other nations.

But how should such a universal regime be structured? Obama advisor Daalder has dismissed the two classic paths as unsuitable: the negotiation of an international treaty, and bilateral US-Russian disarmament aimed at pulling in the other nuclear powers. Instead, he argues for working to convince an increasing number of states to embrace the zero option for nuclear arms. It is anticipated that Russia will present a major problem here, especially since in recent years the Russian government has accentuated the role of nuclear weapons in its security policy.

The question remains: Will Barack Obama have the energy, the courage, and the endurance to put his campaign visions into practice against likely resistance from the US security establishment and parts of Congress? Will he be able to reorient the security bureaucracy toward an almost utopian long-term goal?

Implications for transatlantic security relations

Judging from Obama's campaign platform, foreign policy under his administration will be guided by the idea that the US can and must remain *the* leading world power, despite an increase in the relative power of other states. In this view, the global perception that the US is an "arrogant" power has to be changed; the US should exploit the full potential of its "soft power" through exemplary behavior. Accordingly, institutions of global governance are to be strengthened and used to integrate rising powers. The expectation seems to be that a

new, positive perception of the US will make it easier to mobilize international support for its own objectives.

In some policy areas, the specific goals and the strategies pursued to achieve them are currently in a state of flux. As a rule, each new administration starts by reviewing those foreign policies that are rather less successful or domestically controversial.

Russia policy. In the relationship with Russia, President Obama will be able to tie in with the previous administration's policy of selective cooperation, particularly on nonproliferation and the fight against transnational terrorism, but he will not inherit a strategy with clearly defined priorities. Barack Obama has announced his interest in developing a "comprehensive strategy" toward Russia, but what this strategy will actually look like remains altogether unclear. He emphasizes that Russia is not the Soviet Union and that Cold War postures are outdated, and says that US Russia policy should be embedded in a comprehensive regional policy that also aims to support democratic partners and uphold the principle of sovereignty. He has announced that he will seek dialogue with the Russian government in areas of common interest. All countries in the region that prove themselves to be responsible members of the international community will be offered the chance of full integration into the international system, Russia explicitly included. Yet all this does not add up to a strategy, but more to a mixture of "selective engagement" and—even when it is not described as such—elements of "selective containment." Barack Obama has emphasized that the transatlantic alliance should be strengthened "so that we deal with Russia with one, unified voice." Precisely because US Russia policy has not yet been thoroughly fleshed out, and given that a coordinated transatlantic approach has been called for in the US, it would be crucial for Europe to join this discussion by defining the cornerstones of a common

strategy, which will not be easy to achieve given the different perceptions, interests and preferred strategic approaches within the EU.

Afghanistan policy. US policy on Afghanistan is already undergoing thorough re-evaluation. This is taking place in a difficult context: with pessimistic intelligence reports of a “downward spiral” in Afghanistan, considerable frustration in the US military due to the lack of strategic leadership from the White House, and a vast chasm between lofty pronouncements of building democracy in Afghanistan and the sobering realities on the ground. The current approach contains a number of components: increased numbers of foreign troops, accelerated training and expansion of the Afghan army and police force, increased funds for reconstruction and development, more forceful interdiction of the drug trade that funds the Taliban, intensified pressure on Pakistan to take decisive military action against the Taliban in its border areas, and increased direct US attacks on targets in Pakistani territory.

All this does not, however, add up to a promising strategy that could be sustained for a longer period of time. General Petraeus, the new chief of the US Central Command, is urging that parts of the Taliban be brought into the political (reconciliation) process and that regional diplomatic and economic initiatives be undertaken, focusing on neighboring states that play an important role in the Afghanistan conflict. Obama apparently supports the option of US involvement in talks between segments of the Taliban and the Afghan government. In the US, the need has been recognized for an approach that understands the war in Afghanistan in terms of its regional dimension and that integrates external actors, foremost the bordering states, into a diplomatic strategy. In the US debate, this has recently led to the proposal to form a contact group consisting of the permanent members of the Security Council, and perhaps also representatives of

NATO and other states. Opportunities may emerge for European partners to influence the discussion by contributing their own ideas and to move the transatlantic debate about Afghanistan beyond the acrimonious issue of military burden-sharing to a broader re-evaluation of Western goals and appropriate approaches.

Iran policy. Barack Obama has promised to adopt a new diplomatic approach: willingness to engage in high-level negotiations (after careful preparation and initially not at the presidential level) without precondition—that is, renouncing the previously essential condition that Iran first halt its uranium enrichment activities. Barack Obama does want to negotiate, but the desired outcome is an agreement that would exclude uranium enrichment on Iranian territory.

In the US, there are a number of ideas on the table for how a new approach towards Iran could be introduced: for one, the agenda of European-Iranian talks could be expanded beyond the nuclear question to the point that the US ultimately joins these talks; another is that the US could engage in direct “backchannel” negotiations. But these are tactical questions that have to be addressed once the strategic decision to initiate a new policy has been made. For now, Europe faces the question of whether to support the new approach by declaring willingness to substantially tighten its own sanctions against Iran in the case of further Iranian intransigence.

Conclusions

In his election campaign, Barack Obama emphasized that he sees 2009 as a “window of opportunity” to renew US global leadership. A powerful symbolic initiative would be the promised closure of Guantánamo. Plans and options for such an undertaking were already presented to President Bush, but he decided to leave the problems connected with such a step to his successor (these problems include, for example, that

the criminal prosecution of some detained persons might have to be foregone and that some of the individuals who might have to be released do constitute a security risk).

Barack Obama's relatively cautious style of leadership, characterized by careful consideration of arguments and weighing of options, leads one to believe that he will set the course for his foreign policy only after establishing regular decision-making processes and systematically reviewing previous policies. Precisely in those fields of transatlantic security relations where the policies are currently in a state of flux or crisis, the coming months will offer opportunities for America's European partners to influence the policy positions of the new administration.

© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2008
All rights reserved

These Comments reflect
solely the author's view.

SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und
Politik
German Institute for
International and
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761

Translation by: Deborah Bowen

(English version of
SWP-Aktuell 77/2008)