

Obama's Foreign Policy: No Sharp Break From Bush

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While much of the world and many of his U.S. supporters are expecting a sharp break with his predecessor's foreign policy after President-elect Barack Obama takes office Jan. 20, they may be surprised by the degree of continuity between the two administrations.

That continuity – which would be made more concrete if, as expected, Pentagon chief Robert Gates is asked to remain at his post – has less to do with Obama's hesitation in following through on his more sweeping campaign promises than with the fact that President George W. Bush, has quietly – if grudgingly – moved key U.S. policies in directions that are largely compatible with Obama's own intentions.

Obama will no doubt announce a series of steps during or just after his inauguration to reaffirm to his supporters and, in the words of his victory speech Tuesday night, “to all those watching tonight from beyond our shores, from parliaments and palaces, to those who are huddled around radios in the forgotten corners of the world, [that] our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared, a new dawn of American leadership is at hand.”

Those steps will be designed to contrast his commitment to multilateralism and diplomatic engagement with Bush's fabled unilateralism and reliance on military power. They will probably include an immediate and comprehensive ban on the use of torture and a promise to close the Guantanamo detention facility at an early date.

In addition, Obama will likely move quickly to improve ties with two governments toward which Bush proved unremittingly hostile: Cuba, where he is expected to repeal Bush-imposed restrictions on the freedom of Cuban Americans to visit their homeland and send money to their relatives as a down payment toward further normalization; and Syria, where he will dispatch an ambassador to signal his interest both in renewing anti-terror cooperation and encouraging the resumption of Turkish-mediated peace talks between Damascus and Israel, if not a broader peace process.

At the global level, Obama is expected to pledge full U.S. participation in any successor regime to the Kyoto Protocol, including binding reductions of greenhouse gas emissions. Similarly, he may well announce his intent to gain Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and several other long-pending treaties opposed by Bush, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. He will also restore funding to another Bush target, the UN Population Fund.

He may even indicate a willingness to negotiate a “Bretton Woods II,” as proposed by key U.S. allies in Europe, that would strengthen global financial watchdogs and allocate significantly more power to emerging markets in the Third World in international economic

agencies long controlled by the West.

In addition to earning Obama great goodwill overseas, all of these steps will help dramatize the contrast between his more open and inclusive approach to the world and that of his predecessor, whose unilateralism and cowboy image have brought Washington's standing among foreign publics to an all-time low.

To be fair, however, that image – so richly earned during his first term when neoconservatives and other hawks ruled the roost – is somewhat outdated. Chastened by the Iraq war and guided step by halting step by the foreign policy realists, notably Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Gates, and his top military commanders, who have come to dominate the last two years of his presidency, Bush has essentially – if not explicitly – laid the groundwork for Obama's "new dawn," especially with respect to key crisis areas that are certain to figure near the top of the new president's agenda.

Despite loud protests and repeated efforts by hawks around Vice President Dick Cheney to deep-six the process, for example, Bush has stuck by Rice and her top Asia aide, Christopher Hill, in making the necessary concessions to keep the "Six-Party Talks" to denuclearize North Korea alive.

Similarly, Bush broke his own diplomatic embargo on Iran – along with Pyongyang, the last surviving member of the "Axis of Evil" – by sending a senior State Department official, Undersecretary of State William Burns, to sit down with his Iranian counterpart as part of a larger meeting including other permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany last summer. Significantly, Burns will serve as the State Department's chief liaison with Obama's transition team.

The administration also appears close to announcing that it intends to set up an interests section in Tehran even before Obama takes office. Such a step will no doubt make it far less controversial for the new president to open comprehensive, high-level talks with Iran without conditions when he chooses to do so (possibly after Iran's presidential elections in June so as to avoid boosting President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad chances of reelection).

And after effectively ignoring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for nearly seven years, Bush finally re-launched peace talks at Annapolis last November. While those talks have made little progress and now, with Israeli elections scheduled for February, have no hope of reaching an accord by the time Bush leaves office, he will bequeath, as Rice, the effort's most dogged booster, noted this weekend, a process that Obama can use to fulfill his promise to make a two-state solution an urgent priority.

Even on Iraq and Afghanistan, Bush has helped lay the groundwork for Obama's plans to accelerate the withdrawal of combat troops from the former and rapidly deploying more to the latter, which the president-elect has long argued, unlike the incumbent, constitutes the "central front in the war on terror." By acquiescing in a still-pending accord with the Iraqi government, Bush has also accepted a 2012 deadline for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops – not just its combat forces, which Obama has pledged to withdraw by mid-2010.

As for Russia, whose intervention in Georgia last August brought bilateral ties to their lowest ebb since the end of the Cold War, Bush, like Obama, has acted with relative restraint, particularly compared to the urgings of Obama's Republican rival, Sen. John McCain.

And while his insistence on deploying missile-defense systems in central and eastern Europe is clearly more provocative than Obama's cautious ambiguity on the subject, Bush has also moved in recent days both to address Moscow's concerns and lay the basis for a new accord on sharply reducing U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, something that Obama is expected to make a high priority in the early days.

In other areas, Obama's engagement strategy is likely to build on more positive achievements by Bush that have not received nearly as much attention as his "war-on-terror" debacles: most notably in East Asia, where, to the aggravation of the hawks, good ties with China have not only been preserved, but enhanced; India, where the new nuclear deal capped a rapidly growing strategic relationship; and much of Africa, where Bush's five-year-old, \$15 billion AIDS program, strongly endorsed by Obama, is given credit not only for saving millions of lives, but also for making the region the most Bush-friendly by far, according to recent public opinion polls.

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