
THE NEED FOR BIPARTISANSHIP IN FOREIGN POLICY

By Senator Joseph Biden



The U.S. public holds a general internationalist sentiment, but President Bush faces a real challenge in translating that sentiment into a truly bipartisan foreign policy, says Senator Joseph Biden. The senator sees such bipartisanship as “not only possible, but necessary to advance our national interests.” Biden, the senior Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, served as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee from 1987 to 1995.

First impressions are important in all walks of life, including politics and government. Despite the delayed transition, President Bush is off to a fast start. In the area of national security, he has assembled an able team of advisers. But he has far less experience in foreign policy than in domestic policy. He needs to be a fast learner, because foreign policy challenges will almost certainly confront him soon.

President Bush has assumed office at a time when the United States possesses unrivaled political, military, and economic power. With power, however, comes responsibility — responsibility to vigorously protect and promote U.S. national interests, responsibility to stand with allies, and responsibility to contribute our fair share to global stability and security. Thankfully, most Americans understand that the United States has a duty to lead the world.

A key challenge facing the President is whether he can convert this general internationalist sentiment into a foreign policy that enjoys bipartisan backing. Half a century ago, Senator Arthur Vandenberg said that “politics stops at the water’s edge.” This is so in times of real crisis, but in truth foreign policy debates rarely are immune from partisan politics. Even during the Cold War, when a consensus favored containment of Soviet communism, there was often sharp disagreement about the means to that end, such as whether to support a particular guerrilla movement abroad or fund a particular weapons system at home.

Debate is essential to our democracy. But I remain hopeful that we can avoid divisive partisan fights.

Achieving bipartisanship on the following key issues is not only possible, but necessary to advance our national interests:

A NEW STRATEGY OF CONTAINMENT

The premier threat to U.S. security is the danger posed by weapons of mass destruction. We must forge a new strategy of containment, focused on the danger that nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, and the missiles to propel them, could be used by terrorists or rogue states.

This threat requires a multi-pronged response. Over the last decade, through nuclear arms control treaties, international cooperation on combating proliferation, and programs like “Nunn-Lugar” (which helps secure and dismantle the former Soviet arsenal), we have diminished the proliferation danger. There is still much more to do — we need additional assistance to keep technology and know-how from falling into the wrong hands, and we must maintain an international consensus to protect against proliferation. These efforts are not cheap — a recent blue-ribbon task force urged that we spend some \$30 billion over the next decade on programs to secure “loose nukes” in Russia and to keep Russian scientists from selling their knowledge to rogue states.

The key test for bipartisanship revolves around our nuclear doctrine. For most of the Cold War, there was general political agreement about U.S. nuclear policy, which ran on two parallel and reinforcing tracks. In the superpower sphere, we sought to deter the Soviet threat while seeking mutual reductions that would

mitigate the dangers of global conflagration. Multilaterally, through the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and a common set of export controls, we sought to limit the size of the nuclear club. Today the consensus supporting these policies has all but collapsed. Most Republicans question the utility of nuclear arms control, and favor speedy deployment of national missile defense. Most Democrats, by contrast, support arms control and are skeptical about the immediate need to deploy missile defense.

Whether a middle ground can be found is far from clear. Of course, we must fully fund research and development programs. But the President should resist pressure to make a premature missile defense deployment decision. If he looks closely, he will see that the current system proposed by the Pentagon is too flawed to adequately protect the United States, and is likely to provoke a reaction by foreign powers that leaves us less, not more, secure.

The President needs to prepare the world for missile defense, rather than saying, in essence, “build it and they will come ‘round.” If missile defense is ultimately necessary, our goal should be a system that Russia can accept by amending the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, that China will not see as threatening its nuclear deterrent capability, and that will be supported by allies in Europe and Asia.

The President should also concentrate on the upcoming review of our nuclear deterrent, the first in six years. He must reply responsibly to Russia’s proposal to reduce each country’s deployed strategic warheads to 1,500 or fewer. Simultaneously, the President should promptly review the recommendations delivered by former Joint Chiefs Chairman Shalikashvili on how to move forward on the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which provides a key instrument for capping other countries’ ability to build advanced nuclear weapons while leaving our own arsenal intact.

BUILDING THE RIGHT MILITARY

A key responsibility for the Commander-in-Chief is to decide on appropriate roles and missions for the armed forces. President Bush must organize and equip the military to take advantage of cutting-edge technologies to meet new post-Cold War security challenges.

The choice before us is not between fulfilling our peacekeeping commitments or maintaining our military readiness. We can afford to do both. Promoting regional peace and stability — including deployment of U.S. forces as peacekeepers — is one of the best ways to ensure that our ability to fight and win a major war will not be tested. The key to retaining the finest military force in the world will be rigorously prioritizing where we allocate resources.

KEEPING SECURITY COMMITMENTS IN EUROPE AND ASIA

The United States is both a European and Asian power, and is a force for stability in both continents. Key security commitments in both places will provide early tests for the new foreign policy team.

In Europe, we must avoid the precipitous step of unilaterally withdrawing U.S. ground troops from Bosnia or Kosovo, which would cause our European allies to question our commitment to NATO. The Balkans are, slowly, turning away from the destructive tendencies of the past and toward a more democratic future. With the job only partially finished, this is hardly the time to consider troop withdrawals. Nor does U.S. policy represent an undue burden. For five decades, we’ve had hundreds of thousands of forces in Europe. We can surely spare a few thousand forces for Balkan security to stand with our European partners, who make up three-quarters of the peacekeeping forces in Bosnia and Kosovo. Finally, NATO must expand the zone of stability in Europe by continuing the process of admitting new members — and offer membership in the next few years to any country that meets the Alliance’s rigorous qualifications.

In Asia, creative diplomatic efforts by the United States, South Korea, and Japan to draw North Korea out of its shell are slowly yielding results; the promise of a reduced security threat in Asia, and of a reduced threat of missile proliferation elsewhere, demands that the new Administration be prepared to promptly engage here. A successful outcome in talks with North Korea on its missile program — the main threat upon which U.S. national missile defense is predicated — would give the President more time to consider the missile defense decision. Across the region, U.S. military deployments and active diplomacy are critical to

regional stability. There is no Asian analog to NATO, so we must rely on key bilateral alliances while strengthening the region's nascent security structures.

ENGAGEMENT WITH RUSSIA AND CHINA

Since the Cold War, American policy has struggled to find the right approach toward Russia and China. We may be a superpower, but we lack the ability to control events in either country — though we can help shape them. Neither nation is likely to be a true partner soon, but neither need be an adversary. In an era of globalization, “containment” is not an option. We must engage them — but on what terms?

With both countries, our message should be clear and consistent: we will expect you to act responsibly in the international arena; we will work with you to advance common interests; we will support advancement of democratic values; and we will vigorously oppose proliferation behavior that threatens world security. Whatever we do, we must try to avoid serious partisan disputes; our relationships with Russia and China simply are too important.

ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR DIPLOMACY

To pursue an active international agenda, and to keep the peace, we need both a well-trained and well-equipped military and diplomatic corps. Indeed, the best way to avoid over-using our armed forces is to adequately support our diplomatic corps and our intelligence capabilities. Modest increases in recent years have not made up for deep cuts earlier in the decade. We spend just one percent of our national budget on foreign affairs; we can afford more, but the President and Secretary Powell must make the case for it with Congress and the American public.

The foreign policy agenda is, of course, longer than this short list. But the tone that President Bush sets on these issues in the next few months will do much to determine the tenor of the foreign policy debate for the next four years. The American people are watching to see if Senator Vandenberg's famous maxim can become more than a slogan. ●