
FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES FACING THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION

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“At least four broad challenges seem likely to top the foreign policy agenda facing the Bush administration,” says Robert J. Lieber, Professor of Government and Foreign Service at Georgetown University. The first of these, he says, “concerns relations with America’s allies, especially the Europeans and Japanese.” Also of key importance are relations with Russia, the “unique problems and choices” posed by China, and the Middle East, which “represents perhaps the most dangerous single foreign policy challenge facing the United States.” Lieber is editor and contributing author of “Eagle Rules? Foreign Policy and American Primacy in the 21st Century,” to be published Summer 2001 by Prentice-Hall.

When an American president takes office, he brings with him an entirely new team of foreign policy officials. In contrast with most other democracies, in the United States the changes in personnel are much more extensive and include not just top policymakers — such as the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Advisor — but scores of sub-cabinet and even many working level appointees within these and other agencies of government. The character and tone of policy thus change in ways reflecting the views and ideas of the President and those around him, though it is also essential to keep in mind that America’s world role and the kinds of problems and opportunities it faces dictate a good deal of continuity as well.

Though President George W. Bush does not have an extensive foreign policy background, he has surrounded himself with an unusually experienced and accomplished team. Secretary of State Colin Powell previously served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Security Advisor. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld returns to a position he held once before. In addition, he previously headed a commission that analyzed America’s vulnerability to missile attack and recommended a missile defense program. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice served on the National Security Council (NSC) dealing with European issues during the end of the Cold War. And Vice President Dick Cheney not only was Secretary of Defense in the earlier Bush administration, but he also worked as White House Chief of Staff under President Gerald Ford. Moreover, the number two officials at State, Defense and NSC (Richard Armitage, Paul Wolfowitz and Stephen

Hadley) also bring impressive credentials and long experience in foreign and defense policy, as does Robert Zoellick in his position as Special Trade Representative. This experience and expertise will be important as the Bush administration confronts the major international challenges now facing the United States.

Specific foreign and security policy issues must be examined against the backdrop of America’s world role at the start of the 21st century. The end of the Cold War a decade ago had an enormous impact on world politics and the consequences of this change still reverberate. As a result, three broad tendencies shape the American role and the context in which the Bush administration responds to foreign policy challenges. First, the United States finds itself in a unique position as the single most powerful and influential country in the world. This exceptional status, or primacy, is a product both of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fact that no other individual country or group of countries has the capacity to compete effectively with the United States. Not only does the U.S. possess a unique degree of military power and advanced technology, but America’s leading role is also evident across a wide range of sectors: economic strength, competitiveness, information technology, and even the realms of entertainment and mass culture. This status creates opportunities as well as problems for the United States.

Second, American leadership, or at least active involvement, is a prerequisite for many kinds of international collaboration. This is especially relevant in the security realm and has become evident both where the U.S. has

acted (as in Kosovo in 1999, Bosnia from 1995 onward, and in the Gulf), as well as when it has declined to lead (Bosnia from 1992 to 1995, Rwanda in 1994, and initially in East Timor.) In many instances, the alternative to America's taking a leading role is not that some other country or regional or international body will lead, but that there will be inaction. This too poses a problem for the United States, in that it must steer a course between, on the one hand, over-commitment in becoming the world's policeman and, on the other hand, failing to provide the leadership that is in its own interests and that promotes a more stable and benign international environment.

Third, the end of the Cold War makes it harder for the United States to achieve cooperation with its allies and friends. In the past, a sense of a shared threat stimulated cooperation and acted as a restraint on the inevitable differences and quarrels that arise among allies. Absent this threat, countries have a greater temptation to pursue their narrower interests even though these may create obstacles to collaboration in facing common problems. This diminished sense of threat also makes it harder for an American administration to gain domestic support for an effective foreign policy. Without the challenge presented by the Soviet Union, there tends to be a reduced interest in foreign policy on the part of the American public and a lesser priority for foreign affairs as well as for providing the resources essential for sustaining America's world role. This is not a matter of isolationism. The public, the press, and the Congress remain internationalist rather than isolationist, but foreign policy problems tend not to have the same degree of urgency as during the Cold War.

Given these wider considerations, at least four broad challenges seem likely to top the foreign policy agenda facing the Bush administration. The first of these concerns relations with America's allies, especially the Europeans and Japanese. In the case of the Europeans, a series of recent controversies has arisen over missile defense, the planned European Union rapid reaction force, trade disputes, genetically modified foods, and symbolic issues such as the death penalty and gun control. Underlying many of these differences is a European reaction to America's size and power, as well as a perception that at times the United States acts unilaterally without sufficient regard for European sensibilities. On the American side, there is concern about burden-sharing, anxiety that the Europeans may be tempted to go their own

way as the EU develops greater economic and foreign policy coherence, and frustration at the difficulties of consulting and negotiating with the 15 EU countries who often disagree sharply with one another, or else become rigid in their interaction with the United States once they have hammered out a common policy of their own. Despite these very real frictions, the Europeans continue to rely upon the United States in the security realm, and we share fundamental economic interests and values. The Bush administration will need to devote considerable time and energy to consulting European leaders and seeking to assuage some (not all) of their concerns. The overall prospect is for continued friction but no transatlantic divorce.

Second, relations with Russia pose a key challenge. A decade after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, there are fewer illusions about the Russian transition. Russia continues to experience a deep economic, social, and demographic crisis, and it is clear that construction of both a market economy and a genuinely democratic political system will at best be a long and arduous affair. On the other hand, Russia is no longer a global threat to American interests and values. Moscow does, however, tend to pursue policies that the Bush administration will undoubtedly seek to discourage. These include its efforts to reestablish control over some states of the former USSR (especially Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia). Moreover, Moscow has not only been opposing American and British efforts to maintain UN sanctions against Iraq, but it has been making overtures to the rogue regime of Saddam Hussein. In Iran, the Russians have been providing nuclear technology that could allow the Teheran regime to acquire a weapon of its own. On missile defense, the Russians have been actively opposing American efforts, even though these are directed at rogue states such as North Korea. Overall, the Putin government has been following a policy of opposing American influence. Under these circumstances, the task for the Bush administration will be to signal to the Russians that these policies are a serious obstacle to better relations, and that their continuation lessens Russia's opportunities to gain the kind of access to Western capital and technology needed for its own pressing internal problems.

Third, China poses unique problems and choices. Previous administrations have struggled with the balance

between engaging Beijing in order to foster economic modernization and development that could make China a more open and pluralistic society, or confronting the regime in order to deter it from threatening Taiwan, supplying missile and nuclear technology to would-be proliferators, and threatening American interests more broadly. This is not an easy task. An economically dynamic China has opted to increase military spending by more than 17% in an ongoing modernization and strengthening of its armed forces, and China is continuing to deploy ICBMs aimed at the United States while bitterly criticizing Bush proposals for missile defense. On yet another issue, Chinese firms have reportedly been installing fiber optic communications cables that would upgrade Iraqi anti-aircraft capability against American and British aircraft enforcing the no-fly zones. How to orchestrate a mix of incentives and disincentives in shaping China's behavior will thus be a crucial test for the new Bush administration. At the same time, it will need to provide reassurance to Japan and South Korea that its policies can be effective while avoiding both overreaction and retrenchment.

Fourth, the Middle East, including both the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Persian Gulf, represents perhaps the most dangerous single foreign policy challenge for the United States. The problem of Iraq is particularly vexing, and Saddam Hussein's defiance of UN weapons inspections as well as the weakening of sanctions against his brutal regime have been among the earliest issues for the Bush foreign policy team. An initial choice will concern whether to implement a more ambitious policy aimed at ousting Saddam. A number of Bush administration foreign policymakers, including Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, previously criticized the Clinton administration's failure to actively support and arm an Iraqi opposition, but it remains to be seen whether this approach or one aimed mainly at reinvigorating sanctions ("smart sanctions" aimed specifically at Iraq's production of weapons of mass destruction) will gain the most support. In any case, Saddam's undiminished effort to develop nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and to link these with missiles is certain to be a preoccupation for the Bush administration.

By contrast, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is less likely to receive the kind of intense attention devoted to it by the Clinton administration.

The outbreak of violence that began in late September 2000, as well as Yasser Arafat's rejection of the most far-reaching peace proposals ever put forward, provide, in my judgement, clear evidence that the Palestinian leadership is currently unwilling to end the conflict with Israel. Under these circumstances, the key task for the Bush administration will be to deter escalation to a wider war while awaiting a time when violence subsides and some form of interim negotiation becomes feasible. During this period, it will be important both to show firm support for Israel, in order to discourage wishful thinking by its hardline Arab opponents that they can somehow prevail, while maintaining effective communication with Arab leaders.

Connected to the above problems is the related but distinct challenge of how to reshape America's defense policy for the 21st Century. Though the topic has been raised during the past decade, the Bush administration has undertaken what promises to be the most serious and sustained effort at an overall review and redesign of the military, taking into account the changed world of the post-Cold War era as well as the revolution in military technology and precision-guided weaponry. Issues of missile defense and threats from weapons of mass destruction and terrorism have an important place in this assessment as well.

The United States continues to occupy a unique role in world affairs. In each of the areas of foreign and security policy cited here, as well as in trade, international economic policy, and non-traditional foreign policy arenas such as the environment, climate change, disease, refugees and humanitarian intervention, international cooperation is rarely effective without an active American role. The task for the new Bush administration will thus be to face these multiple challenges in such a way that it provides leadership without becoming overextended, maintains American primacy, engages other countries to act jointly wherever possible, and sustains domestic support for the policies and the level of resources needed to carry them out effectively. This role is not only indispensable internationally, but it reflects the critical national interests of the United States. ●

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