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Session Notes

Foreign Policy in a New Administration

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Coit Blacker

I have three contextual observations about foreign policy in the Obama administration. The first is the primacy of domestic politics. Elections are based on domestic issues, not foreign policy like they used to be. When the economy is struggling, people are going to care about those things that affect them most. But the foreign policy challenges the Obama administration is facing cannot be ignored, so the administration will probably privilege the domestic agenda optically while working on and implementing an effective foreign policy.

The second observation is the continuity in foreign policy across administrations. There is continuity in what constitutes national interests, so the differences that exist are the means administrations choose to employ to address these interests. The people who design and implement foreign policy all go to the same schools—they have the same way of thinking about foreign policy.

Yet the transition from Bush to Obama will be more dramatic than usual. Obama is signaling an openness to communication and negotiation rather than the reliance on military force that Bush displayed. Obama must be careful, however, not to suggest a reluctance to use force and erode his domestic political support by increasing the risk of an attack—if another attack were to occur under these circumstances, it would be a huge political blow.

The third observation is that the personality of our new president is like nothing we've seen before. His colleagues assure us that he is as calm and sure-footed as he appears. He grew up in two “exotic” locales, so he can see and understand things through the eyes of others more easily. He also has a greater capacity for empathy, which is an extraordinary political gift. He is not about taking someone down for his own political advancement (though he's not Mother Theresa). And he did not become a political machine in the most mechanical political arena—Chicago.

The first priority of the Obama administration, as indicated by his appointment of Larry Summers as chair of the National Economic Council, is to restore faith and

confidence in the financial state of the U.S. and global economy. Other critical issues include:

- the threat posed by transnational terrorism;
- the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;
- global warming;
- the depletion of natural resources; and
- infectious diseases.

President Obama needs to deal with issues simultaneously to draw attention to the areas where an absence of U.S. leadership has been most obvious.

Obama faces critical situations around the world. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, we're seeing terrorism and an intra-Pakistan war. His appointments of Jim Jones as national security advisor and Hilary Clinton as secretary of state indicate his seriousness about these issues. They'll be heavy hitters in both the Pentagon and the White House, but it is important that they pull in the same direction. We've seen that the center of foreign policy has shifted from the Pentagon to the National Security Council and the State Department.

Iran is the most dangerous situation, with Hamas and Hezbollah: No one has a credible strategy yet. The choices Obama faces are isolate or engage—I believe he will engage.

In Korea, we could bribe them to release their nuclear program, but how much are we willing to pay?

Africa presents problems with failing or failed states, endless violence, human rights disasters, and threats to neighbors and people. The question at the United Nations is where to send troops, when and who will pay the bill.

Russia is an energy superpower that is making a claim on foreign Soviet space and trying to take advantage of the European Union. Though oil and gas compose 60 percent of the government's revenue, their economy doesn't look good. They've been propping the ruble, and their stock market lost two-thirds of its value in seven months.

They're facing conflict in the Caucasus, in Georgia, where the United States is not prepared to send troops. There the lack of a response emboldens Russia despite its economic challenges. There are also problems in the Baltic region, Estonia and Latvia, and the Ukraine.

Obama's hardest challenge is to restore the United States' status in the world. The rest of the planet thinks we've taken leave of our senses since the Global War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq. The image of the United States as global bully is the greatest terror threat of all, and reversing it will take actions. However, we must take this step without endangering our national security. Obama's team is experienced and intelligent, so they may be able to do it.

Stephen Krasner

Barack Obama's greatness as president will depend on his success domestically. In foreign policy, on the other hand, there are no big wins, only big losses.

One of two clear opportunities Obama faces is to lessen the nuclear threat. The United States should move toward zero nuclear weapons—some of Stanford’s professors have been working on this plan. This is an attractive initiative, as it will change dynamics and increase America’s standing. The initial steps aren’t dangerous. The final steps, the difficult steps, won’t come up during Obama’s term or even in his lifetime, as it will take 30 to 40 years to get there.

The second clear opportunity is to address global warming. It’s something we can do regardless of what other countries do, and it will improve our standing in the world.

Another action Obama could take is to close Guantanamo, though it’s not a clear winner politically. Closing Guantanamo was the right thing to say, but the hard problems have been left unresolved. One is what to do with people who are dangerous but not prosecutable; another is that if detainees who have been released launch an attack, that would damage the presidency.

It’s the ticking time bomb problem: Some methods work only with a lot of time, and coercive techniques might be more effective.

Too much restraint in foreign policy can be a problem, though it is a good thing in dealing with allies, as they want their opinions to count. We should not exaggerate the benefits of multilateral policy. For example, it is unlikely that we will get any more contributions from Europe in Afghanistan because they have different views from us on this issue.

We’re hostages to Iraq right now. We’re also hostages to Iran—they want us to bleed but not collapse in Iraq, or they want us to withdraw and leave Iraq as an ally of Iran. A collapsed Iraq is bad for Iran, and a stable Iraq allied with the United States is bad for Iran. The most likely outcome is that a relatively stable Iraq will lean toward Iran. We won’t get the best outcome in Iraq because of Iran. Iran probably also worries about the United States allying with Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, the government is corrupt, which is not helpful to the Taliban. Afghanistan has a lot of leverage: It doesn’t want Iraq to fall apart either, but it doesn’t have identical interests.

Pakistan is suffering attacks from the Taliban. While the government is concerned with terrorist activity, India is a bigger threat. Pakistan is a country with nuclear weapons, and the Talibanization of Pakistan would be terrible. The hope is that the country will be tolerably governed, decentralized, detached from terror and OK with the United States.

Will we have mutual responsibility and mutual respect in the Middle East? The oil wealth in the Muslim world makes democracy impossible. Should we impose economic sanctions on Iran? Europeans haven’t cracked down, and we would need help from Russia and China on the Security Council, though they’re anxious about that.

A possibility is a naval blockade, but that would be considered an act of war that we’d have to be prepared for. Israel is trying to convince us to take a military strike because we could do it better and because we’d be blamed for it anyway. I predict that there will be a nuclear armed Iran.

We could reach out our hand to the Muslim world, but it will be difficult to get them to grasp it in friendship.

Foreign aid is not in our interests. Empirical studies show that it’s not really helping,

and possibly having a negative effect in Africa.

We have pretty good relationships with the major powers in the world, such as China. But trying to change the domestic structure of another country (state-building) is difficult, yet important as many of these countries are a threat to humanity and to the United States.

Working with Pakistan does not require the same approach as working with China.

Picture a semi-submersible vehicle used to smuggle cocaine. It's not detectable by radar; there are more than 10 of them; they can carry a nuclear weapon.