

US 2008 and foreign policy: what to expect from a John McCain presidency

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The 2008 campaign will present the US electorate with perhaps the clearest choice between Republican and Democratic candidates and their platforms since the 1972 contest between George McGovern and Richard Nixon. While there are overlapping positions among the top three candidates in both domestic and foreign policy, there are also stark differences in approaches, style and substance. The degree of continuity or discontinuity with the previous administration's policies after November will, of course, depend on who wins the election and the complexion of the Congress that is elected.

Health care, social security, job creation and the economy have received much attention from the candidates, but in the debates and elsewhere they have had to respond continually to foreign policy questions, particularly the war in Iraq and occasionally, on US policy towards Iran. What is missing is more detail on other issues including Israel, the Middle East and especially Afghanistan. Democratic candidates are placing themselves at some distance from the Iraq fiasco. The Republican candidates, with the exception of libertarian Ron Paul, all support continuing the war and the current "surge" of troops. Yet, it is interesting to note that in speeches and debates the Republicans generally mention Reagan numerous times and hardly mention Bush at all. This is undoubtedly because of his low approval ratings which in turn are driven primarily by the rising unpopularity of the war in Iraq. In general, people outside the US (Europeans for example) worry that in terms of foreign policy, all three leading candidates are too formed in the post-9/11 mold.

While the nature of such an essay is necessarily speculative, we have some good indications of what John McCain really thinks and will probably do because Senator McCain has been in Congress for 26 years and has staked out his views and policy positions for some time. It is useful, then, to place McCain in his political context as well as examining his political and ideological persona. Despite criticism that McCain is too liberal by the Republican hard right, the Arizona senator has solid conservative credentials, even for a conservative society like the US. He has described his record as that of a mainstream conservative, appealing broadly across the centre-right political spectrum to create a "big-tent" party. He is pro-business, an economic supply-sider, and supports smaller government, low taxes for individuals and corporations, free trade, secure borders, and a strong military and defense policy, while opposing abortion and gun control.

He continually displays these bedrock beliefs in his campaign rhetoric, infusing his speeches with Bush-era phrases like: "Our purpose is to keep this blessed country free, safe, prosperous and proud....liberty is a right conferred by our Creator, not by governments ...[and] the state's

function is to minimise its sway over the society while pursuing its first obligation: protecting the liberty and property of its citizens." He reiterates that the major concern of conservatives like him is the threat of radical Islamic extremism and that he is the candidate best qualified to keep the nation safe. Because of the continued threat from terrorists whom he describes as "moral monsters....led by an apocalyptic zeal that celebrates murder," the country needs to remain tough on national security. In this sense McCain is still running on a variant of the fear-baiting, politics of dread orchestrated so masterfully by the Republican Party in the post 9-11 electoral campaigns.

Yet, McCain is clearly not conservative enough for many Republicans. Angering social conservatives, he opposed a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage and supports stem cell research. Economic conservatives did not warm to his initial opposition to Bush's tax cuts and campaign finance reform and both are skeptical of his original "soft-line" on immigration policy. He is not as emphatically sympathetic to evangelicals as they might want and has at times criticised evangelical leaders; in the 2000 primary campaign he branded the Reverends Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson as "agents of intolerance". The Republican right is also unforgiving of his apostasy on not supporting tax cuts but also see him as too "liberal" in opposing harsh measures (ie: torture) for detainees in the war on terror and the use of Guantánamo to circumvent both US and international law on holding prisoners. Right-wing commentator Ann Coulter declared recently that she would vote for Clinton as the more conservative choice of the two.

His basic problem is not with his bending of principles - all the candidates must do that if they are to win in the presidential (as opposed to parliamentary) system used in the US. His real challenge is to unify a fractured Republican Party wary of their nominee. As Ryan Lizza writes in the February 24 issue of *The New Yorker*, "McCain has, in effect, stumbled to the head of a party brimming with ferment". He must mollify his right wing while still appealing enough to the center to win in November. He is stuck somewhat between scylla and charybdis: if he veers to the right to cajole votes out of the Republican hard-right he stands to lose the independent vote. If he hews too close to the center to capture the independents, he may very well lose the right and evangelical wings of the party.

According to analysts and recent polls the best chance McCain has of winning the White House and staying the Bush course in foreign policy to the extent that I believe he will, is in a contest with Clinton. With nearly half the country giving her negative ratings (more than any other candidate at this moment), McCain could be the default beneficiary of an anti-Clinton tide, should she be nominated. Those independents and undecideds may either stay home or cast their vote for McCain if she is the alternative. Recent match-up polls bear out that Obama does better against McCain than Clinton. Obama wins by 7 while she loses by 12, with the 19-point differential mirroring the gap between the two in the most recent primaries.

McCain's Foreign Policy

At first glance John McCain's foreign policy appears to be a sort of trimmed down version of Bush's militarism but with the kind of detailed plans that the arrogant Rumsfeld scorned. His vision is not that of a neoconservative with its emphasis on muscular unilateralism, preemptive wars and military adventures to remake countries and reconfigure regions. McCain's vision is rather that of a more traditional, patriotic, pro-military, empire-defending conservative. Although he does not articulate it quite the same way, like the Democrats, he feels that Bush's foreign policy has led the country astray in many respects. Unlike the Democrats, he says this only in private. And more than the two Democratic candidates, McCain still sees the US role as that of the post-Cold War "global sheriff," a role he is proud to uphold, defend and enhance.

Among a host of conservative foreign policy advisers he counts Henry Kissinger who is an unabashed McCain publicist and supporter; neoconservatives like Robert Kagan, William Kristol, Randy Scheunemann, and Gary Schmitt. The latter three have been active in the Project for a New American Century, a major intellectual force in promoting the invasion of Iraq to topple the regime of Sadaam Hussein. McCain's advisory group is also tempered with more moderate conservatives like Brent Scowcroft, Colin Powell and Niall Ferguson.

A moderate alternative

In his approach to the environment, multilateral relations and diplomacy, and the issue of torture, McCain distinguishes himself from current administration-policies.

Environment/climate change

Like the Democratic contenders, McCain is favourably disposed to tackling environmental issues. In contrast to Bush's dismal record McCain wants to pursue a global agreement on climate protection - although warning that this would have to include India and China. Alone among his former Republican rivals, McCain proposes a "cap and trade" system for carbon emissions similar to the Democrats.

Multilateralism

In place of Bush's unilateralism McCain is more willing to consult and act in concert with allied nations to confront international problems. He has pledged more respect for European allies, NATO and the UN than the Bush administration demonstrated in the run-up to the war in Iraq. The most ambitious expression of this idea is his proposal for a "League of Democracies" to take action when the UN fails to do so and to be involved in political and moral suasion and humanitarian missions. Regarding Europe, McCain has said one of his top foreign policy priorities will be to revitalise the transatlantic partnership and that "Americans should welcome the rise of a strong, confident European Union". Apart from common security concerns, he has stressed that the alliance's future lies in developing a common energy policy, creating a transatlantic common market and institutionalising cooperation on issues such as climate change, foreign assistance, and democracy promotion.

Terrorism and torture

McCain harps on the threat of terrorism in the form of "radical Islamic extremism" almost as much as Bush, claiming it to be his major concern and asserting that he is the best qualified to keep this nation safe. To his credit McCain has distanced himself from the Bush administration on the issue of torturing suspects and on detainee rights. He is the only candidate to have experienced torture, having been a prisoner for five and a half years of the North Vietnamese (1967-1973), and the only leading Republican contender publicly to denounce torture. He has opposed the Bush administration's justification of torture and declared that as president he would announce that "we [the US] are not ever going to torture anyone held in American custody". Like his Democratic rivals, he would close the prison at Guantánamo Bay, moving prisoners within US jurisdiction to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In fact, the three leading contenders all part with the policies of George Bush and his vice-president, Dick Cheney, on the use of torture. Col. (ret.)

Larry Wilkerson, former chief of staff to General (ret) and Secretary of State Colin Powell, says “we can safely say that whoever among them becomes the next president would never entertain the idea of torture as a useful instrument of US policy”.

McCain has created the impression of being a courageous voice for sanity and the rule of law in the post 9-11 world. Indeed, he would abandon Bush’s most egregious, embarrassing and wrong-headed tactics in the war on terrorism. Yet, as he has embraced the fundamentals of other domestic and foreign policies of the past seven years, he would accept the administration’s most basic assumption in the case of counter-terrorism: that terrorist suspects are in a unique category and not subject to the same US or international legal regime as either US citizens or prisoners of war.

Take, for example, the Military Commissions Act (MCA), which McCain, after initially opposing, helped craft as a “compromise” and then spearheaded through the Senate. The MCA contains language protecting the rights of the accused and prohibiting cruel and unusual punishment. However, in actual practice it allows for the introduction of evidence obtained by coercion and blocks the courts’ power to declare interrogation methods as torture and therefore illegal. It sanctions secret prisons and denies Guantánamo prisoners the right to a trial in the US. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the MCA sets up special commissions to judge the guilt of Guantánamo prisoners, in effect nullifying US obligations under the Geneva Conventions. It is revealing that McCain voted against an amendment that would have preserved habeas corpus in the bill, a right, guaranteed in the US Constitution, by which detainees could challenge their confinement in court. Thus, while McCain may inveigh against torture, he has in fact enabled the Bush administration to keep on torturing, defining their interrogation techniques as they wish—all without serious legal challenge. It is worth noting that McCain has again backpedalled by voting against a recent bill to prevent the CIA. from physically abusing prisoners during interrogations.

The Middle East:

Israel

The candidates’ attitudes toward the Middle East will play a central role in defining the two parties and their presidential aspirants in the general election. There is little disagreement on Israel among the three: a continuation of strong US support for the defense of Israel. Obama has made some remarks which indicate he does not equate Likud with Israel and that the Palestinians are among “the most oppressed people on earth” and deserve a fair hearing. Conservative and pro-Israeli Jewish groups in the US at this point are more skeptical about Obama’s commitment than either of the other two candidates and more likely to support McCain or Clinton.

Iraq

In Mid-East policy the greatest distance between McCain and the Democrats is over Iraq and Iran; regarding the former he is quite vocal in supporting a military solution; in the latter he has - at least rhetorically - taken a more bellicose, hardline stance, similar to the counterproductive belligerence of Bush’s approach.

Despite the growing disenchantment with the war in Iraq, McCain affirms proudly that he has always supported military operations in Iraq, “even at a time when that position was not very popular within the Republican Party”. He distinguishes his position from the Democrats by

seeing Iraq in Bush-like terms as the frontline in the war on terrorism, rejecting Clinton and Obama's proposed schedule for withdrawal which he believes will finally release the floodgates of violence on the Iraqi population. Most alarming, he pictures a triumphant and emboldened Al-Qaeda reaping a great propaganda coup from a US defeat and enlarging its scope of activities to attack the US directly. He accuses the Democratic candidates of proposing an arbitrary timetable for withdrawal "designed for the sake of political expediency and which recklessly ignores the profound human calamity and dire threats to our security that would ensue" and which underestimates the fallout benefiting Iran.

For McCain, the mistake was not going in with more troops; thus, he favours increasing troop levels, confident in the judgment of US commanders that the solution there is military and their mistakes were mainly military. He subscribes to the Powell doctrine, which states that if you are going to enter into a conflict, you go in with overwhelming force and get it done as quickly as possible. This means McCain would invest even more in a war that is costing \$10 billion a month already, would continue it into the foreseeable future if necessary, while at the same time keeping the Bush tax cuts and balancing the out of control budget. (This is to happen somewhat magically, even with cuts in special spending). Despite his image as a straight-talker and war-hero, McCain's continuation of the war and its costs to US taxpayers may be a difficult sell in the general election - especially if the economy continues its downhill slide.

Many observers believe that, given his straightforward position supporting the war in Iraq, the recent "surge" and his campaign promise to pursue victory there, his political fortunes will turn on the tide of the conflict. If Iraq is going well, he has a good shot at being president; if it looks bad to the US public or the perspective is of a bloody stalemate, he will probably lose. McCain admitted as much in a campaign aside in late February (25th) - which he then quickly retracted.

Iran

With regard to Iran McCain would continue Washington's current policy of not talking directly to Teheran; he speaks only of organising a concert of nations to apply sanctions and other punishments until Iran disavows its nuclear ambitions and changes its rhetoric on Israel. He accuses Clinton and Obama of not seriously addressing the threat posed by an Iran with nuclear ambitions against a US ally, Israel, and the entire region.

Voters may remember more his foolish insinuation that we should bomb Iran (punning to the lyrics of the Beach Boys' *Barbara Ann*: "Bomb, bomb Iran"). Despite the report of the declassified National Intelligence Estimate report, which stated its "high confidence" that "in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program," McCain's position on Iran appears to be fundamentally indistinguishable from the hardline bellicosity of the Bush-Cheney team. His recent remarks at a panel discussion ("Bush's choice", Feb. 9-10) reprised the old fear-mongering argument (offering no supporting evidence) about Iran's "ambitions....which are as old as history: a Persian domination of the region".

Afghanistan

It stands to reason that a candidate who favours winning the war in Iraq and has offered no policy changes from the US' present military strategy is also committed in equal measure to victory in Afghanistan. McCain has not discussed rethinking what is in many respects a failed US strategy or veering from the current course which emphasises pressuring NATO allies to augment

the US effort with more of their troops and more involvement in the fighting in the south and east. The Democratic contenders are sending clear signals that they want to wind down the war in Iraq in order to refocus attention and resources on the war in Afghanistan. McCain seems to want to fight on both fronts simultaneously, although generally agreeing with some US military leaders to privilege Iraq. For example, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Michael Mullen, told the House Armed Services Committee last December that Afghanistan “is by design and necessity an economy-of-force operation... Our main focus, militarily, in the region and in the world right now is rightly and firmly in Iraq.... In Afghanistan, we do what we can... In Iraq, we do what we must”.¹

How much difference would McCain make in US foreign policy?

What we have is a Republican candidate who in some measure mirrors Bush’s domestic and foreign policies - albeit in a sort of “Bush-lite” version. With regard to Iraq and Iran he has been arguably more hard-nosed and bellicose in his recent rhetoric than the Bush administration. But if McCain has not repudiated Bush’s approach or the basic contours of US foreign policy in the last seven years, there are some noteworthy shifts expressed in his positions during the campaign. His embrace of multilateralism offers a refreshing antidote to the clumsy and counterproductive diplomacy of the Bush years (At one point it seemed that Donald Rumsfeld was the only bull who carried his own china shop with him wherever he went). His past commitment to dialogue with Europe and his assurance during the campaign leave little doubt that a McCain administration would have more credibility with its NATO allies. His vow to banish torture and to close Guantánamo are important distinctions separating him from the current administration. His pledge to pursue a successor treaty to Kyoto, disowned by the Bush administration, and his general attitudes toward the issue of environmental protection place him very near the stance of his Democratic rivals. Finally, however, McCain’s support for free trade and the NAFTA agreement places him at odds with the Democrats, but squarely in the Bush camp.

McCain now faces something of a dilemma. He has tacked to the right to gain support of party conservatives and necessarily tied himself to the Bush legacy—especially on Iraq. But the mood of voters is increasingly negative on Bush’s handling of his presidency and over 70 percent of the US public now believes the war was a mistake. A Democrat like Obama has some clear running room on any Republican this strongly identified with the outgoing administration. McCain could tack again to the center and separate himself more prominently from Bush’s foreign policies, especially the administration’s strategy in Iraq. But there are two problems with this: first, he will undermine his reputation as a straight-talking independent and a man of unwavering principles; and second, he simply cannot backtrack on Iraq because he has been too invested for too long in that now unpopular war. In a sense, and at the risk of oversimplification, like Bush and Clinton, McCain has wagered his political career on Iraq. The gamble, so far, has proven to be the undoing of Bush and a tactical mistake for Clinton. A prescient individual might have understood the stakes on the eve of the invasion in 2003. US political fortunes would be determined for some time to come by the degree of the war’s success or the amount of Iraqi resistance to it. So far such an assessment has been proven right.

¹ CNN, Associated Press (AP), December 11, 2007.

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