

Some observations on the election of Obama

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The 2008 campaign has probably offered the American electorate the clearest choice between Republican and Democratic candidates and their programmes since the 1972 contest between George McGovern and Richard Nixon. Although the candidates' positions have coincided on certain issues (more on foreign than domestic policy), there has been a marked difference between them in approach, style and content. The degree of continuity or change from January 2009 with respect to the policies of the previous administration will likewise depend on the nature of the newly elected Congress.

Although Senator Obama was considered the most progressive member of the US Senate in 2007 by the National Journal, it is widely felt that it has not been easy for him to adopt a progressive foreign policy agenda and that, even then, his stance remains cautious.

However, Obama amounts, in short, to a change in the White House with respect to what we have witnessed over the last eight years. Despite recently adopting the Obama mantra about change, John McCain basically represented a prolongation of the Bush era. In the Senate, McCain voted alongside Bush on more than 90 percent of occasions and only when the economy suffered its worst crisis since 1929 did he deliberately distance himself from the current administration. And McCain generally gave full backing to the Bush administration's foreign policy.

Can changes be expected in foreign policy?

General

Campaign promises, shaped by the demands of a variety of electoral groups, generally tend not to be worth the paper they are written on. Sometimes the pointers they offer in the electoral period can lead to confusion. George.W.Bush's electoral promise to rectify the Clinton years and carry out a "humble" foreign policy serves well enough by way of example. Speculation is always prone to error and, by its very nature, a risky business.

Apart from his call to pull out of Iraq (his opposition to the war in Iraq since 2002 has distanced him from any other presidential candidate) and his inclination to negotiate with unsavoury regimes, Barack Obama usually aligns himself with mainstream opinion in his foreign policy thinking. Even on the question of Iraq, where he has been most forthright, Obama has extended the timetable for troop withdrawal in the last year or two. In Afghanistan, the absence of new strategic thinking and his proposal to increase US and NATO troops is more or less in line with the Bush administration's position. In the same vein, Obama might also end up adopting a politically safe, centrist approach to Israel, somewhat like Clinton, which would look pretty much like the current policy, even if he is likely to pay more attention to the issue.

This said, it can be reasonably expected that the Obama Presidency will be somewhat more progressive in its general way of thinking. During the campaign, his foreign policy advisors have been markedly more Dovish than their Republican opponents. For now, Obama will need to consolidate his credibility as leader before he can adopt any drastically different position on foreign policy. The “absolute democratic majorities” in both Houses will help Obama take risks and advocate a more audacious agenda. In this context, Obama may simply overcome his pragmatic and cautious side and summon up the qualities of compassion, understanding and inclusiveness which the public has glimpsed in the past.

Climate change

Unlike Bush’s terrible record on the issue, and just like the McCain campaign, Obama is pre-disposed to tackling environmental concerns. He would support a world agreement on climate protection, albeit warning that it would have to include India and China. He is also in favour of “carbon trading” to limit carbon monoxide emissions.

The global war on terror

Obama has been very critical of the Bush administration’s policies related to the war on terror. In an article in July 2007 in *Foreign Affairs*, Obama described the response of the Bush administration to the 9/11 attacks as “conventional thinking of the past, largely viewing problems as state-based and principally amenable to military solutions”. As a result of the action taken under the umbrella of the war on terror, Obama states “the world has lost trust in our purposes and our principles”. With respect to Iraq, he has pointed out that it is not “nor has it ever been” a main front of the fight against terrorism. Obama has called for the strengthening of counter-terrorism activities in Afghanistan and the tribal regions of Pakistan, as well as the bolstering of police forces and the work of the intelligence services to continue the fight against global terrorism.

Free Trade

With Obama, we will see somebody with greater protectionist sympathies in the White House than a Republican administration led by either Bush or McCain. Obama has been especially critical of the North American Free Trade Agreement (or NAFTA), signed by the United States, Canada and Mexico. Since the NAFTA vote in 1994, the Democratic Party – though not always its representatives in Congress – has gradually adopted a more protectionist stance, ever more cautious about trade agreements, whether they be bilateral or multilateral. Labour unions link the loss of almost three million jobs in American industry from the year 2000 to liberalisation and free trade.

However, it is likely that Senator Obama, as his voting record in the Senate has shown (voting in favour of some agreements), will be a somewhat cautious and prudent defender of free trade. Nonetheless, it ought to be remembered that neither Obama nor the Democrat party have clearly established positions on the question of free trade, nor should it be forgotten that the Democrats receive donations from export industries (for their votes in the Senate).

Obama and Latin America

Obama has adopted a moderate position in relation to Latin America, an issue which has figured lower down on both the national and international agenda in comparison with other issues during the last year of the electoral campaign. No doubt government policy will leave behind the Bush administration’s national security obsession, focusing instead on policies more in keeping with those of the Clinton era. Obama has committed himself to a relationship with the south of the continent based on support for the development of democracies in the region,

which necessarily implies the defense of human rights and social justice, as well as opposition to unconstitutional regimes (for example, coups d'état). Moreover, his aim is to put an end to the US pattern of supporting regimes which benefit American interests one way or another. Just as Obama has said with respect to Iran, the new administration will be willing to hold talks with both Venezuela and Cuba. Like McCain, the Democratic candidate has promised to close the prison in Guantanamo bay, Cuba. Nevertheless, he has indicated that he will maintain the embargo on that country, because he believes it provides a good level of pressure to bring about democratic reforms on the island.

Obama will increase North American support for a reasonable and conventional programme of public and private incentives on basic matters, such as training, micro-credits and community development programmes. As for immigration over the Mexico border, he has talked about reforming the law in general terms, but supported the construction of the wall, more than 1.000 kilometers long, stretching along the southern frontier of the United States. Both Obama and the candidate for the vice presidency, Joe Biden, have demonstrated their agreement with Plan Colombia and its multimillion dollar budget to control and eliminate the production and trafficking of cocaine and other narcotics.

This has not prevented Obama from criticising – even in writing — the government and the Colombian army for human rights violations, which has served as his main argument in opposing the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Colombia.

Individual cases

Israel-Palestine

Barack Obama will inherit one of the oldest and most dangerous conflicts in the world, the one between Israel and Palestine, whose solution seems further away than ever. In the short term, a change by the Obama presidency in basic US-Israel policy is unlikely; there are more pressing problems to attend to. Although Obama can be situated in the traditional pro-Israel policy of the Democratic Party, he is the only candidate whose comments in the past have revealed a greater understanding of the issues which affect both sides of the conflict, and sympathies for the difficulties suffered by the Palestinians. For example, unlike other high profile politicians, he has stated that the Palestinians are one of “the most oppressed peoples on earth” and deserve to be listened to impartially. Obama showed no fear in discussing Middle East politics at a dinner in Chicago with the late Edward Said, the Palestinian intellectual, or in suggesting he would meet with the Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad.

Obama now needs to establish the legitimacy and credibility of the United States as an “honest mediator” in the region. The first step is to underline his commitment to human rights and social justice. And Obama must demonstrate his determination and strength of mind for these efforts to be turned into an effective process leading to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

An Obama presidency may be capable of coming up with a new internationalist vision – which has been lacking over the last eight years - in order to obtain both security for the Israelis and justice for the Palestinians and the return of their territory— all within a “two state” solution. Obama needs to summon the will to pursue this vision as aggressively as he has done in his own presidential campaign. In contrast to the unilateralist presumptions of the Bush presidency, the philosophy on which this vision is based converges to a greater or lesser degree with the European approach to the conflict. If this scenario comes to pass, it is crucial that Europe be ready to work with the new administration in bolstering a serious vision of peace for the conflict-ridden region. But as FRIDE Associate Researcher Henry Siegan puts it:

“...an initiative that goes beyond the failed ‘facilitation’ of previous administrations to vigorous and determined diplomacy...will surely be the last US opportunity to salvage a two-state solution”

Iraq

Unlike both Bush and McCain’s stance, Obama 1) does not see Iraq as the front line of the war on terror, and 2) doesn’t see the military commitment as something indefinite and proposes a timetable for US troop withdrawal – at present there are 150.000 soldiers in the country - in 16 months. The situation in Iraq continues to be unstable, with no firm economic and political agreements between Iraqi parties and groups, and without an agreement on the status of the forces there (or SOFA). Washington wants an agreement guaranteeing the presence of US troops until 2011, something which the majority of Iraqis oppose, and the UN mandate expires at the end of this year. So Iraq is going to be another hot-potato for the new administration.

Iran

Obama has frequently used the same rhetoric as the Republicans to describe the threat from Tehran. For example, in a speech in 2007 at the AIPAC (the main pro-Israel Jewish lobby), he described Iran as “one of the major threats to the United States, Israel and world peace”. He has also declared that no alternative can be ruled out, including the very serious and unthinkable option of war with Iran. The Senator from Illinois has also co-sponsored a bill to impose further sanctions on Iran and supported the Bush administration’s criticism of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

However, Obama’s record in the Senate on Iran is less hostile than the Republicans and many Democrats. For example, unlike John McCain, he refused to back the Senate declaration in 2007 which called for the United States to designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard a foreign terrorist organisation and include it in the list of “Specially Designated Global Terrorists”, with the appropriate sanctions. But the most notable and striking difference between Obama and McCain or Bush is his proposal that the United States enter into dialogue with Iran without any pre-conditions. He proposes negotiating the nuclear issue directly, using the threat of military force and the toughest sanctions, with the aim of offering Tehran the prospect of an economic and political incentive package. This would include trading credits and membership of the WTO. His position with respect to Iran, more than any other factor, has weighed in favour of McCain over Obama for Israelis.

Afghanistan

To date, Obama has offered no change in policy with respect to current American military strategy in Afghanistan. He has lamented the use of bombing raids which lead to the death of civilians as tragic and counterproductive in winning the battle of “hearts and minds” against the insurgents. But like Bush and McCain, he is committed – at least in his rhetoric - to securing victory over the insurgents in the country. Obama has made no mention of re-thinking what is, in many respects, a failed American strategy, or of changing the current course of the war, which stresses putting pressure on NATO allies to add to US efforts with more troops of their own and an increasing participation in the fighting in the south and east of the country. Obama’s campaign has insisted he wants to gradually wind down the war in Iraq with the aim of centering his attention and resources on the war in Afghanistan.

During his visit in July 2008, Obama described Afghanistan as the “central front” in the fight against terrorism and called for the immediate redeployment of some combat forces from Iraq to Afghanistan. He has stated that, as president, he will request an additional billion dollars in humanitarian and economic aid (not only for Kabul, but also for the provinces) and that he will send at least two more combat brigades (9.000-10.000 troops) to the country, underlining Washington’s commitment to seek a greater contribution from the allies – in particular, from Western Europe—and NATO. Finally, he refuses to rule out negotiating with the Taliban, a possibility he thinks should be explored. According to a statement made by experts on November 1st, this is a critical moment in the country and the United States only has a few months to try and turn the deteriorating situation around. The same experts went on to emphasise how vital it is that the new president formulate a plan for Afghanistan before the 20th of January, 2009.

Pakistan

In 2007, Obama indicated he might support a unilateral response to the incursion of combatants from Pakistan into Afghanistan. He said he would cross the Afghan border without consulting with Islamabad if he had intelligence on Al-Qaeda positions inside Pakistan at his disposal, by-passing the issue of national sovereignty. Although he was harshly criticised by political opponents (and Pakistani leaders), that is essentially Washington’s position, officially announced in September. Obama has also strongly criticised the Bush Administration for having backed Musharaff and for the amount of military assistance which Pakistan has received in contrast to the scant quantities provided in development aid. Obama’s vice-president, Joseph Biden, has proposed tripling the amount of US humanitarian aid to Pakistan to 1.5 billion dollars a year and Obama has put new emphasis on the construction of schools and infrastructure in the country.

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