

Obama's Foreign Policy Between Dreaming and Doing

Alexander Moens and Inu Barbee

Barack Obama's Political Personality and Presidential Style

Barack Obama's presidential character and decision style is dominated by three traits. He is intellectually curious and has a taste for philosophical reflection. His willingness to understand perspectives other than his own and his rejection of rigid ideology makes him lean towards relative rather than absolute values. Finally, Obama has a practical side which calls for pragmatism and compromise.

Obama reveals his intellectual curiosity and philosophical bend in his first book, *Dreams from My Father* which was published in 1995 while he was yet an unknown figure in American politics.¹ Born of a Kenyan father who attended the University of Hawaii as a foreign student and an American mother who grew up in Kansas, Obama beautifully records the long intellectual and emotional journey he undertook to find his identity and his philosophical roots. Having finally retrieved his Kenyan roots and his Indonesian passage, Obama is better able to appreciate his being an 'American'. He clearly has a penchant for reflection and a desire to understand others around him. Understanding different sides to an issue is part of his presidential decision-making process. The Obama Administration was criticized in the fall of 2009 for "dithering" in taking three months to decide on a 'new' strategy in Afghanistan.² Different options advocated by Vice President Joe Biden and General Stanley McChrystal were aired in public. But Obama was not worried about 'conflict' or competition among his advisors and would not be hurried into a decision.

Obama is very comfortable about his American identity, but it nevertheless remains complex. He is an African American but he did not really grow up immersed in that culture. Most of his early years were spent in Hawaii where his grandparents on his mother's side played a leading role in raising young Barack. Theirs and his mother's appetite for racial and cultural diversity and dislike for ideological or religious rigidity have deeply influenced Obama's thinking. Obama is as much part of that white liberal segment of American culture as he is of black American culture. He is fully American in terms of political culture and religious experience, but he is also somewhat un-American in that he has a vivid sense of what life is like outside of America. Obama's multicultural experience combined with a strong dislike of rigid ideology makes him somewhat of a relativist in the American political spectrum. In this sense, he is the opposite of George W. Bush who was strongly attached to a core set of values. Obama's rhetoric can soar to great heights but his deep attachment to any specific value is more difficult to pin down.

Helping minority folks in the south side of Chicago as Obama did in his twenties no doubt requires idealism, but the underlying theme found in Obama's days there is getting things done. The practical appears more immediately attractive to Obama than the ideal. Ideals and beliefs do not stand in the way of accomplishing the final specific project or program. We can observe the same dynamics in his presidency. The health care bill which occupied most of Obama's political attention in 2009 shows this complexity. While Obama's frequent speeches on health care are quite ideological and idealist, the actual bill is more a revision to existing policy than a new beginning. Similarly, Obama's Afghan strategy is a refinement of the policy inherited by the Bush Administration with the exception of a date specific (2011) for troop withdrawal. However, several of his top advisors have since indicated that the date specific may not be that definite after all. It will depend on the circumstances.

Is it achieving the practical that connects Obama's early community activism with his ultimate political career, first in the Illinois state Senate and then in the U.S. Senate, or is it the ideal? Is Obama a dreamer or a doer? This question may well end up framing the research and debate on Obama's presidency. Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, published in 2006, is a call to pragmatism, a call to rediscovering the lost art of political compromise and coalition-building.³ The presidential candidate decries ideological rigidity on both the left and right and the winner-take-all mentality of partisan politics. Certainly Obama's surprise decision to make Congress a genuine 'partner' in his legislative agenda on health care and green energy must be seen as an attempt to revive coalition government between the White House and the Congressional leadership.

Just as there is tension between intellectually pure solutions and cobbling together the opinions of all interested parties, so Obama's own priorities and those of the Democrats in Congress will not always blend. The 2008 election campaign showed that Obama's team was skilled at both strategy and tactics. His attempt to govern in close cohort with the various Democratic interests in Congress also requires both.

Obama's Administration and Agenda

Obama won the 2008 Democratic Primaries through a combination of his own charisma and eloquence and the tactical savvy of his team led by David Axelrod and David Plouffe. Obama took a more liberal position in terms of spending, the role of government, and foreign policy than Hillary Clinton. Obama's policy platform included a decisive tax increase for upper income earners as well as new taxes on corporations and higher taxes on dividend and capital gains. A sizeable increase in welfare payments was aimed at the lower income brackets. None of these promises have as of yet been implemented. In foreign policy, Obama maintained a hard line about withdrawing American troops from Iraq and seeking out dialogue with arch enemies such as Iran and North Korea. Only on the need to win in Afghanistan did Obama sound hawkish.

As is usual in American politics, foreign policy was not Obama's priority when he took office. The run-away financial and economic crises in the fall of 2008 made the American public which was already yearning for change turn decisively towards the Democratic Party and Barack Obama. However, the American voter did not become more liberal. The gains the Democrats made in Congress in 2008 followed the earlier trend in 2006 when mainly Blue Dog or Reagan Democrats joined the ranks, especially in the House of Representatives.

Obama picked a widely respected and experienced economic team to cement confidence in his immediate handling of the economic crisis and to make clear that his rather liberal election platform would be handled in a pragmatic manner. Lawrence Summers, who had been Treasury Secretary in the last two years of the Bill Clinton Administration, was put in charge of the White House Economic Council. Timothy Geithner, Obama's pick for Treasury Secretary, had most recently been Federal Reserve president for New York and was seen as a hands-on guy for dealing with the loss of confidence in the financial sector. Paul Volcker, a former chairman of the Federal Reserve agreed to chair Obama's Economic Recovery Advisory Board.

Strengthened by this team's reputation, Obama was able to have Congress pass a stimulus package in early 2009. Obama showed his good faith toward Republican Mitch McConnell, the Senate Minority Leader, by offering more than one third of the stimulus bill in tax cuts and business write offs; a Republican mainstay for economic stimulus. In composing the stimulus bill this way, Obama was clearly hoping to strike a deal with the Republicans. Still, only three Republicans voted with the Democrats to get the bill passed in the Senate. When on February 17 Obama signed the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act into

law, he had scored his first legislative victory. As the *Washington Post* put it, "... the compromise stands as the first major achievement of the new administration."⁴

For the rest of Obama's appointments, the underlying theme is policy diversity. Christina Romer was put in as chair of the Council of Economic Advisers. Melody Barnes, ex-president of American Progress, a left-of-center Washington think tank and long-term counsel to Senator Ted Kennedy at the Judiciary Committee, was appointed as Domestic Policy Director. Both were likely to bring a more liberal approach forward than Geithner and Summers.

The magnificent study of Abraham Lincoln's cabinet politics published in 2008 was said to be an inspiration for Obama appointing his main rival Hillary Clinton as his Secretary of State.⁵ Obama had indeed read the book, but Clinton's appointment had as much to do with a centrist and pragmatic line Obama wanted to follow in foreign and national security policy as well as economic policy. For the same reason, he kept Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense. Obama made a shrewd move in picking James Jones for his National Security Adviser. The former Marine Corps general and Supreme Allied Commander of NATO had both the credentials to give Obama's national security approach military teeth while at the same time being one of the toughest critics of Bush's policies. Jones had complained that Rumsfeld had turned the Joint Chiefs of Staff into parrots towing the Rumsfeld line. In his book *State of Denial*, Bob Woodward corroborates Jones' point, arguing that Rumsfeld outmaneuvered and silenced his generals and thus robbed President Bush of independent military advice coming from the Pentagon.⁶

Obama's National Security Council reflects his pensive style and willingness to hear many viewpoints. American ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, as well as the Attorney General, and the Homeland Security and Energy secretaries all have a seat in Obama's NSC. The plan is to call upon other senior advisers frequently.⁷

In an apparent effort to go beyond the already wide range of opinions among his advisors, Obama assigned several policy czars and envoys to augment the flow and diversity of opinion. He appointed Carol Browner who was the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency under Bill Clinton as his energy czar. In foreign policy, Obama appointed George Mitchell as his special envoy to the Arab-Israeli problem. Richard Holbrooke was chosen as special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Obama's advisers started a bottom-up review of his options toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. He appointed Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer, to join Holbrooke and the newly appointed Undersecretary of Defense for Policy at the Pentagon, Michele Flournoy, to jointly chair an interagency review. Flournoy had co-founded the Washington think tank called the Center for a New American Century. The Center's name seems deliberately chosen to take over the ground staked out by the Project for the New American Century, a group started in 1997 by famous neoconservatives such as Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan. George W. Bush's plans for invading Iraq and turning it into a Middle Eastern democracy as advanced by Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle have their intellectual roots in the Project.

The special review boards and envoys set up by Obama points towards a competitive style of governing practiced by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt would often set various advisors on the same trail, hoping that a large amount of diversity, even competition would bring out the best advice he could get.⁸ Such a competitive circle of advisors demands of the president, in return, that he can keep his team from bureaucratic warfare. It demands an actively engaged decision-maker who can detect when an advisor is trying to silence a rival or use his special access to bypass the decision-making machinery.

Obama's Foreign Policy

In foreign policy, Obama does not easily fit into a traditional ideological category. Obama demonstrates the liberal-internationalist aspect of the Woodrow Wilson tradition as described by Walter Russell Mead.⁹ At the same time, he is less adamant on human rights than Jimmy Carter and more cautious on the attraction and power of American democracy than George W. Bush. Obama is not so confident that American values are the solution for world problems. There is a small 'r' realism in his foreign policy ambitions. Although his speeches are riddled with idealistic rhetoric, there is more to his approach than diplomatic *détente*. He also exhibits a pragmatic approach. Obama conducts his foreign policy much like his domestic policy in that he uses both ideals and compromise to gain allies in opposing camps.¹⁰

Community outreach rather than "liberty for all" seems part of his early foreign policy approach. In his speech at Cairo University in June of 2009, Obama noted that "America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles...."¹¹ His conciliatory tactic seeks to reach across the divide, distinguishing his approach from that of his ideologically hardened 'with-us-or-against-us' predecessor. He wants this to be a "new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world."¹² In the same vein, Obama has heralded multilateralist diplomacy to try to re-connect with European countries. Joe Biden commented that the administration wants to hit the reset button with Russia. Obama's foreign policy is underlined with diplomacy and dialogue, a desire for understanding, and an acceptance of the limits of American power.

But does all of this outreach and embrace make Obama simply a dove or a starry eyed idealist? His Nobel Prize acceptance speech displays another side of Obama's understanding of world affairs. He addressed the notion of just war and building a just peace. "To say that force is sometimes necessary," he states, "is not a call to cynicism – it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason."¹³ Some suggest that he was laying the groundwork for potential armed conflict with Iran, dubbing it his "Nobel War Speech."¹⁴ Others have claimed that it is telling of an Obama Doctrine of sorts, and a shift from his previous policy.¹⁵ More likely, Obama appears to lay down in foreign policy what he had done in domestic politics, namely that he is also a pragmatist and knows how to play the game. There is nothing in Obama's defense budget to suggest a more forceful policy is on the way. If anything, the defense budget proposed by Obama points to a continuation of the shift in military strategy from heavy conventional forces (e.g., a production cap on F-22 Raptor aircraft) to counterinsurgency. The base defense budget of \$538 billion is a 3.4 per cent increase over the FY 2009 budget. Spending on missile defense is cut by 15 per cent.¹⁶

His policy towards Afghanistan illustrates Obama's propensity to go for the middle position. Obama's call for a review of Afghan strategy in September was in part prompted by the election fraud in Afghanistan, the growing unpopularity of the war among the American public, and General McChrystal's request for 40,000 additional troops.

Liberal reporters such as Arianna Huffington, Rachel Maddow and E.J. Dionne have labeled Obama's policy as belligerent, and changed only in word, not substance from the days of the George W. Bush.¹⁷ But their willingness to walk away from Afghanistan without regard to the consequences of such action bespeaks of deep-seated political partisanship, and not the national security interests of the country.¹⁸ Obama has emphasized Iraq as a war of choice and Afghanistan as a war of necessity due to the attacks of 9/11, which in contrast to Iraq, is not just America's war, but a war in which NATO Allies and the world have a stake.

After much deliberation, Obama outlined his strategy for Afghanistan which includes a 30,000-troop increase as well as a civilian component to fund a major Taliban reconciliation effort and plans to work with Pakistan.¹⁹ Obama needed a coherent plan and strategy if he

wanted to repeat General David Petraeus' success in Iraq with the surge policy in Iraq in Afghanistan.²⁰ Obama recognized that a troop surge could in fact be successful in Afghanistan, and allowed General McChrystal a chance to redefine the mission. The counterinsurgency campaign is focused on the idea that civilian populations must be made more secure, and trust be created between the military and the people.

It must be kept in mind however, that a counterinsurgency campaign, being interconnected to a nation's development and growth, is a slow process, and one that often has no set deadline.²¹ However, Obama has stated that he will start bringing troops back home within 18 months of the surge deployment. This is where the Afghan policy will truly test the Obama Administration.

Equally intractable is the Iranian question. Avoiding violent conflict seems to be at the forefront of Obama's Iran policy, and its success will only be seen in time. The time for Obama's outreach and dialogue is coming to an end and putting together a robust sanction regime appears to be next. It is not yet clear whether Obama's overtures to both Russia and China will produce cooperation from these powers with regard to Iran. Obama's switch from long-range to medium range missile defense in Eastern Europe was welcomed by Russia. Similarly, Russia welcomes Obama's announcement to negotiate a successor to START. Whether these goodwill efforts can secure Russian cooperation on sanctions towards Tehran remains to be seen.

Conclusion

President Obama has used the phrases "a fresh start," a "new beginning," and a "new day" so often in 2009 that expectations for his diplomatic efforts are very high.²² At the same time, Obama's pragmatic Wilsonianism leaves few heartened supporters. It is too pragmatic for radical liberals and too soft for American conservatives. Perhaps sensing vulnerability, the White House has begun to speak more robustly about the war on terror. In his West Point address, Obama made it clear that his commitment to security in the AfPak region was unwavering and directly linked to averting new terror attacks on America.²³ After the bombing attempt on an American airliner on Christmas Day, he repeated his determination to fight and win the war on terror.

Beyond terror attacks and recalcitrant foes such as Iran and North Korea, President Obama faces a good deal of vulnerability in 2010 on the home front. Despite his stated wish for unemployment to be at 8 per cent at this time of the economic recovery, it is actually at 10 per cent. The high unemployment level is keeping Obama from taking fuller credit for the economic recovery. An average of over thirty U.S. polls shows that Obama's popularity fell from 63 per cent in January 2009 to 47 per cent in January 2010.²⁴ His Affordable Health Care for America Act has low levels of popular support. The recent loss of a supermajority in the Senate puts the bill's future in jeopardy. Even if passed, it is expected to become a hot button for many Republicans trying to unseat Democrats in November's Congressional elections.

Still, Obama's style and words have started a new era in American foreign policy. Given America's serious long-term budgetary problems and the growing strength of its rivals, a cautious and pragmatic approach is warranted. Obama's intellectual grasp and breadth of vision as well as the diversity of views in the decision-making process will enhance the chances of success if he can pull the different strands together in time to have coherent policies. Compromise and pragmatism on means and methods make good policy provided clear goals are set. Obama's Afghan policy has a bit of both. His approach to Iran does not yet.

Dr Alexander Moens is Professor of International Relations at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby (BC), Canada.
Inu Barbee graduated with Honors from Simon Fraser University in 2008, and will be commencing graduate studies in American foreign policy in the United States this September.

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Notes

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