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US Foreign Policy and Transatlantic Security Relations after the Elections

Peter Rudolf

The election campaign rhetoric on foreign policy issues is no direct indicator of the strategic priorities a new US President will set later – nor is it indicative of the actual policies which will be adopted. It does, however, reflect the ideological framework in which he and his circles of advisors operate. Leaving aside the numerous tactical controversies, the current foreign policy debate in the US displays a rather broad consensus that the country should continue to play a leadership role in international relations. Neither too much concern about a re-ideologisation of foreign policy under John McCain nor an all too hopeful anticipation of a multilateral foreign policy under Barack Obama is appropriate. Considerable continuity in US foreign policy rather than a fundamental shift is the more likely outcome of the upcoming change in the White House.

The sobering consequences and costs of George W. Bush's foreign policy have sparked off a new debate on the international role of the US. Two variants of an hegemonic foreign policy are competing with one another: on the one hand the unilateral, occasionally almost imperial foreign policy approach that took shape in the wake of September 11th 2001; on the other hand the predominantly liberal internationalist, multilateral variant. Both strive, in their current forms, to maintain American primacy. Both approaches display a pronounced disposition to use military force in the pursuit of a number of goals. Both are united in their perception of a threat being posed by illiberal regimes and

failed states as well as by Islamist extremism. Both approaches share a globalistic view of American interests and the conviction that the US should remain committed and involved in all strategically important regions. The two approaches differ, however, in the importance they ascribe to international legitimacy and, thereby, to the role of multilateral institutions.

Barack Obama and US Leadership

Barack Obama's foreign policy programme displays a clear preference for a liberal, multilateral conception of America's leadership role. Obama frequently refers to "visionary leadership," to leadership

through action and by example. In his perception of threats he clings to the standard topoi of foreign policy discourse: a world that is “at least as dangerous” as in the past, threats that are posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, by global terrorists and rogue states acting in league with terrorists, by rising powers that challenge the US and the “international foundations of liberal democracy,” by “weak states” and, finally, – and herein he most certainly differs from Bush – by the effects of climate change.

It seems that Obama wishes to redefine the “War on Terror.” He has made clear that the US is not at war with Islam – Al-Qaeda and their tactical as much as their ideological allies are the enemy. He explicitly opposes the approach of lumping together different groups with differing aims – Al-Qaeda and Iran for example.

A President Barack Obama would not limit the use of military force to the protection of the American people and of vital interests in the event of an actual attack or the threat of an imminent attack. Beyond self-defence the use of military force should also be contemplated in those cases where it serves “common security” – the basis of global stability. With regard to the use of military force in these cases, he has suggested the maxime that every effort should be made to secure the support and the participation of other states.

Barack Obama takes a positive view of international institutions and emphasises the necessity of giving rising powers such as India, Brazil, Nigeria and South Africa “a stake in upholding the international order.” Back in Summer 2007 he let himself get carried away in voicing “I want to go before the United Nations and say ›America’s back!‹.” In Obama’s view the US should assume a leading role in the United Nations (UN), which would include new efforts at pushing for the implementation of reforms. In order to be able to play such a role, the US would need to meet its financial obligations to the UN. Vis-à-vis the International Criminal Court Obama takes a caution-

ary, reserved stance, which reflects the concerns and reservations held by the US military leadership. In his view, it is still too soon to commit the US to signing the Rome Statute; the evolving role of the court requires further observation.

John McCain’s Conception

John McCain’s foreign policy programme displays a clear tendency towards an understanding of the US leadership role that is strongly influenced by ‘neoconservative’ ideas. Having himself undergone the transformation from a realist sceptic of interventions to a neoconservative interventionist over the course of the past decade, McCain wants to restore the US global leadership, win back America’s moral credibility and renew damaged relationships. In stylising himself as a “realistic idealist,” John McCain tries to combine the two predominant, competing “schools of thought” within his party: the more traditional “realists” such as Henry Kissinger and James Baker, who would reserve the use of military force for those cases where vital national interests are at stake, and the “idealists,” labelled as “neoconservatives,” for whom military force represents an instrument to assert American values. National values, rather than strategic interests are the avowed guiding principles upon which McCain’s foreign policy is based – with democratic values forming the fundamental guideline.

McCain has the vision of a new “organising principle” of American foreign policy which extends beyond the paradigm of the “War on Terror.” For him, the struggle against “international terrorists” is just a special case of a wider and older ideological conflict: the global struggle between “freedom and despotism.” The conflict with an authoritarian and “revanchist” Russia, which McCain would exclude from the G 8 (and instead would include India and Brazil), the conflict with radical Islam, with the Iranian Mullahs, Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah are all portrayed as part of this

overarching ideological struggle. The proposed “new global league of democracies,” which according to McCain would function as “the core of an international order of peace based on freedom,” very much fits into this organising principle. In this new organisation, which is not seen as a replacement but as an addition to the United Nations, cooperation on many issues would allegedly work better than in existing institutions.

With his preference for treaty-based disarmament, McCain has fallen in line with the Democrats’ position. With John McCain and Barack Obama, the presidential candidates of both parties have adopted the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons. In doing so, John McCain draws upon Ronald Reagan, no doubt so as to shore-up a notable policy change, which is controversial among Republicans. He wants to re-establish American leadership in disarmament and non-proliferation policy stating that the time for a “dramatic” reduction of the nuclear arsenal had come. McCain seems to be convinced that disarmament on the part of the nuclear powers and non-proliferation are interconnected. McCain has announced that, following a review of the existing nuclear posture, the US nuclear arsenal would be reduced to the lowest possible level reconcilable with security policy needs and international obligations. Nuclear disarmament is to be codified in a new agreement with Russia, which would include binding verification measures of the kind that the START Treaty contains, which is due to expire soon. The joint reduction and “hopefully” the elimination of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe are also stated aspirations. In addition, the Russian proposal to globalise the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty is to be given serious consideration. Indeed, McCain has stated his willingness to give fresh thought to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, which he rejected in 1999 when the Senate dealt with the treaty. His willingness to negotiate a new disarmament treaty with Russia can be seen

as an indication of the realisation beginning to take hold – even amongst Republicans – that Russia must (once again) be taken seriously as an international actor.

More Continuity than Change

Even if John McCain and Barack Obama adhere to different variants of hegemonic foreign policy, international restrictions and domestic political constellations will ensure that hardly any upheavals and mostly shifts in one direction or the other will occur when it comes to actual, concrete policies.

This will be particularly true for policy towards China, which, despite Congress’ critical stance on the domestic effects of globalisation, does not play a noteworthy part in the presidential election campaign. Given the uncertainties linked to China’s rise, the US under George W. Bush has found a strategic concept which is sustainable in domestic politics. The American strategy is directed at further integrating China into the international system and its inclusion as a constructive actor in a concert of great powers under US leadership. American strategy takes into account the possibility that an antagonistic hegemonial rivalry will develop. Political cooperation and economic integration are therefore flanked by a considerably strengthened policy of strategic “hedging.” The preservation of US military supremacy and the expansion of security relations with states in the Asia-Pacific region became central elements of this “hedging” under President Bush. With regard to China’s growing power and the role of the US in East Asia, the next President will face the question of whether new multilateral security structures should be created in the region – structures, into which China could be integrated – in exchange for Chinese willingness to acknowledge the US role as guarantor of stability in the region – a role based upon bilateral alliances. Barack Obama has expressed his interest in creating an “effective regional framework” in Asia,

building upon the various bilateral relationships and the Six Party talks on North Korea. In doing so, he would tie in with ideas already debated in the Bush administration to further develop this discussion forum into a permanent security forum.

Regarding policy towards Russia, the future incumbent can build upon a policy of selective cooperation, specifically in non-proliferation policy and in the fight against transnational terrorism – but not on a comprehensive strategy setting clear priorities. Even before the crisis over Georgia, McCain's rhetoric on Russia foreshadowed a new Cold War; from within McCain's closest circle of advisors Condoleezza Rice has even been accused of "appeasement" towards Russia. The exclusion of Russia from the G 8 and the prompt accession of Georgia to NATO are, however, decisions which a President McCain would not be able to make by himself but only in consensus with America's allies.

The ambitious plan for a "League of Democracies" also requires a broad basis of support. The idea has been met with considerable scepticism among allied countries. This could be the reason why John McCain, by now, presents this proposal as a more humble project: it should not be about the use of military force, it is not about a formal organisation, but about coalitions which change according to priorities. It would, in that case, be little more than an ad-hoc coalition of democratic states.

It is rightly expected that the next incumbent in the White House will follow pragmatic, more multilaterally orientated policies than President Bush. From the American point of view, however, multilateralism is seen in a very utilitarian manner: as a means of global governance but also as a means by which to pass costs on to other countries. This will not be much different if the President's name is Barack Obama. The distinct scepticism towards the UN in the US Congress will just as well not disappear; for institutional

reasons alone Congress rather constitutes a force of unilateralism.

It will be of some importance in regard to foreign policy whether the Democrats expand their majority in the Senate and whether, by working together with some moderate Republicans, they will manage to secure the 60 out of 100 votes necessary to overturn Republican blockades (this number of votes is required for the invocation of cloture in order to end a debate). Over the course of the past 20 months it has become very clear that a determined President and a Republican minority covering his back can successfully use the procedures in the Senate to block Democratic approaches. It can be said with some certainty that the Democrats will at least maintain their majority in both Houses of Congress, if not expand it. Should Barack Obama win the election, the relationship between the White House and Capitol Hill would undoubtedly relax. Nevertheless, just as in the early Clinton years, rivalries and conflicts would by no means disappear.

Every President is tempted to take full advantage of the powers of his office. But not every President has interpreted those powers as broadly as George W. Bush. And not every Senator has so vehemently defended the President's powers as Commander in Chief as John McCain has continuously and consistently done for many years. With Barack Obama a politician would win the White House who has experienced the arrogations of the (new) "imperial Presidency" firsthand as a young Senator. He has stated his interest in establishing a "Consultative Group," in which he would bring together leading representatives of both parties on a monthly basis, consulting them prior to large-scale military operations.

Crisis Management in the "Greater Middle East"

For the very first time a President will enter the White House at a time when the US is waging two wars – in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition, it is likely that the nuclear stand-off with Iran will grow more acute. Crisis management in the "Greater Middle East" will dominate the new President's first year in office. It remains to be seen whether and how quickly the new incumbent will build upon the Annapolis Process and move it forward with explicit dedication. Barack Obama has announced his willingness to engage his administration in the Israeli-Arab peace process and has pledged his support for the Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

Iraq

The logic underpinning the two positions on Iraq could not be any more different. While Barack Obama expects a political agreement only to come about under the pressure of American troop withdrawal, McCain clearly believes that, at some point in time, the hoped-for political solution will present itself under the protection of a strong American presence. The actual Iraq policy pursued in 2009 will probably depend to a greater extent upon the situation in Iraq than upon promises made on the campaign trail.

Even though Barack Obama has promised his electorate to end the war in Iraq, he does not envisage a complete withdrawal. A residual contingent of troops, never specified in its size, is to fulfil a number of tasks, including counterterrorism operations and the protection of the US embassy. Obama wants to make the exact size of the force dependent on the conditions prevailing on the ground – in particular upon Iraqi willingness to political reconciliation. Further American assistance in training is, again, to be made conditional on the progress in political reconciliation. The outcome of a review of policy towards Iraq undertaken in the first months of an Obama Presidency could prove to be a sobering experience for a large number of his supporters. He will potentially be facing the dilemma of either disappointing those two-thirds of Americans who want Ameri-

can troops to withdraw within a year or of laying himself open to Republican accusations of undermining the limited success that is becoming apparent in Iraq. Withdrawal from Iraq could be portrayed as tolerating Iran's growing influence in the region. This argument would quickly play a central role in the American debate. In the case of further improvements in Iraq, even a President Obama would hesitate to jeopardise a possible "victory" through a hasty withdrawal. Vice versa: should, despite the current fragile successes, developments spiral out of control, and should the stabilisation of the country seem to be beyond reach, then even a President McCain would have to draw the appropriate conclusions.

Iran

With regard to Iran there is little difference in the threat perception and the conclusions drawn. For Barack Obama Iran constitutes a "radical theocracy," for John McCain a "dictatorship." Both candidates view it as a regime which has to be hindered in its acquisition of nuclear weapons in any circumstance. Differences do, however, exist in the question of how this is to be achieved.

McCain backs a continuation of the policy of isolation and sanctions; for Barack Obama the current policy on Iran has utterly failed. He has already declared his willingness to engage in high-level negotiations with Iran – without the previously as inalienable deemed precondition that Iran has to give up all uranium enrichment activities – and, in doing so, he has been subject to the reproach of wanting to pursue an "appeasement policy" towards Iran. At the core lies the question of how the US is to engage with "rogue states" and radical movements such as Hamas. Barack Obama is, in essence, in favour of a policy of diplomatic engagement – a policy which the Bush administration pursues with Libya, North Korea and even with Sudan. When it comes to "problem states," Barack Obama

favours a carrot and stick policy in which the main incentive is the prospect of normalized relations with the US.

Barack Obama made abundantly clear that he would do everything – genuinely everything – to hinder Iran in its acquisition of nuclear weapons. If he became President the use of military force would remain an option. Policies on Iran and Iraq are debated in the context of a strategic framework in which the role of the US as the “balancing power” in the Near and Middle East is not called into question. Considerations on embedding this role within a new security architecture in the region do not play a role in the election campaign.

Afghanistan

Whoever moves into the White House – the US will have to strengthen its engagement in Afghanistan and thus will increase the pressure within NATO. Across party lines the war in Afghanistan is considered to be a “good” war that, by all means, must not be lost.

Unlike John McCain, Barack Obama does not consider the war in Iraq the central battle field in the “War on Terror” – for him this is Afghanistan/Pakistan. The withdrawal of troops from Iraq is to free-up resources for deployment in Afghanistan, which are otherwise not available. It is expected that with strengthened US efforts the European allies will widen their engagement in Afghanistan as well. Frictions in transatlantic relations could arise if European countries utilised a withdrawal from Iraq and the attendant availability of large US troop contingencies for operations in Afghanistan as an argument to reduce their own troops in Afghanistan or, at least, to not increase their numbers. John McCain does, at any rate, expect more from America’s allies as long as the US is unable to reduce its troop numbers in Iraq.

It is generally expected that under a new President it will become more difficult for Germany not to meet American expectations regarding the shouldering of greater

military and financial burdens and greater risks in Afghanistan. However, this depends as well on the degree to which a new President will establish linkages between issue areas – i.e. the degree to which concessions made in policy areas in which Germany has a particular interest are linked with the Afghanistan question. Such linkages, which could strengthen the American bargaining position, are indeed present in the American debate. Based upon the hegemonic understanding of its role though, the USA will strengthen its engagement in Afghanistan in the end. Failure is – unlike in the case of Iraq – outside the realm of the conceivable. A sober discussion of the strategic options, their benefits and their risks is only slowly emerging. On the part of the Europeans it would come down to push for such a discussion and to present the necessary arguments – even if anything which smacks of an “exit”-option is a sensitive issue from an alliance-politics point of view. Undoubtedly it would be beneficial to widen the transatlantic debate beyond the military dimension and to keep reminding a new administration that a successful counterinsurgency strategy is determined less by the strength of foreign troops and more by the strength of domestic security forces, by the quality of local government and administration and, finally, by stopping external support for insurgents and – in the case of the Taliban – by eliminating their safe havens in Pakistan (for this see the RAND study *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* by Seth G. Jones, <www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG595.pdf>).

Conclusions

The new administration will initially be preoccupied with crisis management. But sooner or later it will have to set long-term strategic priorities. There is no way it can avoid the question of a grand strategy which can be sustained over time and is appropriate to the shifts of power within the international system. The financial crisis and the resulting budgetary con-

straints will probably give impetus to a debate about setting national priorities. In a situation like that it is more necessary than ever that the transatlantic dialogue moves beyond acute policy questions and extends to a debate of fundamental challenges of international order. There are a number of basic strategic questions in need of a broader transatlantic dialogue:

► **Global order.** Is it desirable to shore-up liberal American hegemony for as long as possible? Or is the formation of a multipolar world considered to be unavoidable, making the construction of a system of multilateral multipolarity desirable? A fundamental strategic divergence of opinions exists on this issue. On the one hand, there is the dominating view in the US that it is crucial to maintain American primacy in a world which is by no means inescapably and inevitably developing towards multipolarity. On the other hand, there is the view widely held in Europe that the challenge is basically about shaping future multipolarity in line with own ideas and beliefs on world order. What kind of international order is desirable in the event that the United States will no longer hold its current position of power? And more specifically: What might this imply for the idea of an organization of democracies voiced in the US and occasionally articulated in Europe?

► **Russia and the Eurasian security order.** Transatlantic debates on missile defence systems and the expansion of NATO stem from a central question: what are Russia's legitimate security interests? Should the West, guided by the notion of democratic peace, continue to expand NATO and thereby its sphere of influence ever further into Eurasia, or should Russia be conceded a geopolitical sphere of influence as is traditionally demanded by major powers?

► **Iran and the regional security order in the Middle East.** Current US policy on Iran is based upon the assumption that Tehran's behaviour cannot be altered by means of a skillful diplomacy and that

the current regime, with its destabilising, expansive external engagement, cannot be transformed into a constructive actor in the region. Europeans perceive Iran more as a rising regional power seeking to play a leading role in the region. Europe has become more willing to support the US policy of containment by imposing sanctions of its own. Transatlantic policy coordination on Iran is basically confined to the nuclear question. Ideas to create a regional security system into which Iran could be integrated as a rising power are rarely debated in the United States. Thus it would need a European initiative to set the creation of a regional security order on the transatlantic agenda.

► **A global anti-terror regime instead of the "War on Terror."** The core issue of the "War on Terror" – the delegitimisation of terror as a tactical instrument and the responsibility of countries to fight terrorist organisations on their territory seems to have been pushed into the background. Amid the plethora of discussions on regime change, pre-emptive wars and the classification of the "War on Terror" as an ideological conflict between radical Islam and the West, it seems to have been almost forgotten that the struggle against terrorism is, in essence, a normative project. Two groups of states are central for the delegitimisation of terror: on the one hand states that support terrorist groups because they, for example, serve a useful purpose within a strategy intended to change the *status quo* – these would be those states which fall into the rogue states category – and, on the other hand, states that fight terrorism in their own country only selectively or with reservations for reasons of domestic politics or due to strategic consideration (in particular Pakistan). The "War on Terror" has, so far, been predominantly waged upon the first group of states. A global anti-terror regime, comprising a series of interlinked multilateral agreements, could exert greater pressure upon the first group and make it – from the aspect of domestic politics – easier for the second group to

meet international expectations. Such a *Global Compact* with criteria for membership and mechanisms for intelligence and legal cooperation, as it was suggested by Michael J. Boyle in an essay published in the March edition of the journal *International Affairs*, would multilaterally institutionalize the fight against terrorism and could create a pull effect.

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