

Foreign Policy in the Presidential Election After Super Tuesday

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Theme: With a narrower field of candidates after 'Super Tuesday', observers will now be able to focus more on what a McCain, Clinton or Obama presidency would mean in foreign affairs.

Summary: After almost a year of political campaign activity, the much anticipated 'Super Tuesday' primaries have finally clarified the presidential election contest. The general election itself will not take place until 6 November, nearly nine months into the future, but it is now virtually certain that the Republican nominee will be Senator John McCain and the Democratic nominee either Hillary Rodham Clinton or Barak Obama. With the field of candidates thus narrowed, observers in the US and abroad will be more able to focus on what a McCain, Clinton or Obama presidency would mean in policy terms and especially in foreign affairs.

Analysis: During the past year, all three candidates have offered their foreign policy views in speeches, debates and position papers, as well as in articles published in a leading American journal, *Foreign Affairs* (Obama's essay appeared in the July/August 2007 issue and those of Clinton and McCain in November/December 2007). However, speeches and writings of this kind tend to offer very general statements and they are typically penned by advisers, more for political campaign purposes than as expressions of policy. Indeed, once a candidate actually wins the election, these written views could have limited relevance as the incoming President comes face to face with new and pressing issues that had not been evident during the election campaign. The best recent example can be found in the presidency of George W. Bush, who in his original election speeches and in the writing of his chief adviser, Condoleezza Rice, had advocated a less assertive role for the US, greater humility in foreign policy and a reluctance to become engaged in nation-building. Yet the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 suddenly presented lethal threats to which the Bush Administration responded with policies necessarily quite different from those anticipated prior to the election in the year 2000.

In many presidential elections, the candidates' positions on world affairs are less important in their specifics than in what they convey about readiness to assume the burdens of high office and to protect the security and national interests of the US, its friends and allies. The candidates' words are aimed at voters as the latter are making up their minds about which of the aspiring Presidents will have the character and judgment to provide effective national leadership in peace or war and to react wisely in the face of unpredictable future events.

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During the Cold War, foreign policy was highly important to voters as they weighed the merits of prospective candidates. By contrast, after the Cold War foreign affairs no longer seemed so urgent and voters tended to give the subject a much lower priority, focusing instead on the economy and other domestic issues. This was evident in the presidential elections of 1992, 1996 and 2000. However, in the years since 9/11, foreign policy has reemerged as a priority in presidential as well as congressional elections, and though recent financial crises and the prospect of recession have caused renewed emphasis on the economy, foreign affairs consistently rank among the most important concerns in the minds of voters. For example, exit polls on 'Super Tuesday' in California showed that, along with the economy, the subjects of Iraq and terrorism continued to weigh heavily in the minds of many voters.

Foreign policy thus remains a major election issue, but views about it differ sharply by political party. For many Democrats, this mainly means opposition to the Iraq war plus a desire to see American troops withdrawn as soon as possible. Democrats also tend to be concerned about what they consider to be the damage done to America's image abroad during the Bush presidency and they hope to see this prestige restored under a Clinton or Obama Administration. Republicans, however, tend to be much more concerned about threats to national security from terrorism, hostile foreign countries or from the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Most believe it is essential to prevail in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as in the war on radical Islamist terror, and they prefer a presidential candidate who shares these concerns and has the stature and decisiveness to persevere.

Presidential candidates express their foreign policy views with these considerations in mind, and do so with the understanding that they must first gain the support of voters from their own party in order to secure the Democratic or Republican presidential nomination. That is, they have a strong incentive to appeal to the party base, the most active and committed party voters in the primary election. This can mean taking early positions that have ideological appeal to the party faithful –especially liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans– but that may be less popular with moderate and uncommitted voters in the subsequent general election. For example, consider the experience of Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, who had been the Democratic Party's nominee for Vice-President during the 2000 election, when Al Gore was the Party's presidential candidate. In 2003-04, after Gore opted not to run again for President, Lieberman became a candidate for the Democratic nomination. Though his moderate domestic and foreign policy views appealed to many independent and some moderate Republican voters, in ways that might have made him a strong contender in the November 2004 election against President Bush, his support for the Iraq war hurt him with Democratic voters, the majority of which now opposed it, and his candidacy failed.

In the case of Hillary Rodham Clinton, the effects of party politics have been quite evident. Among the 50 Democratic senators in October 2002, she was among the 29 who voted for a resolution authorising the use of force in Iraq. In the run-up to the war, three-quarters of the American public as well as majorities in both houses of Congress (and some two-thirds of the member governments of both the EU and NATO) initially supported the decision to use force against Saddam. Hillary's vote thus seemed not only mainstream, but logical for a politician expecting to seek the presidency in the future and wanting to be viewed as strong and credible in foreign policy. However, in the months after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, with inspectors failing to find the expected stockpiles of WMD and Iraq slipping into disorder and a costly insurgency with mounting American casualties, opinion among Democrats shifted heavily against the war. Like many Democratic office holders, Clinton reassessed her own position and became increasingly critical of the Bush

Administration's conduct of the war, arguing that she and others had been misled on the WMD issue.

As Clinton began her campaign for the presidency, she initially expressed support for gradual withdrawal of US troops. However, as Barack Obama, who has sharply criticised the original 2002 war resolution, emerged as her major opponent within the Democratic Party, Clinton began advocating a more rapid withdrawal of US troops. While both she and Obama now share similar positions, they do so in very general terms and without elaborating on the consequences for Iraq and the wider region. In their position papers both do suggest that they will want some kind of residual American force present in the region as a means of responding to terrorism or other grave threats.

Senator Clinton had also taken positions on other foreign policy issues, for example Iran, that are intended to have more mainstream appeal in the forthcoming general election. For example she voted with the majority of Senate Democrats for a resolution condemning the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation, whereas Obama (who was absent from the vote) stated that he opposed the resolution. But as the Democratic primary campaign intensified, she came under pressure to adopt positions more attractive to the party base and in response to the challenge posed by Obama's candidacy.

Thus, at this stage of the presidential campaign, and in assessing the foreign policy views of McCain, Clinton and Obama, it is more useful to consider the candidates' overall orientations and the broad themes they articulate than to engage in a detailed exegesis their of words and speeches.

John McCain

John McCain has made national security the focal point of his campaign. In broad terms he emphasises the importance of prevailing in the struggle against terrorists who threaten both security and liberty on a global and national basis. On Iraq, he has emphasised the need to persevere and warned of dire consequences were the US to withdraw before the country is stabilised. While he supported the decision to go to war, he was quite critical of how the Bush Administration and the military responded to the insurgency. In late 2006 and early 2007, in the face of widespread pessimism about the military situation in Iraq, he was a powerful advocate of the 'surge' –the decision not only to send 30,000 additional troops, but to transform the way coalition forces were used in order to clear entire areas of insurgent and al-Qaeda forces and to provide meaningful security to the Iraqi population until local forces are capable of handling the task. The effectiveness of the surge in reducing military and civilian casualties and in producing greater stability in Baghdad and the most important population centres cities of Iraq gave McCain's candidacy a major boost.

More broadly, McCain is seen as someone with a military background, leadership experience and maturity, strength of character in withstanding torture and years of imprisonment in Vietnam, and as something of a maverick in the sense of being unafraid to speak his mind when he is convinced that not only his political opponents, but members of his own party are mistaken on a major matter of public policy. Thus he has not only opposed those who, in his judgment, advocated policies that might dangerously weaken American security in the face of threats from radical Islamist terrorist groups or from dangerous foreign leaders such as President Ahmadinejad of Iran, but in contrast to some other Republicans, he has also spoken out against torture and has supported legislation to combat global warming. In addition, he expresses support for free trade and for

immigration reform. Among those whom McCain is believed to consult about foreign policy are such senior figures as George Shultz, Lawrence Eagleburger, Brent Scowcroft, Robert Zoellick and James Woolsey, as well as public intellectuals such as Robert Kagan and William Kristol. The campaign's director for foreign and national security issues is an experienced foreign policy expert and the former senatorial and Defense Department advisor Randy Scheunemann.

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Hillary Rodham Clinton has emphasised the importance of restoring America's leadership and international standing. In common with other Democratic candidates she has criticised the Bush Administration's unilateralism. She has cited the need for much greater cooperation with other countries and international institutions and has indicated the need to reassure America's allies in Europe and Asia. In her *Foreign Affairs* article she argued that ending the war in Iraq is important in restoring America to a position of global leadership, and she voted in favour of a Senate resolution on the redeployment of US troops from Iraq beginning in March 2008. On other issues, Clinton also adopted positions comparable to those of most other mainstream Senate Democrats: modernisation of the military along with an increase in the size of the Army and Marine Corps, strong support for Israel and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, opposition to Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and approval of incentives for Teheran if it cooperates, approval of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, ending America's dependence on imported oil, and strong support for human rights. Clinton has stressed her many years of public service, including eight years in the White House during her husband's presidency and nearly eight years in the US Senate. She argues that this experience enables her to get things accomplished in a complex national policy environment. Her key foreign policy advisors reflect this background, in that they include leading figures from Bill Clinton's presidency: former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, former National Security Advisor Sandy Berger, former UN Ambassador Richard Holbrooke and senior Middle East official Martin Indyk.

Barack Obama

Barack Obama mostly shares Clinton's positions but with a few nuanced differences. He points to having been opposed to the Iraq War from the beginning and cites his opposition to the original 2002 Senate resolution, though he was not yet a US senator at that time. Obama is strongly committed to international engagement, saying that after bringing the war to a responsible end the US must not turn inward. He does not exclude the use of force in confronting threats, but insists that America first use sustained diplomacy. The Illinois senator asserts that the US should not hesitate to talk directly and unconditionally to the leaders of Iran, North Korea and Cuba (a position that Clinton has criticised as 'naive'). Obama expresses a strong commitment to the security of Israel, is concerned to halt the spread of weapons of mass destruction, favours upgrading the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and supports adding 65,000 troops to the US Army and 27,000 to the Marine Corps. He advocates strong international partnerships in order to defeat al-Qaeda and cites the need to stay on the offensive against it.

Obama, similar to Hillary Clinton, talks of rebuilding ties to America's allies in Europe and Asia. He wishes to strengthen weak states and help to rebuild failed states, favours UN reform and adds that there must be effective cooperation among all the major powers to deal with pressing global issues. Obama wishes to free the US of its dependence on imported oil, pledges dramatic reductions in carbon emissions and strongly supports efforts to combat global warming. Obama's key advisers include several who served in the Bill Clinton Administration, among them Anthony Lake (National Security Advisor in

the first Clinton term), Gregory Craig (former head of Policy Planning at the State Department), Dennis Ross (former chief Middle East negotiator), Ivo Daalder (Europe) and Susan Rice (an Africa specialist).

It would be a mistake to focus too closely on the Clinton-Obama differences in foreign policy. These exist, but they are not significant. Clinton does put slightly more emphasis on positions that would appeal to a wider public in a general election campaign rather than to core Democratic primary voters, for example on Iran or the timing and means of withdrawal from Iraq. However, as Obama gained momentum and pulled even with her in the nomination contest, she subtly shifted some of her positions in order to counter the Illinois Senator's appeal to the party base. While the two candidates and their supporters sometimes emphasise their foreign policy disagreements, in reality both represent liberal democratic mainstream positions as reflected among the party's foreign policy elites and the majority of senatorial and congressional Democrats. And both have invoked the elusive goal of ending America's dependence on imported oil. Ultimately, their disagreements have far less to do with policy than personality, character and the contrast between Hillary Clinton's experience and Barak Obama's charisma and his appeal to transcend past differences of region, race and party.

Conclusion: Once the Democratic nominee is decided, the contest between the Party's presidential candidate and the presumed Republican nominee, Senator John McCain, will see substantive disagreements between the candidates. A Clinton/McCain contest would be likely to see heated debates about the foreign policy record of the Bill Clinton presidency. Disagreements about Iraq would include Hillary's evolving views about the war, the question of whether political stability is achievable despite military progress during the surge, consequences of troop withdrawal and McCain's insistence that America's vital national security interests preclude an early departure of troops. McCain will be criticised for an open-ended commitment to Iraq with no end in sight, while Clinton (as well as Obama) will face the charge that her policy would open the door to a deadly civil war in Iraq that could benefit al-Qaeda and threaten the stability of the entire region. In their election contest, Clinton would put more emphasis on multilateralism and the importance of restoring America's reputation, McCain would point to the existential terrorist threat to the security and liberty of free societies. He will emphasise his lengthy experience, including military command responsibilities in a dangerous world, while Clinton will likely assert that her husband's Administration succeeded in working with other countries to address common problems. Because the two are only a decade apart in age, the fact of McCain's own advancing age (he is now 71) will be less likely to arise as a campaign issue.

An Obama/McCain contest could produce edifying and substantive debates about principles and genuine differences of policy. Both men are widely respected for their integrity and willingness to challenge conventional wisdom, even among those who otherwise disagree with them. McCain's appeal is especially strong among voters whose foremost concern is national security. His extensive experience, but also his advanced age, would stand in contrast to Obama's relative youth (he is 46 years old and was first elected to the US Senate in 2004), inspirational qualities and leadership potential. Obama's lack of major national policy experience and achievement will be an issue, as will the question of whether he possesses the tenacity to cope with serious foreign dangers. His multiracial background would be appealing to audiences at home and abroad, as would McCain's character, courage and integrity. The two would be likely to disagree on the extent to which international institutions, especially the United Nations, are capable of addressing urgent world problems, contrasted with the role the US can and

must play along with its allies. And they would differ fundamentally about Iraq. Nonetheless, their debate would attract rapt attention from audiences at home and abroad.

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