

Key Points from “Memo to the President Elect: How We Can Restore America’s Reputation and Leadership”

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America’s next president will face an array of problems more daunting than any since the Vietnam era and will be constrained to do so with US assets—military, economic and political—under severe strain. Our new leader must therefore arrive in the Oval Office equipped not only with the right programs, but also the right temperament to handle the world’s most challenging job. Qualifications include analytical skill, an understanding of global strategy, a willingness to recognize and correct mistakes, and a gift for persuading others to do—and even more important to want—what we want.

To begin, the new president must assemble a national security team that consists of strong individuals who are also team players. He or she must choose to be surrounded by people who speak honestly, whether or not their tidings are welcome. The White House works best when it is a place of intellectual ferment, where knowledge is sought, reason honored, and conflicting information sifted and weighed.

From its first day, the new administration should use the full range of our foreign policy tools, including force (selectively), allies (respectfully), diplomacy (creatively) and international law (assertively). Our leaders must learn from the past without allowing historical clichés to dictate future actions. Not every enemy is Hitler and intelligent acts of diplomacy should not be confused with appeasement. We must recognize, as well, that torture is not a means for fighting terror, but a gift to al-Qaeda. Moral credibility is a precious national asset.

Sitting in the Oval Office, the next president will confront five challenges that have, in recent years, been mishandled or neglected. The first is developing a more productive working relationship with the Arab and Muslim worlds. The second is restoring an international consensus in opposition to the spread of nuclear weapons. Third is defending democratic values against a new generation of dictators and demagogues. Fourth is attacking poverty, ignorance and disease. Fifth is addressing the intertwined global issues of energy supply and environmental health.

The new chief executive also will inherit three conflicts—Iraq, Afghanistan, and a global struggle against al-Qaeda. These confrontations, though related, must be dealt with separately. Each has its own variables.

With respect to Iraq, the next president must devise an exit strategy that will leave this troubled nation reasonably stable and unthreatening to itself or to others. That is far easier to promise than to carry out. To succeed, the administration must persuade Iraqi

leaders to see their interests in the same light we do; that a fair share of power in a functioning state is better than a fight to the finish amid disaster. In recent months, there has been good news—attacks have declined while constructive political steps have been initiated. However, without further movement toward reconciliation, Iraq's competing militias may well resume acting on their insecurities. The best way to avoid that is to make maximum use of the limited leverage we have. This means that the next president should neither announce a rigid timetable for complete withdrawal of our troops nor proclaim an intention to stay indefinitely. Instead, we should decide where, when, and how to withdraw based on hardheaded discussions with all sides, paying particular heed to Iraqi leaders who show a commitment to national reconciliation. Our decisions on further economic and military assistance should be similarly guided.

Ultimately, it will matter a great deal which Iraqis are able to claim credit for the redeployment of coalition forces. Will it be responsible leaders who are able to assume sovereignty, or violent extremists who have forced our hand? Given the political realities, a stable Iraq is likely to be decentralized, with power dispersed among Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish communities. The tricky part—which remains far from accomplished—will be to implement a power-sharing formula that causes each side to put down its guns.

Perhaps the most sobering aspect of America's engagement in Iraq is that it has already continued far longer than anticipated—and yet it began after and will likely end before NATO's fighting in Afghanistan. It is sobering, as well, that foreign militaries have not historically done well in Afghanistan, as Great Britain and Russia can testify. Our advantage is that most Afghans have little taste for the Taliban's rigid theocracy. This should be decisive, but progress in establishing a viable alternative through economic reconstruction, improved governance and creation of a national army has been slow. Private militias and the wide scale cultivation of illegal drugs add to the unsavory mix. Though lacking our firepower, the Taliban has the home field advantage—familiarity with the terrain, linguistic and religious kinship, and hiding places across the border in Pakistan. The Taliban also is helped by divisions within NATO over how best to fight.

The danger for us in Afghanistan is not so much defeat on the battlefield as open-ended involvement in a struggle that neither side is able to win. Our next president must review NATO's approach with the aim of identifying achievable goals, reviving alliance unity, invigorating the government and providing anti-Taliban forces with the means of self-protection. Afghanistan is unlikely, in the foreseeable future, to become economically advanced or truly democratic; it can and must, however, consolidate its status as a sovereign and politically moderate state. Under the circumstances, that would be a remarkable achievement.

In neighboring Pakistan, where the most painful headaches of the new century (terror, extremism, nuclear weapons and corruption) all come together, the Bush administration's mistake was to forge an alliance with a dictator, not a country. While many Pakistanis have seen President Pervez Musharraf as too close to America, the Bush administration treated him as a modern day Machiavelli who understood how to accumulate and use power. For a time, Musharraf was an effective leader, but like many

who reach the top, he proved unwilling to share. Today, his hold on office is tenuous. The newly-elected parliament is against him and a restive population is clamoring for change.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda has re-established itself in Pakistan's rugged northwest. Because of public impatience, President Bush's successor may feel compelled to seek instant solutions to a dilemma that—like Afghanistan—will require years, even decades, to sort out. The right strategy must be long-term, starting with an understanding that many Pakistanis yearn to be embraced by the West. The best way to influence the country is not by throwing money at its military, but by backing its desire to become a modern and prosperous state. This calls for economic and trade concessions, support for democratic processes, diplomatic respect and help in improving social services. A free and economically vibrant Pakistan will not end the peril posed by al-Qaeda, but it is the surest way to contain that danger.

One reason Pakistan concerns us is its possession of nuclear arms; one reason Iran alarms us is its apparent desire to join Pakistan in the nuclear club. The Bush administration has tried to isolate Iran, but the Iraq war has elevated the country's status within the region. Despite UN Security Council sanctions, Tehran continues to enjoy warm relations with such key capitals as Baghdad, Moscow, Delhi and Kabul. Since the CIA's declaration that Iran's nuclear weapons program stopped in 2003, American diplomats have lost their central talking point and advocates of a preemptive military strike have quieted. Iran's bellicose president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is under fire for his failed economic policies and could well lose his re-election bid next year if we do not resuscitate him politically through our mistakes. Given all this, how should we proceed?

A two track plan seems best. The United States should continue working through the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency to see that Iran meets its nuclear obligations. Ultimately, an arrangement that allows Iran to develop nuclear power for civilian purposes could be acceptable provided strict and enforceable safeguards are in place. The military option would remain available if Iran were to renew its quest for nuclear arms.

At the same time, the new administration should quietly explore the chance for improved relations with Tehran, especially if Ahmadinejad is voted out. Despite past differences, our two countries have shared interests in Iraq—where stability would have widespread benefits—and Afghanistan—where Iran has in the past bitterly opposed the Taliban. Though Iran remains a threat, it also is saddled with economic vulnerabilities and surrounded by suspicious neighbors. Firmness, not belligerence, is the right approach to Iran.

Of course, nothing would do more to improve the overall climate in world affairs than progress toward Middle East peace. Although President Bush envisions a settlement this year, the fragmentation of Palestinian leadership makes that unrealistic. The paramount goal in the short term should be to revive a sense that a mutually acceptable peace is still possible, because otherwise all sides will prepare for a future without peace. In that case, everyone will lose.

Looking to the East, our primary focus—unavoidably—is on China, a country that is simultaneously our partner and our rival. In recent years, we have developed an unhealthy reliance on Beijing for cheap goods, help in dealing with North Korea and financing our deficit. At the same time, we are nervous about China because we don't know what the upper limits of its influence will be. Leaders in Beijing interpret our unease (not without reason) as a desire to contain them. Thus, our criticisms of China's internal policies (on Tibet and human rights, for example) are thought cynical, designed to lure the regime into making the same mistakes that doomed the Soviet Union. As China adds economic muscle, it is playing a more influential role on the world stage. It is wooed as a customer for raw materials, and its domestic policy of economic liberalization without political reform is attractive to leaders elsewhere who value prosperity but fear elections. Its foreign policy of nonintervention and respect for sovereignty has a similar appeal. Our next president must find the right balance between friendship with China and preparing to win what could prove a multi-faceted and long-lived competition.

Overall, an effective national security policy must unite our allies and divide our enemies. To succeed in that, we must do a better job of seeing ourselves as others do. It strikes the world as ludicrous that we—with all our wealth and power—seem so afraid of terrorists, rogue states, illegal immigrants and economic globalization. People put themselves in our shoes and expect us to act with confidence, and so we should, but true confidence is shown by a willingness to enter into difficult debates, answer criticism, treat others with courtesy, and do our share or more in tackling global problems.

We are four percent of a planet that is half Asian, half poor, one-fourth Muslim and by and large far more familiar with recent American actions than with our country's historic accomplishments. To many, the Bush administration—and the associated images of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo—is the sum total of America. The next president will have to restore our nation's reputation as a supporter of law and champion of peace. The opportunity is there because there are no truly credible alternatives to American leadership. Russia is not strong enough; China is undemocratic; Europe is a committee; and India and Brazil have their hands full with regional rivals. We cannot, however, afford another presidency like the current one. The next president must strive not to scare us but to challenge us—to have faith in one another, exercise leadership without arrogance, and make choices that blend principle with pragmatism in a morally complex world.