

## Obama's Foreign Policy: Opportunities and Challenges

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### ABSTRACT

Obama's election represents an important opportunity to put US-Turkish relations on a new, more cooperative footing. On many issues – especially those related to the Middle East – Obama's positions overlap or closely coincide with those of Turkey more than the policies pursued by the Bush administration. This is particularly true regarding Iran and Syria, which should help to reduce these issues as irritants in US-Turkish relations. The critical question mark is what position Obama will take regarding the Armenian genocide resolution, which is likely to be reintroduced in Congress in 2009. Passage of the resolution could deal a severe blow to prospects for putting US-Turkish relations on a new, more stable footing as well as undermine recent efforts at promoting Turkish-Armenian reconciliation that have opened up since President Gul's historic visit to Yerevan in September.

The election of Barack Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States raises a number of critical questions for analysts and government officials in Turkey. How will US foreign policy change under Obama? What will be Obama's top foreign policy priorities? And above all, what are the implications of his election for Turkey and US-Turkish relations?

Predicting what Obama's foreign policy will look like at this early stage, however, is fraught with risks and must of necessity be somewhat speculative for several reasons. First, Obama has only been in national politics for a short period. He thus does not have an established track record in foreign policy nor a great deal of experience dealing with foreign affairs.

Second, although Obama has selected his Cabinet, many key policy positions at the critical

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sub-Cabinet levels in the various foreign policy bureaucracies, including the National Security Council staff in the White House, have not yet been filled. This process is not likely to be completed until late spring. Moreover, after taking office, the new administration will need to undertake a full-scale review of key policy issues and options. This will take months. Thus it will be some time before it will be possible to discern the contours of the administration's policies in key areas with any clarity.

Third, unanticipated events can derail a president's initial intentions and reshape his foreign policy agenda. John F. Kennedy's foreign policy was dealt a serious setback in the first weeks of his presidency by the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Lyndon Johnson's domestic agenda and foreign policy fell victim to the growing escalation of the Vietnam War. Richard Nixon's significant foreign policy achievements in his first term (*détente* with Russia, the opening to China) were overshadowed by the Watergate scandal, which paralyzed Nixon's presidency in his second term, eventually forcing him to resign in disgrace. And George W. Bush's initial foreign policy agenda was largely junked after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, as his administration increasingly focused on the war on terror and the conflict in Iraq.

### **Obama's Foreign Policy Outlook and Priorities**

These considerations underscore the difficulty – and hazards – of trying to predict what Obama's foreign policy will look like. Nevertheless, the positions Obama has espoused on certain issues and some of his appointments to date give a rough clue to his main priorities and general worldview. This worldview differs in fundamental respects from the approach adopted on a number of important issues by the Bush administration.

In general, Obama is likely to rely more heavily on preventive diplomacy and be more discriminating about when and where to use military force. He is also likely to put greater emphasis on negotiated efforts at arms control than the Bush administration, which preferred unilateral arms control measures that involved fewer constraints on US freedom of action. Preventing nuclear terrorism and controlling "loose nukes" are also likely to be Obama's key priorities.

Finally, Obama is likely to give higher priority to the role of international law and to restoring America's moral credibility, badly tattered by the invasion of Iraq and the Bush administration's indiscriminant prosecution of the "global war on terror." One of his first acts as president is likely to be to close down the military detention and interrogation center at Guantanamo, which has become a symbol for some of the abuses and excesses associated with the Bush administration's pursuit of the war on terror.

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Obama's appointment of Susan Rice, one of his closest foreign policy advisors and a former assistant secretary of state for Africa in the Clinton administration, as ambassador to the United Nations -- with Cabinet rank -- also suggests that under Obama the UN will play an important role in US diplomacy and contrasts sharply with Bush's appointment of John Bolton, an outspoken neocon who made no secret of his disdain for the UN, as UN envoy.

### **A Daunting Agenda**

Obama faces the most daunting array of challenges that any US president has had to confront in the postwar period. Domestically the United States faces the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. At the same time, the country is bogged down in two wars. Eisenhower and Nixon both inherited wars begun under their predecessors, but neither had to deal with two wars and an economy in deep crisis.

The impact of the global economic crisis means that Obama will need to spend a great deal of his time dealing with domestic affairs -- preventing the collapse of the US economy, bailing out the US automotive industry and developing an economic stimulus package. This may initially leave him little time to focus on foreign policy matters.

As a result, America's allies -- including Turkey -- may find it difficult to get Obama's attention. Problems that normally might be dealt with at the presidential level may be delegated to lower level and not get the attention they normally would receive, increasing the chance that the problems may fester and escalate into full-blown crises before they are given the attention they deserve.

This could particularly prove to be the case with the Armenian genocide resolution, which is likely to be re-introduced in early 2009. There is a danger that the

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Obama administration may be so preoccupied with other pressing issues that it may not pay sufficient attention to the potential damage the resolution could do to US-Turkish relations until it is too late to head off a serious crisis.

A second problem is posed by the high expectations that have been generated worldwide by Obama's election. Many of these expectations will be hard to fulfill, especially in light of the daunting foreign policy agenda note above. Thus one of the prime challenges Obama will face will be to manage expectations and keep them from turning to bitterness and sharp disappointment if they are not quickly satisfied. Failure to do so could seriously jeopardize his ability to conduct an effective foreign policy.

Third, Obama assumes office at a time when US prestige and authority in international affairs is at an all-time low. The Bush administration unilateral approach to foreign affairs, its over-reliance on military means to solve essentially political problems, its disregard for international law and norms when they conflicted with the administration's policy goals, its disdain for negotiated arms control, its failure to accept scientific evidence regarding climate change and its profligate and irresponsible economic policies have severely damaged America's reputation for responsible global leadership at a time when that leadership is more necessary than ever. Thus one of the key challenges facing Obama will be to restore faith in America's capacity for effective and enlightened global leadership.

### **Obama's National Security Team**

While Obama does not have extensive foreign policy experience, he has picked a strong national security team that has won praise from Democrats and Republicans alike.

Obama's national security advisor, Gen. James L. Jones, is a respected military officer with extensive high-level policy experience, having previously served as NATO SACEUR, commandant of the Marine Corps and special envoy for Middle East security. Jones is likely to act as an "honest broker" and coordinator of foreign policy along the lines of Brent Scowcroft, George Bush senior's national security advisor, rather than be an active advocate of policy as some NSC advisors such as Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski tended to be. Under his direction, the National Security Council is likely to be restored as the key mechanism

for coordinating national security policy and providing options for the president, replacing the more informal, less structured decision-making system that prevailed under President Bush. This could help to reduce internal turf battles and ensure that Obama is presented with a full range of policy options.

Obama's choice of Hillary Clinton as secretary of state has been widely applauded and demonstrates that Obama is not afraid to have strong personalities in his Cabinet. Clinton served on the Senate Armed Services Committee and was one of the most thoughtful and articulate Democratic critics of Bush's foreign policy. As a former first lady and presidential candidate, she is well known and respected abroad. As secretary of state, she is likely to seek to increase the State Department's budget and diplomatic role, especially in dealing with global economic issues, and rely heavily on high-profile special envoys in sensitive global trouble spots.

Robert Gates, Bush's secretary of defense, has retained his post at the Pentagon. An experienced bureaucrat who has served in both Republican and Democratic administrations, Gates is widely respected on both sides of the political aisle. He is generally credited with having restored order and coherence to DOD policy after the tumultuous tenure of his predecessor, Donald Rumsfeld, whose abrasive style antagonized both the uniformed military, whose views he often ignored, and the US Congress. He also has developed good relations with his European counterparts. His retention as secretary of defense ensures that there will be a degree of continuity in defense policy, especially on key issues such as the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, and should help to gain support for Obama's policies on Capitol Hill in the early and difficult transition period.

Also likely to play an important role in shaping the administration's foreign policy is Vice President Joseph Biden. A former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biden is one of the most experienced -- and outspoken -- foreign policy specialists in the Democratic Party and was chosen by Obama as his running mate largely because of his foreign policy expertise. However, Hillary Clinton's appointment as secretary of state has raised questions as to how much influence Biden will have on foreign policy matters. Biden and Clinton largely see eye-to-eye on most foreign policy matters, but there can only be one secretary of

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state. Thus defining Biden's role more clearly will need to be addressed early on if friction is to be avoided and foreign policy coherence ensured.

This is all the more important because there has been a tendency in recent years for the vice president to play an increasingly active and influential role in foreign policy. Vice President Cheney was heavily involved in foreign policy matters, especially regarding policy toward Iraq, often acting as a "state within a state" and working outside the NSC system. There is some sensitivity within the Obama team -- and in Congress -- therefore that this pattern not be repeated.

### **Relations with Europe**

Obama's election has generated high expectations that his presidency will lead to a significant improvement in US-European relations. On many issues, such as climate change and the environment, Obama's position is closer to that of many European allies than the policy pursued by the Bush administration, particularly in its first term. Obama is also likely to be less neuralgic about European efforts to create a capable European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). This could reduce an important source of US-European friction in recent years and facilitate closer cooperation between NATO and the EU.

Similarly, under Obama there is likely to be less US-European dissention over NATO enlargement in the post-Soviet space. Although Obama supports Georgian and Ukrainian membership in NATO in principle, he is not likely to press for granting Membership Action Plans (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine at the upcoming NATO summit in April 2009, as Bush did at the Bucharest summit last spring. This slower, more deliberate approach will be welcomed by many European allies, particularly France and Germany. At the same time, it holds open the option of granting MAP to Georgia and Ukraine at a later date.

Obama is also likely to adopt a flexible position on the controversial issue of missile defense.<sup>1</sup> While he supports the deployment of missile defense in Europe in principle, he is likely to call for more testing before actually deploying new systems in the Czech Republic and Poland. He is also likely to want to ensure that US policy on missile defense is closely coordinated with NATO's missile defense plans and has the firm support of America's NATO allies before proceeding with any deployment. This would keep open an arms control option if Russia shows a serious interest in negotiations.

However, while Obama is likely to pursue a more multilateral policy and consult more closely with America's European allies than the Bush administration did, as noted earlier, he also is likely to demand more of America's European allies. In particular, he is likely to press for increased European troop contributions in Afghanistan, which could create tensions with some key allies, especially Germany.

Policy toward Russia could also prove divisive. Obama is likely to try to engage Russia, but if Russia proves unresponsive or uncooperative, US policy toward Russia could harden. This could exacerbate tensions with some European allies, particularly Germany and Italy, who have a strong economic stake in good relations with Moscow.

Turkey, too, could be affected. As Ian Lesser has noted, Turkey's ability to conduct a policy of breadth rather than depth -- to engage diverse partners with conflicting interests simultaneously -- would be severely constrained by more overt competition between Russia and the West.<sup>2</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey has had the luxury of not having to choose between its Western and Eurasian interests. This could become more difficult if there is a hardening of Western policy toward Russia.

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## The Middle East

While it is too early to predict with any certitude what specific initiatives Obama may take toward the Middle East, his policy is likely to differ from Bush’s policy in several areas. In particular, he is likely to be more willing to engage with Iran and Syria. Such a shift

in US policy would bring US and Turkish policy into closer accord and reduce both issues as irritants in bilateral relations.

**Iraq.** The sharpest differences with Bush’s policy are likely to be related to Iraq. Obama considers the invasion of Iraq to have been a major strategic mistake that diverted US attention away from dealing more effectively with al-Qaeda and the terrorists who launched the attacks on 9/11.<sup>3</sup> Ending the war in Iraq, in his view, would allow the United States to refocus its attention on the broader Middle East, especially the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, Obama understands that a precipitous withdrawal of US troops could be destabilizing. He wants to withdraw US troops gradually, in a deliberate and controlled manner. He is likely to rely heavily on the advice of Secretary of Defense Gates and Gen. David Petraeus, the former US commander in Iraq and now head of CENTCOM, regarding the pace and modalities of the withdrawal. He is also likely to try to engage Iraq’s neighbors, including Iran and Syria, in the effort to stabilize Iraq -- something that the Bush administration was reluctant to do.

**Iran.** On Iran, too, Obama’s policy is likely to differ from Bush’s policy in important ways. Obama has argued that tough-minded diplomacy backed by a range of instruments of American power -- political, economic and military -- can be effective with countries like Iran (and Syria). While not ruling out the use of military force, he has insisted that the United States should not hesitate to talk directly to Iran.<sup>4</sup> He is thus likely to seek to open a dialogue with Iran, though initially at a relatively low level – a move that will probably be welcomed in Ankara, which has long favored a policy of greater engagement with Tehran.

At the same time, Obama is likely to seek tougher sanctions against Iran if Tehran continues its nuclear enrichment program. As a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Turkey could come under stronger US pressure to support tougher sanctions toward Tehran. Turkey’s energy ties to Iran may remain an irritant in bilateral relations. Barring a major shift in Iranian policy, Obama, like



Bush, is likely to oppose foreign investment in Iranian oil and gas development.

**Syria.** Obama is likely to open dialogue with Syria in an attempt to woo Syria away from Iran. Such a move would be welcomed in Ankara, which favors a policy of trying to engage Syria rather than isolating it, and would bring US and Turkish policy into closer alignment.

**Arab-Israeli conflict.** Here, too, there are likely to be important differences with the Bush administration's policy. Bush was reluctant to become actively engaged in trying to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict until the closing months of his administration. By contrast, Obama is likely to give an Arab-Israeli settlement a higher priority. However, Obama has made clear that the starting point for his policy will be a clear and strong commitment to the security of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Thus while not allowing Israeli policy to drive US policy, as Bush did for most of his administration, Obama is likely to remain sensitive to Israeli concerns for domestic as well as strategic reasons.

A lot will depend on the outcome of the Israeli elections on February 10, 2009. Polls currently show a likely victory for hard-line Likud candidate Binyamin Netanyahu, a sharp critic of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's efforts to create a Palestinian state. A Netanyahu victory would seriously complicate US policy and any attempt to jumpstart the Middle East peace process.

## **Implications for US-Turkish Relations**

Obama's election represents an important opportunity to put US-Turkish relations on a new, more cooperative footing. On many issues – especially those related to the Middle East – Obama's positions overlap or closely coincide with those of Turkey more than the policies pursued by the Bush administration. This is particularly true regarding Iran and Syria, which should help to reduce these issues as irritants in US-Turkish relations.

Obama is also likely to support Turkish membership in the EU and continue to supply operational intelligence to enable Turkey to more effectively combat PKK terrorism. At the same time, with the drawdown of US combat troops from Iraq, the Iraqi Kurds will lose their main patron and source of support. This could increase the KRG's interest in finding an accommodation with Ankara.

Much will depend on Obama's approach to the Armenian genocide issue. As a presidential candidate Obama supported the Armenian genocide resolution, as did Hillary Clinton, the secretary of state-designate. However, this does not necessarily mean that Obama will support the resolution as president. The executive

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branch has traditionally opposed the resolution because of the negative impact its passage could have on US-Turkish relations. Thus once in office Obama could switch his position and oppose the resolution, as his predecessors have done.

As noted earlier, the danger is that the administration will be overwhelmed by other pressing issues in its first few

months in office and will not pay sufficient attention to the genocide resolution until it is too late. In 2007, the Bush administration succeeded in staving off a crisis with Ankara only by conducting an all-out campaign at the 11th hour to block the resolution. If it is not careful, the Obama administration could find itself in a similar situation.

Moreover, several additional factors complicate the situation this year. First, Obama intends to make preventing genocide an important tenet of his foreign policy. This could make it difficult for him to oppose the genocide resolution without damaging his broader campaign against genocide. Second, the Congress is controlled by the Democrats, who traditionally are more concerned about human rights issues than the Republicans. The speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, is from California, which has a large -- and very vocal -- Armenian community.

In short, the Armenian resolution is a potential time bomb that needs to be urgently defused. Its passage could deal a severe blow to prospects for putting US-Turkish relations on a new, more stable footing as well as undermine recent efforts at promoting Turkish-Armenian reconciliation that have opened up since President Gul's historic visit to Yerevan in September. Thus Turkish and American officials need to work closely together to prevent the Armenian genocide resolution from driving a new wedge between Washington and Ankara precisely at the moment when there are serious prospects for overcoming many of the problems that have plagued bilateral relations in the past.

At the same time, Turkey needs to continue to show increasing openness at home toward addressing this issue while intensifying its diplomatic efforts to improve relations with Armenia and promote better ties between Baku and Yerevan. All three efforts can have a positive impact on Turkey's image in the United States and internationally, undercutting support for passage of the Armenian genocide resolution.

Opening the Turkish-Armenian border could have a particularly important effect in this regard. It would be a highly visible demonstration of Turkey's determination to pursue reconciliation with Yerevan, which could undermine support for the Armenian genocide resolution and pave the way for a broader normalization of relations if Armenia shows reciprocal good will. Turkey can only win by such a gesture. If Armenia fails to show reciprocal good will, it will be clear to all concerned – including the US Congress --where the obstacles to reconciliation lie.

## Endnotes

1. For a detailed discussion, see F. Stephen Larrabee, "Whither Missile Defense?" *The International Spectator*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 5-13.

2. Ian O. Lesser, "After Georgia: Turkey's Looming Foreign Policy Dilemmas," *The German Marshall Fund* (September 2008), p.2.

3. This was a consistent theme throughout the presidential campaign. See Obama's speech "A New Beginning" in Chicago on October 2, 2007. For the text of the speech, see [http://www.barackobama.com/2007/10/02/remarks\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_obam\\_27.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2007/10/02/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_27.php). See also Obama's article, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (July/August 2007), p. 4.

4. See Obama "Renewing American Leadership," p. 6.

5. Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," p.5.