

Democrat Barack Obama spells out his foreign policy: “I will not hesitate to use force”

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This month’s issue of *Foreign Affairs* carries an essay by Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama outlining his foreign policy. Obama gets to the point early on. Noting the catastrophe in Iraq, he writes: “After thousands of lives lost and billions of dollars spent, many Americans may be tempted to turn inward and cede our leadership in world affairs. But this is a mistake we must not make.”

The senator’s words must be seen in context. The foreign policy establishment that constitutes the key audience of *Foreign Affairs* generally recognizes that the debacle in Iraq represents a disaster for American military and geopolitical hegemony. In evaluating presidential candidates, these elements are looking for leaders who will not equivocate in the assertion of US primacy. Obama certainly gives them no cause for disappointment. To this end, he writes: “To see American power in terminal decline is to ignore America’s great promise and historic purpose in the world.”

How is this dominance to be preserved? Obama does not leave us in suspense: “We must use this moment both to rebuild our military and to prepare it for the missions of the future. We must retain the capacity to swiftly defeat any conventional threat to our country and our vital interests. But we must also become better prepared to put boots on the ground in order to take on foes that fight asymmetrical and highly adaptive campaigns on a global scale.” In concrete terms, Obama recommends adding 65,000 soldiers and 27,000 Marines to the standing military.

As demonstrated by the above passages, Obama’s quarrels with the Bush administration foreign policy are of a tactical nature; both Obama and the current resident of the White House share the overall strategic goal of preserving American hegemony by force of arms.

The senator’s main dissatisfaction with the Bush administration, however, is the deleterious effect the occupation of Iraq has had on the United States’ ability to project force abroad. As Obama would have it, the United States “must harness American power to reinvigorate American diplomacy. Tough-minded diplomacy, backed by the whole range of instruments of American power—political, economic, and military—could bring success even when dealing with long-standing adversaries such as Iran and Syria.”

The principal obstacle to a “tough-minded” diplomatic strategy, however, is the fact that American troops are mired in a long-term counterinsurgency operation in Iraq. In this regard, Obama notes: “The Pentagon cannot certify a single army unit within the United States as fully ready to respond in the event of a new crisis or emergency beyond Iraq; 88 percent of the National Guard is not ready to deploy overseas.”

By this logic, the continuing occupation of Iraq not only subverts US ability to invade sovereign nations at will, but takes the teeth out of American diplomacy, which, as Obama makes clear, is to be based upon on the constant threat of violence.

Obama’s solution to the Iraq question constitutes a rehash of the Baker-Hamilton commission’s findings, combined with an attempt to shift the blame for the debacle onto the shoulders of the Iraqi government.

After calling for a removal of “all combat brigades from Iraq by March 31, 2008,” Obama goes on to write: “We must make clear that we seek no permanent bases in Iraq. We should leave behind only a minimal over-the-horizon military force in the region to protect American personnel and facilities, continue training Iraqi security forces, and root out Al Qaeda.”

At the very least, Obama’s policy would entail keeping tens of thousands of troops just across the border in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, ready to engage in combat operations at short notice. This would imply letting the various factions in Iraq fight it out, while American troops defend only key US installations (such as oil refineries and pipelines). In practice, the policy means indefinite engagement in Iraq, despite a nominal “pullout.”

Obama justifies such a “withdrawal” not because the war is a moral abomination, or because the United States government has committed innumerable crimes against the people of Iraq. Rather, his essay implies that the Iraqi people have proven incapable of creating a viable, peaceful state and do not deserve the kindness bestowed upon them in the form of the US occupation.

Thus, he writes: “It is time for our civilian leaders to acknowledge a painful truth: we cannot impose a military solution on a civil war between Sunni and Shiite factions. The best chance we have to leave Iraq a better place is to pressure these warring parties to find a lasting political solution. And the only effective way to apply this pressure is to begin a phased withdrawal of US forces.”

The article continues: “This redeployment could be temporarily suspended if the Iraqi government meets the security, political, and economic benchmarks to which it has committed.”

The idea that the Iraqi people have proven unable to govern themselves has become something of the standard Democratic rationale for withdrawal from Iraq. Such an assertion is patently ridiculous; the Iraqi government is unable to function largely because it is despised as an instrument of the occupation, and the sectarian violence gripping the country—not to mention the insurgency—is a direct product of the American intervention in the country.

Obama goes on to recommend that the military capability economized in his “pullout” from Iraq be used elsewhere in the region, including in support of Israel: “Our starting point must always be a clear and strong commitment to the security of Israel, our strongest ally in the region and its only established democracy. That commitment is all the more important as we contend with growing threats in the region—a strengthened Iran, a chaotic Iraq, the resurgence of Al Qaeda, the reinvigoration of Hamas and Hezbollah. Now more than ever, we must strive to secure a lasting settlement of the conflict with two states living side by side in peace and security. To do so, we must help the Israelis identify and strengthen those partners who are truly committed to peace, while isolating those who seek conflict and instability.”

As is obvious from the above passages, Obama is not an “antiwar” candidate by any stretch of the word. What is most striking about the article is the degree of similarity between the theoretical, political and even rhetorical underpinnings of Obama’s foreign policy and that of the Bush administration.

While in some ways the continuation of trends that have been developing for decades, the Bush administration’s foreign policy is sharply delineated from previous precedents by a several key features. First, the Bush presidency saw fit to justify all military operations on the basis of a fabricated “global war on terror.” The chief strategy of this war was to be preemptive strike—that is, unilateral military action, illegal under international law—against any nation targeted by the president in his capacity as “commander in chief.”

Barack Obama accepts this formulation lock, stock and barrel. If we are to believe his essay, the entire foreign policy of the United States revolves around the goal of defending the American people against terrorism. In fact, “Al Qaeda” and “terrorist” are together mentioned in the essay more often than “Iraq.”

Within this framework, Obama explicitly affirms the doctrine of preemptive strike. He writes: “I will not hesitate to use force, unilaterally if necessary, to protect the American people or our vital interests whenever we are attacked or imminently threatened.” While Obama implicitly chides the Bush administration for failing to “objectively evaluate intelligence,” he categorically insists that the presidency should retain the right to attack a nation believed to “threaten” US interests. What such a doctrine implies in practice was demonstrated in the invasion of Iraq.

Obama even goes so far as to borrow the Bush administration’s thuggish terminology: in dealing with Iran, North Korea, and other countries whose interests conflict with those of the United States, Obama says unequivocally, “I will not take the military option off the table.”

In fact, the essay is remarkable only for its shallowness and complete lack of originality or insight. Obama cobbles together ideas from various sources with little concern for their truth or internal consistency. He starts with a watered-down version of the Bush administration’s lunatic Manichaeism, adds the conclusions of the Baker-Hamilton commission, blames the Iraqis for the daily slaughter in their country, and calls it a day.

In the final tally, Obama’s criticisms of the Bush administration are rooted not in any opposition to war and imperialism, but in the conclusion—compelled by obvious and unavoidable facts—that Bush’s methods undermine the ability of the United States to dominate the world.

But even from the perspective of preserving American hegemony, Obama’s proposals are scarcely less estranged from reality than the

policies of the Bush administration. There is an objective reason for the United States’ loss of political clout; namely, the decline in its economic power relative to its strategic competitors (the “global economy” appears once in a nine-page essay on US foreign policy, “globalization” not at all). Obama seems oblivious to the consequences of this decline, calculating “leadership in world affairs” as the sum total of diplomatic bullying and military violence, differing with Bush only on the relative proportions of the two.

As George W. Bush has made clear repeatedly, Iraq must be understood within the framework of the global war on terror, a military conflict that will rage on foreseeably for decades. Obama wholly accepts the larger perspective, while offering an alternative policy in Iraq that would leave tens of thousands of troops in the country. Those troops withdrawn by a President Obama would be used to further escalate America’s drive to dominate the globe through violence.

He writes: “To renew American leadership in the world, we must first bring the Iraq war to a responsible end and refocus our attention on the broader Middle East. Iraq was a diversion from the fight against the terrorists who struck us on 9/11, and incompetent prosecution of the war by America’s civilian leaders compounded the strategic blunder of choosing to wage it in the first place.”

The words “responsible end” give the game away. To those genuinely appalled and horrified by the war in Iraq, a “responsible end” would be one in which those guilty of the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, and thousands of Americans, would be held accountable. This means war crimes trials for Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and their political, corporate and media accomplices.

For Obama, however, a “responsible end” means extricating the US from the Iraq quagmire with as little damage as possible to longer-term imperialist interests in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East as a whole. It means, in other words, avoiding any genuine accountability in order to continue the struggle for US hegemony, presumably under a more competent and cautious leader. In the final analysis, this is a formula for violence throughout the Middle East no less bloody than that seen in Iraq.

If the 2008 elections put Barack Obama in the White House, the American people will be saddled with a new president who continues the war in Iraq and whose foreign policy does not significantly differ from that of his reviled predecessor.



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