

# American Elections 2008: The foreign policy positions of the leading candidates for President

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## American Elections 2008: The foreign policy positions of the leading candidates for President

Europeans are watching the 2008 presidential election in the United States more closely than any in recent memory. Few American leaders have been as unpopular in Europe as George W. Bush, and many across the continent are hoping for big changes from the next American president.

This short background briefing paper introduces the emerging foreign policy positions of the leading candidates for the White House and highlights key points of difference between individual candidates on the one hand, and between overall Democratic and Republican outlooks on the other.

Peering into a crystal ball in an attempt to ascertain precisely how a candidate would act as President is extremely difficult especially during the rough and tumble fight for the nomination now going on in both parties. Observers would be wise to pay little attention to most of the bellicose rhetoric on show during the campaign, and to avoid getting wrapped up in the back and forth of debate over any particular issue. The candidates' immediate priorities are important, but it is difficult to predict which issues will dominate the international agenda, and a presidency, years into the future. Casting back to the 2000 campaign for example, candidate George W. Bush's top national security priority was missile defence, an issue that has returned to the forefront recently but which could hardly be described as among the leading foreign policy concerns of his administration.

Conversely, and with hindsight, we learned a lot more from candidate Bush's foreign policy adviser and current Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who wrote in the influential journal *Foreign Affairs*, that 'foreign policy in a Republican administration will... proceed from the firm ground of the national interest, *not from the interests of an illusory international community*' (Rice 2000, emphasis added). Against this backdrop, those looking for signals of future behaviour should focus on the philosophical and strategic approaches offered by the candidates.

### Two different visions

In the current campaign for President, voters are being presented with two very different visions of American foreign policy. All the leading Democratic candidates call for a major strategic shift in policy built around a sustained effort to restore the US's moral authority. They also call for the US to lead a revitalised and expanded global alliance, believing the country and its allies to be more secure and able to meet a broader set of challenges when working together than when working alone. The remarkable unity of the Democratic candidates stems from a firm belief that both the causes and consequences of the failure of George W. Bush's foreign policy are readily apparent to voters and that the Democratic electorate is hungry for change. Within this frame, however, each of the leading candidates puts forward a distinct personal approach to international policy with differing ramifications and impacts for allies in Europe.

Among leading Republican candidates, although there is more diversity of view than among their Democratic counterparts, there is also a clear underlying Republican belief that the power, position and security of the US are dependent on the strength of its military and that only through sustained investment in the armed forces will the US achieve its foreign and security policy goals. As with the Democrats, the leading candidates differ in their individual philosophies, but with one notable exception (John McCain), they can be generally classified as favouring either the more aggressive approach of George W. Bush's first term, or the relatively more pragmatic but still less than fully multilateral style of his second. It is unclear whether either of these models would be compatible with the need to repair a fragmented and still strained transatlantic alliance.

## The Democrats<sup>1</sup>

The Democratic contest<sup>2</sup> has been narrowed down to three candidates, of which two of them, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, are pitted in a back-and-forth battle for the nomination that has grown increasingly bitter, while John Edwards<sup>3</sup> remains in distant third place. Hillary Clinton, in her second term as a New York senator after serving as First Lady during Bill Clinton's eight years in office, was once the clear frontrunner. She was knocked off that perch quite forcefully after a third-place finish in the Iowa caucus behind both Edwards and the winner, Obama, surprising many observers with how far she appeared to have fallen so quickly. Her campaign seemed almost at an end before she righted the ship with a stunning narrow win in New Hampshire, followed by another slim victory in Nevada.

Barack Obama, a first-term senator from Illinois, appeared to be rolling to an early knockout blow in New Hampshire after his unexpectedly wide margin of victory in Iowa, when yet another twist was thrown into this campaign as Clinton stunned the political world by capturing the New Hampshire primary. He too has regained his footing and scored a blowout win in South Carolina.

John Edwards<sup>3'</sup> role in this race from here on is likely either to be as a spoiler or kingmaker, but for whom it is unclear. His chances of winning the nomination are extremely remote, but he is unlikely to abandon the race before the 5 February primaries. He likely helped Obama in the South Carolina primary, but come Super Tuesday on 5 February, when 22 states (and two additional races) hold primaries and caucuses, it is believed that he helps Clinton more, peeling some of the change voters away from Obama. All signs point towards a titanic battle on Super Tuesday between the two heavyweights at the top of the Democratic race, and the battle for the nomination may well extend through all of February and into March.

The war in Iraq, the forgotten war in Afghanistan, the Bush Administration's policies on detainees at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, the lack of action on climate change, the fact that Osama bin Laden is still at large, and the failure to stop the genocide in Darfur all rile the Democratic electorate and politicians alike and provide a clear mandate to whomever will be the Democratic nominee to pursue a policy of significant change from the last seven years. When addressing the state of the United States' international policy, the leading candidates all heed this call and use virtually the same language to describe their vision of the US in the world.

Clinton argues: 'the next US president will have a moment of opportunity to reintroduce America to the world and restore our leadership' (Clinton 2007a). Obama chooses to link it to the war in Iraq when he says: 'we must bring the war to a responsible end and then renew our leadership – military, diplomatic, moral – to confront new threats and capitalize on new opportunities' (Obama 2007a). Edwards also ties American recovery to ending the war in Iraq and claims: 'in the wake of the Iraq debacle, we must restore America's reputation for moral leadership and reengage with the world' (Edwards 2007a).

It is not just in these calls for restoration, renewal, and reengagement that the international posture of these leading candidates is similar. Several other common themes are apparent among them. The Democratic candidates identify similar threats and challenges in today's international security

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1. Each of the leading candidates has previewed their foreign policies in the US's leading international affairs journal *Foreign Affairs*. This series provides a thorough explanation of their vision and intentions and coupled with several major addresses on foreign and security policy, forms the basis for the foregoing analysis. The articles and speeches are: Clinton 2007a, b, 2006; Obama 2007a-c; Edwards 2007a-d (see References section of this paper for full details).

2. The Democratic race originally had a field of eight candidates: Clinton, Obama and Edwards along with New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, Senators Joe Biden (Delaware) and Chris Dodd (Connecticut), and two who held no realistic chance of ever contending for the nomination, Congressman Denis Kucinich of Ohio and former Alaska Senator Mike Gravel. Richardson, Biden and Dodd have all withdrawn from the race but Kucinich and Gravel continue their quixotic pursuit of the nomination.

3. John Edwards unexpectedly withdrew from the race after this paper had gone to publication. He will not be actively competing for votes in the remaining primaries, but which candidate his supporters choose to back could very well be decisive in a very close battle for the nomination.

environment, from nuclear terrorism to the coming climate catastrophe. There is broad agreement about the need to rebuild the alliance structure that has served American and European interests so well and to improve the multilateral institutions that support that system. There is agreement, too, on the need to end the over-reliance on the military and to use all of the instruments of national power to achieve the US's global objectives while fostering greater cooperation in the fight against terrorism, bolstering the flagging NATO effort in Afghanistan, and returning to active and consistent engagement in the Middle East Peace Process. Taking serious action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reinvigorating a floundering nuclear non-proliferation regime and working towards nuclear disarmament all also command wide support.

Globalisation and trade have divided the Democratic Party for decades, although there is now more recognition throughout the Party that serious action must be taken to manage the negative consequences of free trade, and all the major candidates reflect this growing consensus. Even a majority of Republicans, according to a recent poll in the *Wall Street Journal*, believe that free trade has harmed the American economy (*Wall Street Journal* 2007). Look for trade and globalisation to become more prominent campaign issues in the general election particularly if the American economy continues what appears to be a slide towards recession. There is some policy disagreement, principally over the direction of American policy in Iraq and over how best to deal with Iran, yet the most serious divisions among the candidates are differences in tone and overall approach.

### **Hillary Rodham Clinton**

Hillary Clinton's foreign policy positions draw heavily on the experience of her time as First Lady during the 1990s and project an American international outlook that conforms to the policies pursued during the presidency of her husband. Democrats at that time were constantly fighting a perception that they were weak on national security and it is because of that experience rather than the often-cited concerns about her gender, that Hillary Clinton focuses more on issues of hard security than the other top contenders. She uses emotive language like 'power and principle' and 'a stronger America' and steers a steady, practical course in an effort to burnish her credentials as a legitimate commander in chief.

But it is not just the words she uses to describe her policies that set her apart from the other Democratic candidates. Some of her positions on pressing issues are different, perhaps the most obvious being on Iraq. As a senator, she voted to give President Bush authority to use military force against Saddam Hussein, and while she has been a strong critic of the Bush Administration's implementation of that authority, she has consistently refused to admit her original vote was a mistake.

Looking forward, she will not provide a timetable for withdrawal, though promises one within 60 days of taking office, and supports a much more gradual redeployment of forces out of Iraq that could leave significant numbers of US troops in the country through the end of her first term. Because of this, she focuses less on Iraq than the other candidates and avoids drawing parallels between the situation in Iraq and that in Iran. She has prudently not ruled out military action against Iran, but clearly prefers a more robust diplomatic effort to persuade the Iranians that it is in their interests to forgo their nuclear ambitions. She is more cautious, however, with regards to direct negotiations with Iran than her rivals.

### **Barack Obama**

Befitting his broader campaign for the presidency and his relative youth, Barack Obama brings a sense of freshness to his approach to international policy and articulates a vision of positive American engagement with the world. That vision draws on the American experience of responsible global leadership but argues that the threats and challenges we face in the modern world require new ideas and new thinking. Nowhere is this more evident, or controversial, than in his proposal to start direct negotiations with Iran, even meeting with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad if necessary, in an effort to halt Iran's nuclear programme. The US has not had any direct bi-lateral contacts with the Iranians since 1979. At the end of the Clinton administration there was some movement towards beginning an informal dialogue, but nothing that represents

such a significant break with established policy as Obama's proposal. His critics point to this proposal as evidence of his inexperience. But for Obama, even this criticism fits into his vision of breaking through old boundaries and finding new solutions to the challenges he would face in office.

Another aspect of his willingness to seek out novel solutions is a new emphasis on the importance of the US acting beyond its own national interest and towards a common good. He has a new approach to 'soft power' as an underused part of the country's international policy. He would reorganise the instruments of American government that deliver foreign assistance and better integrate those programmes into overall government policy to more effectively achieve the country's international objectives. He proposes a massive increase in aid and a new outlook that views foreign assistance as an investment in developing societies, improving education, health care and other civil and government services to help break the cycle of systemic poverty. And, of course, if Barack Hussein Obama became President, his photograph, his name, and his life story alone would be a powerful new symbol of the United States of America.

### **John Edwards**

If a prize were available for being the most critical of President George W. Bush's policies among the leading Democratic candidates, then John Edwards would win it. Edwards has chosen a more populist approach to his opposition to the President, particularly in Iraq, Iran, and the broader war on terrorism. He would have all combat troops out of Iraq within his first year in office. He draws close parallels between the build-up to war with Iraq in 2002-03 and the current situation in Iran and rejects a pre-emptive strike on Iran in favour of a stronger diplomatic approach. He goes squarely after the terminology of the 'war on terrorism' and calls for the most significant overhaul of international policy on terrorism of all the candidates.

Edwards, more than either of the other leading Democratic candidates, defines his international policy as a negative reaction against the Bush Administration's policies rather than by pushing an independent, positive agenda of his own.

### **The Republicans<sup>4</sup>**

The Republican field has been much more wide open and fluid than the Democrats', with five different candidates at times claiming the mantle of frontrunner.<sup>5</sup> The race has finally settled down to a three-way contest headed into Super Tuesday with the recent departures of Fred Thompson and Rudy Giuliani.

Early leader McCain saw his campaign nearly disintegrate during 2007 but has come back strongly after wins in the New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Florida primaries and is the closest thing to a legitimate frontrunner this race has had. It is not all smooth sailing for McCain, however, as it remains to be seen if he has enough support among actual Republicans to ultimately win the nomination if the race narrows to a smaller field. Much of McCain's support comes from moderate Republicans and registered Independents. Fred Thompson's recent withdrawal from the race narrows the field of candidates competing for the votes of conservative Republicans to just Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee. Yet the departure of Rudy Giuliani clears the field of any challenger to McCain among moderate Republicans. The New Hampshire and South Carolina primaries are considered 'open' primaries and allow Independents to vote in them. Most of the upcoming primaries are 'closed' and

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4. Four of the leading candidates have previewed their foreign policies in the leading American international affairs journal *Foreign Affairs*: McCain, Romney, Huckabee, and Giuliani. This series provides a thorough explanation of their vision and intentions and coupled with several major addresses on foreign and security policy, forms the basis for the foregoing analysis. The articles and speeches are: McCain 2007a-d, Romney 2007a-c, Huckabee 2007a-b, 2008 (see References for full details).

5. The first frontrunner was John McCain, followed by Rudy Giuliani who fell behind Fred Thompson, who succumbed to Mitt Romney, who was beaten in Iowa by Mike Huckabee. Out of the nine candidates that have been in the race in all, four now remain: John McCain, Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee and Ron Paul. Rudy Giuliani, Fred Thompson, Tom Tancredo, Duncan Hunter and Sam Brownback have withdrawn.

only allow previously registered Republicans to vote. For example, in South Carolina, Mike Huckabee won among Republicans, with McCain's margin of victory being provided by Independents who voted in the Republican primary. McCain has cleared the first hurdle, winning the Florida primary, and now carries significant momentum in Super Tuesday.

Romney once enjoyed wide leads in the first two states only to lose them both, but recovered with a campaign-saving win over McCain in Michigan and remains viable due to his vast financial resources and reservations about McCain among conservatives. He can take the contest to all 21 states holding Republican primaries or caucuses on 5 February, but now limps into Super Tuesday needing a major reversal of fortune to secure the nomination.

Insurgent Mike Huckabee, a former Baptist preacher, has captured the evangelical base and used their support to surge to victory in the first test at the polls in Iowa, but has struggled to broaden his appeal beyond religious conservatives and remains winless in all of the contests since then. He now has no real hope of winning the nomination barring something strange happening, but can still be a factor in the race, peeling off some conservative voters from Romney and further clearing the path to the nomination for McCain.

If the Democratic primary electorate is giving its candidates a mandate for change, Republican primary voters want more of the same, and perhaps an even more aggressive approach than President Bush is currently pursuing. The Republican electorate strongly backs aggressive prosecution of the war on terrorism and the war in Iraq. Consequently, the war on terrorism and American military power are the dominating themes of every major Republican candidate's foreign and security policy positions.

Where the Democrats criticise an American foreign policy too reliant on the military, the Republicans call for an even bigger investment in military personnel and equipment. All Republicans view Reagan's defence build-up during the 1980s as the primary factor that brought about the demise of the Soviet Union and castigate the defence policies of the Clinton administration, ridiculing the post-Cold War drawdown in forces and shrinking of defence budgets. For them, it was this naïve pursuit of a 'peace dividend' and a costly 'holiday from history' that has caused so many of the US's current problems. It is clear, then, that no Republican candidate could espouse a major change in policy from the Bush Administration on Iraq or terrorism and have any hope of winning the nomination and it is this backdrop that explains Mitt Romney's pledge to 'double Guantanamo' (South Carolina GOP Debate 2007).

Though the leading contenders for the Republican nomination are certainly less similar to one another than their Democratic counterparts, a few common themes do exist. Befitting an approach that emphasises the military, it is the military alliance NATO that receives the most attention, while the United Nations comes in for heavy criticism. The latter is not overly surprising as the UN is held in very low esteem by most Republicans, but it is the nature of the approach to NATO that is of great interest. Each of the major candidates calls for some sort of expansion of the alliance, whether it is to include nations beyond Europe and the North Atlantic, or to become the military force behind a new League of Democracies. Each also agrees that change is necessary in the organisation of civilian agencies responsible for international policy<sup>6</sup>, though even here the Republican preference for the military approach shines through with a call for a reorganisation of civilian organisations along Pentagon lines.

Nevertheless, the common themes do not obscure some real differences in the candidates' experience in international policy, their approach to foreign affairs, and the breadth of their foreign policy visions and priorities.

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6. These agencies include the State Department, the Energy Department, and the Agency for International Development, along with portions of other departments including Justice and Homeland Security.

### **John McCain**

Arizona Senator John McCain is by far the most experienced of the Republican candidates. A five-term senator serving on both the Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees, he has honed his outlook on foreign and security policy at the highest levels of the legislature. It is not, however, just this Washington experience that defines his vision of the US in the world, as he is one of the more prominent Prisoners of War in American history, serving more than five years at the infamous Hanoi Hilton where he was subjected to torture and abuse.

This is McCain's second bid for the Republican nomination, duelling with George W. Bush in 2000, during which he earned a reputation as something of a maverick, and he is not popular with many conservatives. Over the last seven years he has courted some of those right-wing Republicans but retains a reputation, particularly with the media, as a man of clear conviction that does not often bend to public opinion. The two best examples of this are his policies on Iraq and immigration. He is the earliest and strongest proponent of the current US military surge in Iraq and has maintained this position despite clear opposition to it outside the Republican electorate. It could be argued that he tailored that stance to curry favour among his party's base, but that does not explain his position on immigration, an issue at least as important as Iraq to Republican primary voters. Bucking the wave of anti-immigration sentiment sweeping the country, McCain has steadfastly supported a plan to provide a pathway to citizenship for those illegal immigrants already in the US and improve the broader immigration system to give more people a chance to enter the country legally in search of employment. This is very unpopular with Republican voters, and McCain's support for this proposal prompted his campaign's struggles in 2007 and could end up costing him the nomination.

McCain's foreign policy vision underscores the breadth of his experience. He is the one Republican candidate for whom it is appropriate to discuss a wide series of foreign policy priorities, because leaving aside his positions on Iraq and the role of the military (and those are a big issues to leave aside), his foreign policy agenda more closely resembles the Democratic candidates' than the Republicans'. McCain calls for a revitalisation of the transatlantic alliance, a restoration of the US's moral authority by closing Guantanamo and renouncing torture, a cap-and-trade system to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, a renewed emphasis on the Middle East Peace Process, and a recognition that 'power in the world today is moving east', necessitating a new approach to China and the entire Asia-Pacific region.

McCain's biggest proposal is to establish a League of Democracies that would be better equipped than the UN to address the crisis in Darfur, combat HIV/AIDS, and confront environmental disasters. These priorities are so markedly different from the other Republican candidates that they cannot be reconciled with a one-dimensional foreign policy focused on the US military. His commitment to maintaining a large US troop presence in Iraq may have the consequence of forcing his other priorities to the sidelines.

### **Mitt Romney**

Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney is relatively inexperienced in foreign affairs, serving just one term as governor after a long, extremely successful and lucrative career in private equity management. Yet, looking beyond Romney's highly charged rhetoric in the primary campaign, he presents a foreign and security policy more akin to the Bush Administration of the last few years than to the bravado of its earlier days. He heavily emphasises the power and role of the US military and calls for staggering increases in the size and budget of the country's armed forces, but he also emphasises the importance of the Western alliance structure and contributions that can and must be made by the country's allies. Romney's vision is to build a strategy to unite the US and its allies 'around a shared understanding of how to meet a new generation of challenges' (Romney 2007a).

The set of new challenges that Romney identifies is still focused primarily on hard national security issues and he leaves out some of the most urgent issues facing the international community. He is on record as describing what he calls 'the jihadist threat' as 'the defining challenge of our time', and he recommends expanding NATO or creating a new NATO designed to defeat radical Islamism (Romney 2007a). He is certainly keener on non-proliferation than other candidates, but restricts his proposals

to what he would like other countries to do and makes no mention of the growing movement in some quarters towards significant reductions in the US nuclear arsenal.<sup>7</sup>

Romney would direct a large diplomatic effort in the Middle East, focusing on boosting Palestinian economic prospects rather than an emphasis on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Climate change is hardly addressed in an energy policy more focused on ending the reliance on foreign oil through greater domestic energy production. Romney's views are virtually unknown on the changing power dynamics of the modern world symbolised by the rising power of China and the renewed power of Russia. His attention to poverty alleviation and HIV/AIDS is limited to a call for a reorganisation of the civilian agencies with foreign policy responsibilities along a Pentagon model. He does appear to have learned some of the lessons of the last six years, but is still inexperienced in foreign affairs and while his focus is broader than some candidates' single-minded devotion to the war on terrorism, he still lacks clarity on a number of important issues that will face the next President.

### **Mike Huckabee**

Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee is by far and away the least experienced in international affairs of any of the leading candidates from either party. He also has been viewed as unlikely to win the nomination as a relatively unknown governor from a small Southern state with no national exposure and little money in a contest full of well-financed candidates with national reputations. But at the time of writing, no other candidate has taken firm hold of the race and with his win in Iowa and narrow defeat in South Carolina, he must be counted as a real contender.

With Huckabee's lack of experience and his focus on the social issues that are priorities for his evangelical conservative base, his foreign policies are extremely underdeveloped. His most detailed effort to date to lay out his foreign policy in the January/February 2008 edition of *Foreign Affairs* grabbed headlines – and criticism from his opponent – for his assertion that the Bush administration's foreign policy suffered from an 'arrogant bunker mentality' (Huckabee 2008). It is true that Huckabee pledges to change the tone of American foreign policy, a move that would no doubt be welcomed in Europe. But what is also evident from his *Foreign Affairs* piece is that he has a limited grasp on international relations, literally equating it with a high school popularity contest in his opening paragraph. Further on in the piece, a somewhat dizzying construction masks a few decent ideas, such as the emphasis on alternative energy sources strangely placed in the first paragraph of a section about using overwhelming military force on the battlefield.

Based on the campaign so far, it is hard to envision a Huckabee presidency dominated by his virtually non-existent foreign policy strategy. In the extremely unlikely event that he wins the nomination, a better predictive tool would be to observe the team of foreign policy experts that he brought on to his campaign and into his administration.

### **Conclusion**

The United States has come to a fork in the road. In November 2008, the American people will choose from two divergent visions of foreign policy. No other election dating back into the last century has presented such a clear choice. The 2000 election set in motion a major strategic shift in American foreign policy, but that election was certainly not decided on it, and although hindsight allows us to see that the signs were there, foreign policy was not a major aspect of the 2000 campaign. The first post-Cold War election in 1992 was not about foreign policy either, and no election during the Cold War offered such a starkly different choice.

This year, the Republican candidates, with the notable exception of John McCain, would lead the US down a similar path to that of the current administration. A new Republican president would, by instinct, emphasise the military as the primary engine of American security, would work with allies on

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7. The major proponents of significant reductions in US nuclear weapons are Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State George Schultz, former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry, and former Senator Sam Nunn.

an *ad hoc* basis while devaluing formal alliances and institutions, and would focus on terrorism and military threats while sidelining some of the rapidly developing challenges likely to dominate the security landscape in the coming decades. Only John McCain would broaden the scope of Republican foreign policy priorities to include major emerging issues like climate change and a power shift towards Asia. But even McCain believes in the central role of the US military in American foreign and security policy and his approach to international affairs would not deviate from the other Republican candidates in that critical area.

On the other path, the Democratic candidates would steer a very different course. A new Democratic president would seek to restore the US's position at the heart of a thriving system of international alliances, would invest effort and political capital across a broader set of existing and emerging threats and would emphasise all the instruments of national power, not just the military, to achieve common objectives.

Given the stark nature of the choice, it is likely that America's role in the world, and European perceptions of it, may be shaped for a generation by the outcome of this year's campaign.

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