

# Expect No Change in Second Term Foreign Policy

By Ronald Bruce St John | September 29, 2004

If President Bush wins a second term, can the world expect a radically different foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere? Optimists suggest that the answer is yes. As evidence, they argue that the White House has rejected the counsel of neoconservatives and is reaching out to moderate Republicans in search of a more balanced foreign policy. In turn, realists suggest that recent events leave little hope for change. What would a second term foreign policy look like?

## Optimists Abound

James Mann, senior writer-in-residence at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in an op-ed piece in the July 8, 2004, issue of the *Financial Times* described the foreign policy doctrines of the Bush administration as a “spent force.” He went on to say “the influence and ideas of the neoconservative movement seem to be in decline.” Mann then argued that the foreign policy realism of an earlier generation of Republican leaders, like Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft “is again ascendant.”

Eight days later, the same newspaper carried an article by journalist Philip Stephens whose title proclaimed: “the pre-emption doctrine is dead.” Acknowledging that the president himself had not yet declared the doctrine dead, Stephens excused White House rhetoric as a product of election year politics. “Mr. Bush, though, is fighting November’s election as a warrior president. This is no time to acknowledge that the war might have been a mistake.” The journalist then cited administration attempts to engage, as opposed to attack, the remaining members of the “axis of evil” (Iran and North Korea) as evidence that President Bush has been obliged to understand the “limitations” of American power.

In the September/October 2004 issue of *Foreign Policy*, editor Moisés Naím conducted a more extensive postmortem of the Bush doctrine. In an article entitled “Casualties of War: The ideas that died in Iraq,” he argued that the concepts of preemptive war, unilateralism, regime change, and the neoconservative approach to foreign policy “lie buried in the sands of Iraq.” Naím went on to examine some of the valuable ideas damaged by the war on Iraq, including “the need to push for a profound transformation of the Middle East.” He included the promotion of democracy as a “regrettable casualty” of the war. “American politicians increasingly see the promotion of democracy abroad as a threat to both of these goals [stability and security], with the result that it is becoming a cause with a rapidly dwindling constituency.”

## Bush Speak

The problem with the above critiques, and others could be cited to make the point, is that they are at odds with what the Bush administration continues to say and do. At the Republican National Convention, President Bush delivered a robust defense of his first term and a strong case for a second. “Tonight I will tell you where I stand, what I believe, and where I will lead this country in the next four years.” He then portrayed in stirring terms a nation dedicated to the promotion of liberty around the world, offering a forceful vision of a democratic Middle East. In so doing, the president linked the war on terrorism, the United States, and the promotion of democracy. “Because we acted to defend our country, the murderous regimes of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban are history, more than 50 million people have been liberated, and democracy is coming to the broader Middle East.”

Three weeks later in an address to the United Nations General Assembly, President Bush reiterated now familiar themes. He talked about the circle of liberty, security, and development expanding in the world and bringing unity to Europe, self-government to Asia and Latin America, and hope to Africa. He envisioned an historic opportunity to expand the circle further, “to fight radicalism and terror with justice and dignity, to achieve a true peace, founded on human freedom.” He also expressed his determination “to destroy terror networks wherever they operate,” “to end the state sponsorship of terror,” and to end nuclear proliferation.

In addition, President Bush told the United Nations that “peaceful nations must stand for the advance of democracy.” With freedom “finding a way in Iraq and Afghanistan,” “we must continue to show our commitment to democracies in those nations.” As he had done so often in the past, the president also portrayed those two states as models for the broader Middle East. “We must help the reformers of the Middle East as they work for freedom, and strive to build a community of peaceful, democratic nations. Finally, he repeated his long-standing argument that a commitment to democratic reform on the part of the Palestinian authority was a precondition for a

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resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. "Peace will not be achieved by Palestinian rulers who intimidate opposition, tolerate corruption, and maintain ties to terrorist groups." President Bush concluded with a summation of U.S. foreign policy over the last three years:

Today, I've outlined a broad agenda to advance human dignity, and enhance the security of all of us. The defeat of terror, the protection of human rights, the spread of prosperity, the advance of democracy—these causes, these ideals, call us to great work in the world. Each of us alone can only do so much. Together, we can accomplish so much more.

## Bush Action

In the period between the president's remarks to the Republican National Convention and his address to the UN General Assembly, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East continued on a familiar course. After imposing sanctions on Syria in May, the United States cosponsored a UN Security Council resolution in early September, demanding the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. The Bush administration later threatened additional sanctions in the event that Syria refused to quit Lebanon. At the same time, the White House continued its policy of isolating Iran, pushing the International Atomic Energy Agency to refer the question of nuclear proliferation to the UN Security Council where Washington could increase diplomatic pressure on Tehran. At a time when ample room for negotiations remained, reports also surfaced of preplanning for a preemptive American or Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities.

In Palestine, the Israeli government focused international attention on plans to withdraw from the Gaza Strip as it pursued its wider goal, permanent occupation of most of the West Bank. In the midst of a presidential campaign,

the White House elected not to pressure Israel to stop expanding Jewish settlements, instead giving these obstacles to peace its tacit blessing. In the process, the Bush administration dropped all pretense of being an honest, impartial broker in the region.

In Iraq, the U.S. occupation continued to alienate allies and polarize the Arab/Muslim world, diminishing America's ability to promote reform in or out of Iraq. Instead of stimulating democracy, regime change in Iraq has had the opposite effect. Reform movements across the Middle East are in retreat.

## Wishful Thinking

Based on the statements and actions of the Bush administration, talk of a "new look" in foreign policy in a potential second term would appear to be wishful thinking. At this point, there is no evidence of a substantive change in direction, tone, or content of the president's foreign policy. President Bush remains a man on a mission, regardless of the lack of wisdom and efficacy of that mission. And he looks prepared and determined to employ any and all tools at his disposal to achieve his goals. Contrary to the hopes of optimists, a Bush success in November, instead of being a force for moderation in foreign affairs, would more likely invigorate and embolden a president no longer concerned with re-election.

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