IMPLICATIONS OF U.S. ELECTIONS

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If you look at the task I have, which is to prescribe Obama's foreign policy priorities in his first year, there are going to be many people trying to set those priorities.

Today's headline in The Times says "Clinton is Set for State Department." And some people have asked me, does this mean that foreign policy will be what Clinton expressed in the campaign or what Obama expressed? If this is true, Hillary Clinton is a smart enough politician to know that if she allows any space to grow between the secretary of state and the president, she is in deep trouble, so I suspect in that sense it will be Obama's priorities. But if you want to ask what single individual will have the strongest effect on Obama's priorities, the answer is clear. It is George W. Bush.

Bush is leaving a legacy of an economic crisis, two wars, struggle against terrorism, and a set of problems in the Middle East that are urgent, and Obama faces a problem. If he fails to fight any of these fires successfully, he will squander his political capital. On the other hand, if all he does is fight those fires, he winds up with Bush's foreign policy, so he has got to learn how to do two things at the same time. He has got to take care of the legacy that he inherits from Bush and also set his own tone. That is not easy.

Let me go through the four inheritances, if you want, and then I will turn to something about setting his own tone.

First and foremost on the agenda will be the economic crisis, for reasons that we heard in the prior panel. He has to stimulate the economy along the lines that our panel talked about and resist protectionist pressures which get worse as a recession deepens. That is not easy either.

He also has to develop cooperation with other countries in terms of dealing with the international structure for the financial markets, and I think one of the things that Bush has left him is good, the fact that Bush turned to the G20 and got beyond the G7, and is an important step. Gordon Smith will approve of that, since he has been lobbying about it for years. I think, in that sense, there will be a framework that Bush leaves him which will be more helpful than if it were only the G7.

The second of these fires he has to fight is the two wars in which American troops are deployed abroad. On Iraq, Obama said that he wanted to withdraw combat brigades by the middle of 2010, 16 months. Now notice the words "combat brigades." He has excluded troops that are used for protection of embassies, troops that are used for training, and troops that used for counter-terrorism. Richard Danzig, who is one of
his key advisors in this area, has said that could mean as many as 30 to 50 thousand troops left after Obama's own deadline.

Then look at the new Status of Forces Agreement which was signed, though not yet ratified – indeed one of our speakers who was going to be here tomorrow, Megan O'Sullivan, is out in Iraq now working on this so-called SOFA. If this passes, it requires American troop withdrawal by late 2011. Whether either of these deadlines will make sense or not will depend on facts on the ground, including political compromises among Iraqis, but at least there is a pretty clear sense of direction, and it is not going to be quite as controversial as it seemed to be let's say a year or so ago.

The other war, Afghanistan, looks more difficult at this stage. The Taliban has been doing better. We will hear more about this in detail tomorrow, so I won't go very far into it, but Obama has called for an addition of American and NATO troops in Afghanistan to try to stabilize the short-term security situation. But one of the problems here, as General Petraeus has said, is we cannot shoot our way out of this. You put in too many American or NATO troops and you increase Afghan nationalism, which makes things worse, not better. So figuring out how to add more troops without, at the same time, making things worse would require some rethinking of strategy, key components of which will be training the Afghan army and police in a political dialogue both inside the country and with neighbors.

The third set of fires that he has to deal with is what President Bush somewhat misleadingly called the Global War on Terrorism. I say misleadingly because the term of fighting a tactic is not sensible, and also, as the British have pointed out because they banned the phrase, it plays into the narrative of Al-Qaeda. So he will probably change the words "Global War on Terrorism," but you can't change the reality. After all, Al-Qaeda declared war on us. There is no prospect that we can put this on a back burner. In that sense, even if he changes the rhetoric, he is going to follow a strategy which basically requires close intelligence cooperation with other countries and policies that attract the mainstream of Muslim opinion and deter Bin Laden's capacity to recruit.

The fourth set of urgent priorities is the Middle East. This week The New York Times had a headline, or a story at least, which said that Iran has enough low-enriched uranium to have, in principal, materials for one nuclear device. Well, there is many a step between having that amount of low-enriched uranium and having a nuclear device, but there is a sense of urgency here.

There is still time for a significant diplomatic initiative that would include Russia and China as well as Europe, but it is not going to be easy. And if you look at the questions of the nasty choices between the use of force or allowing Iran to get a nuclear weapon, you are going to have an urgency for a broader-based diplomacy. Obama has made that a major factor in his campaign – that you will have diplomacy which will not be hampered by the preconditions that the Bush Administration set on this diplomacy. I should add that that will require some repair in our relations with Russia which have deteriorated in recent years, so there will
be a corollary to that.

Finally, of the Middle East fires that he has to think about, he has obviously to think about the Israel-Palestine two-state solution, where some of Bush's recent efforts are a legacy that could be helpful.

Now there are lots of major issues arising in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. They will grow in importance over time, but the good news is that none of these became political footballs in the recent election campaign. Indeed in Asian policy, with the exception of North Korea, Bush leaves quite a positive legacy in terms of good relations with the extremely important states of Japan, China, and India, so in that sense there is some good news as well as bad.

But beyond this tour of trouble spots, we come back to this question of how does Obama set his own tone and what should it be? His very election itself has done a great deal to restore American soft power, but he needs to follow up with policies that combine hard and soft power of the strategy of the sort that won the Cold War.

Democracy promotion is better accomplished by attraction, rather than coercion, and it takes time and patience. I think here he wants to echo the wisdom of Ronald Reagan's shining city on a hill and closing Guantanamo would give such a signal. There are still hard problems of what you do with people at Guantanamo, but that is different from whether you change the symbol.

I also think that Bush's calls for democracy have been heard as an imperial imposition, and as Obama proceeds with promotion of democracy, which every American president does, it is in our cultural genes if you want, we need to be less Wilsonian in our rhetoric about making the world safe for democracy and more pluralistic, remembering the echoes of John F. Kennedy's calls to make the world safe for diversity as well as democracy.

I think what he needs is what I call a liberal realist foreign policy which would say that the largest country in a system has to take the lead in the evolution of order. Basically, the largest country has to provide global public goods, as Britain did in the 19th Century. As the largest country, the United States has to promote an open international economy, as Jim has just referred to; keep the commons of sea, space, and internet open; mediate international disputes before they escalate; and develop international rules in institutions. I think early signaling by Obama that he intends to take the lead in dealing with global climate change will be an important start in this direction.

In short, we cannot do without American leadership. There is no choice of turning inward or reacting against Iraq with isolationist tendencies and so forth. The lead has to go to the largest country, but it is a different kind of lead. As I once put it in a book some years ago, the paradox of American power is that the strongest country the world has seen since the days of Rome cannot protect its citizens or achieve its objectives acting alone. With that type of leadership, I think Obama can make a big difference. In that sense, in addition to fighting the fires, his top priority has to be showing that America is back in the business of
exporting hope rather than fear, and I hope he will do that.

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