

McCain-Palin on the Middle East

Sep 20, 2008



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On September 20, 2008, Richard Williamson addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. The president's special envoy to Sudan, Mr. Williamson is a senior foreign policy advisor to Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

John McCain committed his life to national service when he joined the U.S. Navy at the age of eighteen. Ever since, his involvement in security and foreign policy issues has been extensive, direct, and personal. Through his own distinguished career and as a parent whose son served in Iraq, he knows both the importance of a strong military and the terrible costs of war.

His experience and knowledge are critical, given today's dangerous world and the challenges that the next administration will face. Russia is reasserting itself in dangerous ways by cutting off energy to Europe and deploying troops into Georgia. In Latin America, Hugo Chavez is disrupting oil flows and challenging still-fragile democratic regimes. Partnerships with many of our European allies are badly frayed. McCain knows, as George Schultz used to say, that "diplomacy is like gardening -- you have to till the field constantly if it's going to grow." The next administration will face the diplomatic and strategic challenge of forming constructive partnerships; it's difficult work but absolutely necessary, particularly in the Middle East.

McCain understands that we have not finished the job in Afghanistan, where opium production feeds destabilizing narco-trafficking networks in the country and around the world. Reestablishing collaborative relationships with Pakistan would go a long way in bolstering border security -- particularly in the autonomous tribal areas on the Pakistani side, where the Taliban and al-Qaeda have established strongholds. Yet civil-military relations in Pakistan have been dominated by the army and the nation's intelligence services, and President Musharraf's recent resignation, following a drop in the military's approval rating to 58 percent, was a telling sign of the burgeoning national opposition to the military's continued domination of Pakistani politics.

Meanwhile, Iraq remains central to the war on terror. Last year, McCain voiced his support for the "surge" strategy, despite the unpopularity of that position. In his view, a commitment to genuinely serving the American public requires one to go up against the system at times -- a commitment that also underlies his fight against congressional earmarks and his bipartisan approach. Throughout his career, Senator McCain has stated and demonstrated that his beliefs are more important to him than politics, a value he recognized in his vice presidential candidate, Gov. Sarah Palin. For McCain, winning the war in Iraq is more important than being elected president. This stance makes him an uncharacteristic politician, and with respect to the difficult issues of the Middle East, it warrants a moment of reflection: character and courage are critical in that arena.

Regarding Iran, the country is ruled by leaders who have denied the Holocaust, sponsored Hizballah and Hamas, and steadily pursued a nuclear capability. The Iranians already have between 3,000 and 6,000 uranium-enriching

centrifuges, and although they have not perfected the technology, they are fitfully advancing toward the weaponization of nuclear material. While Senator Barack Obama has stated that he would negotiate with Tehran without preconditions, McCain has been unambiguous in stating that the only thing worse than military action against Iran would be a nuclear-armed Iran.

At the same time, McCain is committed to keeping diplomacy on the table. There are a variety of areas in which the United States can and should work with Tehran. The Iranians have participated in several meetings regarding Iraq and have played a positive role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The next administration will have to balance the benefits of wider discussions with Tehran against the regime's intrusions in Iraq, its support of Hizballah and Hamas, and its continued defiance of the International Atomic Energy Agency -- not to mention President Ahmadinezhad's aggressive statements.

In the Arab-Israeli arena, promising moments in the past have never translated into concrete progress, and in many ways Israel's security has declined. Israel needs to be confident in its security situation before it can vigorously address the many questions related to a two-state solution. Under a McCain administration, Israel could count on U.S. support in dealing with the difficult and inseparable political and security questions it faces. The United States has many friends and allies in the Middle East, but Israel has a special role based on its strategic position, its shared values, and its leadership as a democracy in the region. In the tradition of Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan, McCain believes that American values -- in addition to American interests -- must animate U.S. foreign policy. Accordingly, he would make the U.S. perspective on Lebanon and Syria clear while remaining respectful of Israel's sovereignty.

Beyond specific country strategies, McCain's approach to the broader Middle East includes a belief in energy independence. Our dependence on foreign oil has crippled some of our capacity to pursue other interests. In order to develop long-term solutions to this problem, McCain advocates greater use of nuclear reactors, offshore drilling, and alternative energy sources such as solar power and wind.

McCain understands the importance of multilateral diplomacy, yet he recognizes the limitations of some traditional diplomatic tools. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have been serious shifts in the international system, evidenced by NATO's identity crisis in the post-Cold War era, swings in the effectiveness of the United Nations, and the evolution of the Group of Eight. Although the UN has an unparalleled capacity to establish international norms, taking vigorous action through that body can become difficult or impossible if any of the permanent, veto-wielding Security Council members have a special interest in a given international security issue. McCain recognizes fluidity in the international system and the need to look for better instruments to handle disputes and crises. Former U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright gave an important and historic speech at the founding of the Community of Democracies, and McCain's proposed League of Democracies would not replace this or any other similar entity but, rather, would offer another way for countries to organize and to rebuild frayed relationships under more stringent membership criteria.

Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin's recent actions in Georgia showed the wisdom of some of McCain's concerns regarding Moscow's steady authoritarian drift and its related redefinition of the post-Cold War international order. Russia has a resurgent economy, a rising middle class, and an emerging civil society. The U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship should be considered mature enough that Washington can both work with the Russians and challenge them when they violate the sovereignty of another independent country. Senator Obama's comments placing equivalent blame on Russia and Georgia and then suggesting that the United States refer the issue to the UN Security Council showed a lack of experience -- even naivete -- by comparison.

Henry Kissinger recently wrote a tribute to the late Peter Rodman, in which he commented that the typical division between realists and idealists is a false one: although we have to be realistic about the way the world is, Kissinger

argued, we also need idealism to see where the world should go. This perspective captures Senator McCain's approach to international politics. He has advocated the use of force to effect regime change -- in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. He has taken a muscular view on Sudan's Darfur region in the form of supporting a NATO no-fly zone, a measure that could dramatically change that situation. At the same time, he has opposed the use of force under other circumstances. For example, as a freshman congressman who idolized President Reagan, McCain spoke out against the president's deployment of Marines to Lebanon. Moreover, as chairman of the International Republican Institute for the past sixteen years, he is committed to supporting nascent civil society the world over and the global spread of democratic values that can contribute to peaceful regime change where it is wanting. He will bring sophistication and a renewed energy to this effort. He knows the importance of building civil societies, but he will not preclude the use of force from the support of such efforts. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates has pointed out, diplomacy without the threat of force is like sheet music without instruments to play it. ❖

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