

The Practical Realities of Bush Foreign Policy in the Second Term

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Hurricane damage has confronted the Bush administration with its greatest challenge, at least domestically. How significantly will such domestic issues affect the president's second-term foreign policy? It is hard to say, but being more vulnerable politically is rarely a good thing. Even more to the point, for an administration prone to rely on a limited number of senior officials, given its distrust of midlevel bureaucrats, the need to manage the political fallout from Hurricane Katrina may leave little time for other pressing problems. And yet, the Bush foreign policy in the second term has taken on a very different character.

The most striking change is the level of energy that now characterises US foreign policy. Condoleezza Rice, as secretary of state, has adopted a far more activist approach than her predecessor, Colin Powell. Unlike Powell, she has travelled extensively. She is not averse to using the telephone but seems to appreciate not just the private impact of face-to-face meetings, but also the public relations benefit of going to other capitals and reaching out to local communities.

If the changes were only stylistic, they would still have value in presenting a less defiant U.S. posture to the rest of the world. But on some issues there is also a substantively different posture and direction, especially toward North Korea and Iran.

U.S. hesitancy on negotiations with North Korea is gone—with the appointment of Christopher Hill, a senior administration official, to manage the six-party talks over Pyongyang's nuclear program, deal directly and intensively with his North Korean counterparts, and have the authority to offer significant inducements to give up their nuclear weapons. True, the Chinese may have had more influence than any other party for orchestrating the recently concluded statement of agreed principles, but the administration accepted it and swallowed several important concessions in the process.

Much as it has allowed China to lead the way on North Korea, the administration has done the same with the so-called EU3—the United Kingdom, France and Germany—on Iran. While not joining the EU3 at the bargaining table, the administration has coordinated closely over their talks with Iran and supported their efforts within the International Atomic Energy Agency on a resolution declaring Iran in noncompliance with its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations.

Is the Bush administration replacing the lofty idealism of its first term with a new realism? Rice has spoken of “practical idealism” in indicating the administration will not back away from its broad goals of bringing democratic change to places that have not known it. But, she emphasized, it will pursue these goals in ways that take into account the unique aspects of each case. Thus, democracy promotion remains a fundamental goal in the Middle East but its pursuit in Iraq reflects the desire to synthesize Islamic traditions and democracy—even if that makes secular Iraqis uneasy. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, Rice indicated she will hold the Saudis publicly to account when they imprison advocates of basic rights but not press to open up elections. And while the administration is now prepared to reassure Kim Jong-Il’s regime that it will not be attacked, it has also appointed a new envoy to promote human rights in North Korea.

Rice seems to embody the blending of the ideal and the practical. Her own background lends itself to valuing big ideas and understanding the importance of translating those ideas into reality. In her State Department, she has brought people into key positions, especially Robert Zoellick, Philip Zelikow and Nick Burns, who see the big picture but also know that one has to act on foreign policy and not just talk about it.

She has been able to adopt practical idealism as a policy guide because she is very confident of her relationship with the president. Unlike Powell, she also now has a bureaucratic setup that facilitates and does not impede her actions. Steve Hadley, her deputy during the first term, is now the national security adviser and the two coordinate closely—reflecting both their relationship and common commitment to acting on President George W. Bush’s agenda.

At this point, the struggles between the Pentagon and the State Department that characterised the first term and effectively paralysed policy on North Korea and Iran seem to be a thing of the past. Differences may persist but decisions are now made—and generally in line with the posture adopted by the secretary of state.

So is it all good news? As always, reality has a way of imposing itself. While Rice has the president’s backing and a decision making process that enables her to put her imprint on policy, she faces a daunting array of problems. Even if there is a new diplomacy with both North Korea and Iran, crisis in each case may be more likely than resolution. The gaps in interpretation of the North Korean agreement are already apparent, and the Iranians continue to demonstrate they are determined to complete the nuclear fuel cycle and will not retreat in response to the IAEA—even threatening now to stop all inspections in the country.

A crisis in either, but especially in Iran, would be difficult to handle while the administration is understandably preoccupied with the stubborn and increasingly sectarian reality in Iraq. All the while, it must also address the global

struggle with radical Islamists; continuing danger of nuclear weapons proliferation; the tenuous calm and differing expectations between Israelis and Palestinians after disengagement; and the growing danger of implosion within the Palestinian Authority—not to mention the pandemic of HIV-Aids and poverty in Africa; the declining appeal of democracy in the western hemisphere; the Russian domestic retrenchment; and the emergence of an energy-hungry China with its own demands on the world stage.

No secretary of state can resolve all problems, but the judgment of Rice's tenure and of the Bush legacy in foreign policy will depend on results. While the agenda is large, there can be little doubt that two issues will shape the views of how the administration does in its second term: the war with Iraq (a war of choice) and the war with the radical Islamists (a war of necessity). Practical idealism is a good slogan, but its measure will be how it employs all the tools of statecraft, including hard and soft power, to manage an acceptable outcome in Iraq and the discrediting (and therefore the ultimate defeat) of the radical Islamists.

The writer, a former U.S. envoy to the Middle East and director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, is the author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. He is currently writing a book on statecraft and the practice of US foreign policy to be published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2006



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