

**Australian Institute of International Affairs
National President's Forum**

Great Expectations: Obama's Foreign Policy

Balcony Room, Parliament House, North Terrace, Adelaide
Tuesday 5 May 2009

Summary of the Discussions

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The forum embraced three sessions to set the context, followed by a fourth focussing on implications for Australia. The first session examined the overall priorities of the Obama Administration, the second discussed its foreign policy aims on the global stage and the third considered its policies for the Asian-Pacific region in particular. The following summary covers all four sessions and is concluded by some thoughts from the final speaker, Robert O'Neill.

The Priorities of the Obama Administration

In the first session Dr Michael Fullilove of the Lowy Institute for International Policy noted that Barack Obama's first 100 days were over and that the new U.S. president had downplayed expectations for change in international stance. But he still had the support of 65 % of the U.S. population who believe that the country is heading in the right direction. The Republicans were suffering from divisive arguments among themselves and had just lost an important Senator, Arlen Specter, to the Democrats. Obama was described by his opponents as governing from the left in disguise, while striving to appear as if he were ruling from the centre. His Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, was pragmatically centrist, with keen instincts for what works. The difference between the form and the substance of Obama's foreign policy confused and divided the right, leading some Republicans

to begin climbing aboard Obama's bandwagon in international terms. Although critics had claimed that Barack Obama was the opposite of George W. Bush, it was hard for them to make the charge of weakness stick. Others said Obama had much in common with the more moderate George W. Bush of his second term, enabling persons such as Robert Gates to join the new team. Fullilove pointed out that a degree of continuity was essential for not the whole country changes its views with an election. None the less some key individual policies had changed as in Afghanistan and Iraq. Obama was thus directing a very different kind of foreign policy and seems to feel comfortable and popular on the international stage in ways that George W. Bush never did. Obama was able to set a new tone with world opinion, although he had passed no significant new tests yet.

In concluding his opening remarks Fullilove gave four points which characterise the new administration: pragmatism, ambition, liberalism and diplomacy. He mentioned two points of criticism: that Obama tended to be early in compromising and that his reasonableness could be misinterpreted as weakness.

During the discussion it was noted that while a president normally faces three to four major problems during his term of office, Obama already faces seven or eight. Another point of interest was Obama's colour, which, if anything, made a positive difference in the eyes of the world. The international experience of Obama's own family equipped him better for understanding what is happening in the world. He is a modern global citizen and through his international heritage and experience, many people can identify with him, but this has led to widely differing sets of expectations about his policies.

The session was concluded by a debate on the possibilities for any renewal of United States exceptionalism. Although Obama seemed through his persona to reject any notion that the United States might assert a right to go its own way in the world, irrespective of norms and agreements applying to all nations, this was not so clear with regard to Congressional and public attitudes. Obama would have to take heed of public opinion, especially in the event of a major crisis. He had built a reputation for good judgement through his anti-war speeches in 2002-3 in which he

called the operation Enduring Freedom an occupation and pointed out that for many people their standard of living was as important as their security. His pragmatic approach that “negotiations are not any longer two men sitting in one room” characterises Obama as a careful, thoughtful analyst of foreign affairs. Although Obama has been called naive by some conservative foreign policy experts, he sticks to his course. Some difficult tests are coming up: the Iranian nuclear program has to be watched closely; and the situation in Iraq is deteriorating. But he will need to address these issues in the context of existing international agreements and norms, if he is to keep any kind of faith with those who elected him, not to mention the international community. The new president will be tested constantly and he has to make and retain real friends. His high intelligence and open personality are other important characteristics, making him able to communicate with a wider community than Bush could reach. He also has at his disposal wise and experienced international crisis managers and problem solvers such as George Mitchell and Richard Holbrooke, who will also want to avoid the frictions and controversies of the Bush years. Obama is returning to basics in asserting American values and ideals in a context of international co-operation and support. While it would be unwise to dismiss the problem of a possible return to the assertion of an American right to defy world opinion, it seems unlikely at this point that President Obama and his Administration would deem it wise to resort to that option.

President Obama’s Foreign Policy in Global Terms

Introducing the second session, the Hon Alexander Downer, former Australian Foreign Minister, concentrated on the contraries of change and continuity in President Obama’s policies. Continuity with the Bush Administration is apparent in the way the Obama Administration is facing its challenges, and the new administration has been praised by the international community for maintaining some of the Bush Administration’s commitments. One change that was evident however was that the term “war on terror” is not used any more by the Administration. But more U.S. troops will be sent to Afghanistan with broad international support, much as Bush would have done. Moreover Obama has the

same allies in Afghanistan as Bush.

The speaker acknowledged that Obama was clever in addressing symbolic issues such as torture and Guantanamo. Obama had also shown good judgement in trying to use the opportunity of a new presidency to reach out to the Islamic world, exploiting his knowledge of it and the sympathy which is felt towards him by many of that faith. Some other major problems such as climate change and the global financial crisis had not yet been fully addressed.

The controversial views of the speaker were immediately contested by the participants in the following debate. One discussant compared Obama to Franklin D. Roosevelt. This did not help Obama in Mr Downer's view: he had a low opinion of President Roosevelt for being so slow in coming to Britain's aid in the Second World War. Mr Downer also argued that President Obama is "not an alliance man". The traditional allies of the United States do not have the same high standing in his priorities as they had enjoyed under previous presidents. Other participants in the discussion emphasised policy differences between the two administrations regarding the Muslim world, climate change, torture and Guantanamo, and the good/evil dichotomy in foreign policy. The greater centrality of China in U.S. policies was mentioned as another point of divergence between the two administrations.

Participants agreed that there had been many changes but there were also undeniably many continuities. Which of these would come to characterise the Obama foreign policy? Pakistan was seen to be an important litmus test as many believed that the situation there was so serious that the policies of the Bush years could not possibly survive long, especially with regard to the Pakistani military. Further changes were seen as likely in the fields of addressing global poverty, the effectiveness of the United Nations, and the possibility of an Israeli strike on Iran's possible nuclear weapon installations. Other important issues to watch were attitudes towards Hamas and the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem.

While it may be correct that some core policies have not changed (the U.S. still has to combat extremism, promote democracy and fight climate change) the whole manner of the conception and presentation of U.S. foreign policies under Obama is basically different to the modus operandi of the Bush Administration. Many improvements in important aspects of foreign policy can be seen. The new policy towards Cuba is moving fast and working well. The global financial crisis was being handled competently despite its magnitude. While some saw this problem as threatening to the United States position in the world, many others credited Obama and his key officials with high intelligence and the necessary capacity to avoid the pitfalls of excess borrowing. Despite there being many commonalities between the foreign policies of the Bush and Obama Administrations there were key differences in their basic perceptions of how the world works and change should be expected to appear for some time yet.

President Obama's Foreign Policy in Asia and the Pacific

In the third session, Professor William Tow of the Department of International Relations at ANU raised several major questions. The main point to note, in his view, was the new importance of Asia in U.S. foreign policy, which was widely appreciated by Asians themselves. But although Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech to the Asia Society had enunciated the significance of Asia for the Obama Administration, the taking of concrete policy steps had had a slow start, due not least to delays in the confirmation of senior personnel in the Department of State. Moreover the urgency of domestic policy issues had also diverted the President's attention from international issues.

China was clearly at the centre of the new Administration's Asia-Pacific policy and its importance had been purposefully highlighted by Secretary Clinton, who avoided any negative crescendo like that of the Bush administration in its early months. America's traditional allies in the region need to be reassured however; Japan will not be marginalised and the U.S. security guarantees will still apply there; also India needs to know that it will not be relegated in Obama's priorities. The difficult problems presented by North Korea would be addressed initially by

Special Envoy Stephen Bosworth, who might have to undertake a round of shuttle diplomacy in the north-east Asian region. President Obama's policies in the East Asian region are not locked into the framework of a doctrine. Rather they will be shaped by the President's and his Secretary of State's vision as to what is possible in East Asia.

Debate on Russia occupied a major part of this session. Russia has to be dealt with very carefully, it was agreed, to avoid any unnecessary increase in tensions on matters relating to security. Some speculated on whether Russia – and possibly China – needed to be admitted to NATO to avoid the appearance and the substance of the Western powers isolating them. Against this view it was pointed out that Russian membership of NATO could paralyse that alliance. It may be better to simply recognize Russia as a great power with its own set of interests, needs and perceptions, and work with it on a more bilateral basis. At the same time Russia had to be discouraged from the time-honoured practice of direct intervention in neighbouring states whenever some threat to Russian interests appeared there.

With regard to U.S. policies towards the small states of the Pacific, it was recognised that tensions and differences could arise between Washington and Canberra. For Australia these states are important but they are barely registered in the United States. Given the threat presented by rising sea levels to the very existence of many of these island states the consequences of climate change for the region are of vital importance, yet the United States might prefer to deal with these issues largely through the major powers of the Asian-Pacific region.

Debate also arose on whether a stronger U.S. commitment to the East Asian region would require stronger military forces there. Preference was expressed for a prime emphasis on the instruments of diplomacy rather than on those of war, thereby maximising U.S. influence and avoiding the tensions and rejection that can follow the assertion of an unnecessary and unwanted military presence by an external power. A strong relationship with China required harmony in security arrangements, and of course, this thought carries implications for China as well.

The Chinese Government will need to show sensitivity in continuing its military build-up and in explaining it to the rest of the world. Also if China continued to import huge quantities of oil and gas this will carry implications for the rest of the world. While it has been assumed in the past that China will remain stable internally, this might not prove to be the case in the future, thereby raising problems and challenges for both the Chinese and United States governments. For the Obama Administration, China was definitely a case where “smart power” had to be applied rather than “hard power”.

Japan had suffered severely as a result of the Global Financial Crisis and therefore was likely to lose status in the world. None the less it remains the largest trading partner of the U.S. and therefore will retain influence there. Japan remains a key ally and partner of the United States both regionally and globally. However the better state of the security architecture of the East Asian-Pacific region by comparison with that of the Middle East and South-west Asia means that the United States could play a helpful role in the former at less cost than in the troubled arc of crisis in the Middle East. Despite the problems associated with the deployment of military force, some U.S. presence was required by all the major states of the region.

Implications for Australia

Dr Rod Lyon of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute characterised Australia's expectations of Obama's foreign policy as driven by a desperate need to be wanted and loved. By contrast, the U.S. expectations of Australia are modest: they are those of a good friend and ally, but not those of a power having a key role in the shaping of US foreign policies. He suggested that Australia base its relationship with the US on shared interests, with personalities merely being the ‘icing on the cake’.

Globally Australia wants the U.S. to take the lead and shape world politics, but with a more multilateral approach than that of George W. Bush. Australia also had several key bilateral interests in the U.S., not only security issues, but also trade

and economic relations. Australia had to proceed in its relations with the United States on two different levels, seeking to maximise influence through ensuring good access in Washington, first by sustaining a reputation as a reliable and capable strategic partner and second by upholding our shared values.

Another source of influence in Washington was Australia's experience in working more closely with Asia. Yet it had to be remembered that no superpower will want a middle power to be in the way when it is dealing with another superpower, although it might be willing to exchange views. The quality of the advice that we put forward would be of key importance to the building of Australian influence in global and regional matters. But it should not be forgotten that Obama is surrounded by many countries and powerful personages who want to influence him. In this jostling crowd Australia might not be readily granted any role of special importance. If however we experience a shift in world power whereby the U.S. declines in influence, Australia will have to develop other ways of sustaining its vital interests.

In discussion on the problem of anti-Americanism in Australia, most participants conceded that with the advent of President Obama these attitudes had virtually vanished from the public debate. However others pointed to its potential for re-growth. Although the current generation of young Australians was seen as being more approving towards the United States than the generation of the Vietnam War, Australian ignorance about America remained a problem. So also was American ignorance about Australia. The relatively low level of Australian emigration to the United States, and the absence of a strong pro-Australian lobby within American domestic politics reduced Australia's impact to that of a small state rather than that of a medium power. Bearing these points in mind, the key problem for Australia was not so much to build influence within the Administration as to gain the favourable attention of the Congress. Australia's reputation as a reliable and close ally helped to raise our profile in the Congress but there were many other issues, especially economic, on which Congressmen tended to see Australia as a source of unwanted competition.

Concluding Thoughts from Robert O'Neill, Foundation Fellow of the AIIA

Robert O'Neill noted four sets of tensions in the four plenary sessions of the Forum. The first was that of optimism versus pessimism in the opening discussion led by Michael Fullilove. The optimism sprang from the recognition that Obama was more in tune with the rest of the world than Bush had been. The pessimism was engendered by the thought that even after eight years of George W. Bush, forty-six per cent of Americans were still willing to vote for a Republican candidate in the last presidential election. This was a tension which must also be present in President Obama's own mind. As he is a pragmatist he will not forget the potential of the opposing vote to build up by a few percentage points and remove him from office in 2012. While Obama prefers the path of change and reform, making the United States secure and prosperous through active co-operation rather than through threats and coercion, he must balance these desires against the knowledge that American public opinion can turn against him if his economic policies are not delivering better returns in 2012 or if there should be another serious attack against Americans on their home territory. All of the United States' partners have to read American public opinion carefully and stay abreast of developments within that polity.

The second tension was that of change versus continuity presented by Alexander Downer. He saw more continuity than change between George Bush in his second term and Barack Obama. He argued that the new President's real options were constrained by reality, and more limited to changes in public face (such as in attitudes towards the Islamic world) than to changes of substance. While this is an interesting perspective on the transition from the one administration to the other, it does not accord with the fact that many of George W. Bush's policies were not working, especially in the Middle East and South-west Asia. Obama has ample incentive to drive hard for change in foreign policy. If he can terminate the U.S. commitment to Iraq without dire repercussions for the oil price or the Middle East at large, he will be acclaimed electorally in 2012. As a practising politician he will also have an eye on this outcome as he develops his other international policies. Early set-backs could discourage Obama but current indications are that he will remain an optimist who will not return to the path taken by his predecessor.

The third tension, spelled out by William Tow in his opening remarks, is between our hopes that the United States will pay more attention to the Asia-Pacific region and our fears that despite the best of intentions, the Obama Administration might have to focus most of its energies and attention on the Middle East, the global economy and domestic issues. On the side of hopes for strong but consensual U.S. leadership in our region is the region's own success. A little more U.S. leadership could pay a huge dividend, which will also strengthen Obama politically at home. But it has to be acknowledged that there are other urgent issues elsewhere in the world, and Asian and Pacific countries may have to take more initiatives for the region themselves than they might feel comfortable with.

There are of course a number of potentially hot issues within the Asian-Pacific region which no U.S. administration can ignore such as North Korea's ambitions for nuclear weapon status and a peaceful resolution of tensions between Taiwan and mainland China. There are likely to be a number of other issues, perhaps not so hot, but of greater magnitude, relating to internal conditions in China, South-east Asia and India with which the Obama Administration will have to deal. The Asia-Pacific region will never be left on the back burner. But it should do for itself what it can and not expect that the Obama Administration will spring instantly to assert leadership in every regional issue.

The fourth tension, unfolded in Rod Lyon's presentation, is that between romance and reality. It is easy for Australians to feel warm towards the Obama Administration because most of them were in such strong disagreement with George W. Bush on many of his international policies. Also, because of their nature and relatively isolated location, Australians have a strong propensity to want to be warmly appreciated as a result of their international commitments. It is easy for Australian leaders, after offering assistance to the United States in times of crisis such as at the outbreak of the Korean War, or during the expansion phase of the Vietnam War or before the US invasion of Iraq, to come away from Washington with the belief that they are not only warmly regarded but also have real influence in that city. Those who have lived and worked over long periods in Washington

know that this is an illusion. We are one of a number of middle powers and have to play our shots with great skill and judgement if they are to be effective. We have to keep our eyes on the Congress and U.S. public opinion and play to both of these galleries also when appropriate.

One uncomfortable thought which occurs is that because the Obama Administration has so many friends abroad, it stands in less need of Australia than did its predecessor. Yet there is consolation in the belief, right or wrong, that the Obama Administration is not going to tackle its international challenges like a bull at a gate. Rather it will be more deliberate, more political and more understanding of what it is getting into than was its predecessor, so that in the end our own international problems might be smaller not greater.

The challenge for Australian foreign policy makers, advisers and executants, will be to find successful ways of relating to a more intelligent administration than the one we have become used to over the past eight years. We should not fool ourselves that this will be easy. We will need to look to our laurels, and to study and understand the objectives and methods of the Obama Administration. We should also do as much for ourselves and our own region as we possibly can without any expectation that the United States will forever be available to leap to our rescue if we end up in trouble.

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