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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The contest between Senators John McCain and Barack Obama for the presidency of the United States is being followed intently around the world. But how much exactly, in terms of U.S. foreign policy, is at stake? Experts often get this question wrong. In 2000, the received wisdom was that the foreign policy differences between the presidential candidates were small, but in retrospect the gulf between Al Gore and George Bush seems enormous. The 2004 election appeared to present a comprehensive conflict of worldviews, but in fact Bush's policy had already begun to moderate, and in his second term he has run a fairly orthodox foreign policy relying on multilateral approaches to the most difficult challenges—which is broadly what John Kerry's foreign policy would have looked like.

What about this year? Certainly, the menu of options available to the next president will be limited by Bush's legacy, but McCain and Obama would choose very differently from that menu. The foreign policy differences between the two candidates are striking. In terms of the goals that they would pursue,

the strains of idealism are much stronger in McCain's makeup, although Obama would hardly govern as a classic realist either. Regarding the means they would employ, McCain would be, on balance, more unilateral, state-centric and hawkish than his Democratic rival. If Obama offers hope, McCain offers glory. Temperamentally, Obama is deliberate whereas McCain is unpredictable. The election of either man would shift international perceptions of America, but Obama would shift them more. Obama's charm, steely determination and high intelligence evokes no one more than Jack Kennedy; McCain's taste for adventure and his muscular approach to life brings to mind the original Rough Rider, Teddy Roosevelt.

The risks posed by a President Obama are that America's adversaries would mistake his reasonableness for weakness, and that the high expectations held by Americans and the world for his foreign policy would not be met. The risk posed by a President McCain is that the United States would unlearn the hard lessons it has learned over the past five years.

WHY THE U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION MATTERS TO THE WORLD

The contest between Senators John McCain and Barack Obama for the presidency of the United States is being followed just as closely around the world as it is in America. This year, many non-Americans are following U.S. politics as intently as they follow their own national politics. Speeches, debates and vice-presidential picks are immediately dissected in newspaper columns and blogs published in every language. We all know more about Wilmington and Wasilla than we ever suspected we might. Majorities in countries such as Japan, Germany, Great Britain and Jordan say they are following the race closely; the 2008 Lowy Institute Poll found that nearly two-thirds of Australians believe that the outcome will make a difference to Australia's national interests.¹

It is understandable that the world cares so much about this election. Notwithstanding the familiar claim that the United States is slouching towards mediocrity, it remains the sole superpower. Even after its recent follies, Washington retains extraordinary reach: it is the only capital capable of running a truly global foreign policy and projecting military power anywhere on earth. Almost every other country thinks it has a special relationship with the United States, based on shared history and values—or clashing ones. None of the great threats facing humanity can be solved without the Americans.

The scale of the challenges facing the next president—including bloody conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs, the persistence of terrorist networks, newly confident competitors, a financial collapse, a cooling economy and a warming planet—is also focusing the global mind.

It is not only the power of the United States, however, or its current predicament, that draws the world's attention. The idea of America—democratic, meritocratic and optimistic—continues to fascinate. The nomination of John McCain and Barack Obama by their parties plays directly into this theme, demonstrating the remarkable openness of the American political system and its receptiveness to talent. McCain is a war hero and maverick who is cordially hated by many Republicans on Capitol Hill and K Street. Obama is a gifted newcomer who bested the dynasty which has dominated Democratic politics for nearly two decades, an African-American who has prevailed despite predictions from armies of pundits that Americans would never vote for a black man. Each is the best candidate his party could have offered to the American people; each, in his own way, embodies the finest aspects of his country.

McCain's national security credentials are weightier than Obama's, but when the records of Governor Sarah Palin and Senator Joe Biden are factored in, neither ticket has a notable advantage on that score. Both candidates base their claims to superior foreign policy judgment largely on Iraq: Obama for opposing a flawed war when most senior Democrats supported it; McCain for opposing a Republican administration and public opinion in advocating a more effective way of fighting it.

Both Obama and McCain are deaf to the siren song of isolationism—no small blessing when up to 42 percent of Americans believe that the United States should “mind its own business internationally”.² Both are more impressive than the incurious and impatient President George W. Bush, whose decision-making inadequacies are being exposed daily in his last months in office.³

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The big question currently being asked in foreign ministries everywhere is this: how much exactly, in terms of U.S. foreign policy, is at stake in this presidential election? This question is by no means straightforward, and often the expert consensus turns out to be wrong.

In the 2000 race between Vice President Al Gore and Governor George W. Bush, for example, the received wisdom was that the foreign policy differences between the candidates were minimal.

On the Democratic side, it was presumed that a President Gore would continue the centrist international strategy pursued by the Clinton administration, in which he had been such an important player. Meanwhile, the GOP team hosed down expectations that a President Bush would pursue a more muscular strategy. Condoleezza Rice tut-tutted that “We don’t need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten” and the candidate himself promised a “humble” foreign policy. All this led Robert Kagan to publish an op-ed in *The Washington Post* titled “Vive what difference?”, in which he asked glumly: “When it comes to international affairs, is there really any difference between Bush and Gore?”⁴

It turns out that Kagan need not have worried (though perhaps the rest of us should have). From his first days in office, President Bush was the Charles Atlas of international relations, kicking sand in the faces of puny Europeans and ripping up every multilateral agreement he could get his hands on. Early on, his presidency acquired a unilateral cast which has never been detectable in Gore’s behavior.

After 9/11, Bush opted not just to invade Afghanistan—a country which had given succor to America’s attackers—but to keep marching right to Baghdad. Would Gore have invaded Iraq? Virtual history is always speculative, however Iraq was a war of choice, and it seems likely, judging from his contemporaneous comments and general worldview, that Gore would have chosen differently. But for Bush’s election victory, then, the Iraq war—with all the attendant costs in blood, treasure and prestige—probably would not have occurred.

If 2000 posed a real choice without seeming to, the 2004 election was the exact opposite. In 2004, most analysts agreed with *The New York Times’* David Brooks that “this election is not just a conflict of two men, but is a comprehensive conflict of visions.” Democratic commentators predicted that Bush’s second term would be just like his first term, except worse, because Secretary of State Colin Powell would not be around to apply the handbrake. Joe Cirincione, for instance, warned that the neoconservatives around Bush would be emboldened by their victory, seeing it as “a vindication of their policies and a mandate to continue”. On the other side of the fence, Republicans predicted that a President Kerry would convene a European-style multilateralist love-in. House Speaker Tom DeLay introduced his speeches with: “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen—or as John Kerry would say, bonjour.”⁵

In fact, the foreign policy differences between the candidates were smaller than they appeared to most experts at the time.⁶ By mid-2004, the early failures of the Iraq war had already undermined the ideologues

and chastened U.S. foreign policy. Washington was already taking a more multilateral approach to the problems posed by the two remaining members of the axis of evil, Iran and North Korea. President Bush's ringing commitment in his second inaugural address to "ending tyranny in our world" was a less accurate guide to his administration's future conduct than Washington's earlier rapprochement with the authoritarian regime in Tripoli once Muammar Gadaffi had agreed to renounce terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.⁷

That shift towards pragmatism accelerated after Bush's re-election. Diplomacy became the comeback concept; the State Department recovered some of the territory previously annexed by the Department of Defense; and most of the foreign policy conservatives found themselves outside government—in international organizations, in think tanks or in court. In its second term, the Bush administration has run a fairly orthodox foreign policy relying on multilateral approaches to some of its most difficult challenges—which is broadly what Kerry's foreign policy would have looked like. A Kerry first term would have differed from Bush's second term in some important instances, including the troop surge in Iraq: but there was less dividing the two men than it seemed at the time.

What about this year? The orthodoxy has still not crystallized, but some are emphasizing the similarities between the two candidates' foreign policies.⁸ On the next president's watch, for example, it is likely that the number of U.S. troops in Iraq will fall and the number in Afghanistan will rise; America's traditional alliances will be maintained; Guantánamo will be closed; on climate change, minds will be opened. The state of affairs inherited from the Bush administration—the size of the overseas deployments

(with 180,000 troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan alone),⁹ the assertiveness of America's adversaries, the discrediting of unilateralism, the seriousness of the financial crisis and the condition of congressional and public opinion—will so restrict the policy options available to its successor, goes this argument, that Washington's global strategy will not turn on the election result.

The thesis of this paper, however, is that if the menu of options available to the next president will be limited by Bush's legacy, the two candidates would choose very differently from that menu. McCain and Obama hold contrasting visions of America's role in the world. The differences between the two candidates have been camouflaged somewhat because of some limited convergence on big-ticket items such as Iraq and because the focus of voters (and therefore the campaign narrative) has shifted in recent months from foreign policy to the economy.¹⁰ In fact, however, their differences—in terms of ends, means, temperaments, and the global responses they would elicit, as well as their stated policies—are more conspicuous than their similarities. One candidate offers hope; the other offers glory. In the 2008 election, Americans face a foreign policy choice—and not a marginal, VHS versus Beta kind of choice, either.

It is not easy to identify with confidence the direction of future U.S. foreign policy—especially given the current financial imbroglio. A president's actions are usually related only tangentially to the promises made as a candidate. The contours of America's future strategy will be shaped by events that we cannot foresee. Rather than relying only on stated policies, therefore, we need to examine the candidates' histories and personal styles and make judgments about the cast of their minds.

DIFFERENCES IN ORIENTATION

ENDS

The first contrast between McCain and Obama lies in the international goals they seek to achieve. Both candidates are products of the American political culture, which lends them a certain optimism, a belief that ideas matter in international relations, and a conviction that America is central to international progress. Both believe the president should enact policies which further America's interests and values: but they would strike different balances between interests and values, and their values are not identical.

It may be unfair to say that when it comes to foreign policy, there are two John McCains; however there is certainly a bipolar quality to his worldview. On the one hand, he is attentive to interstate competition and the balance of power, in the realist style. In the first two decades after his release from captivity in North Vietnam, McCain counseled caution in the deployment of American power, emphasizing the need to husband America's resources until the point when her interests were directly engaged. As a freshman congressman in 1983, he opposed the Reagan administration's efforts to extend the U.S. military presence in Lebanon; he was similarly chary about American participation in other second-tier conflicts, including the early phase of the Bosnian conflict and the U.S. mission in Somalia. McCain's pragmatism was evident in his support for normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations, despite his treatment at the hands of the Viet Cong and the character of the regime in Hanoi. McCain was in realist mode in the second presidential debate earlier this month, when he said that the use of force should be "tempered with our ability to beneficially affect the situation ... This

requires a person who understands what ... the limits of our capability are." On the other hand, there have always been strains of idealism in McCain's makeup, and they have become more noticeable since the mid-1990s. With Washington's victories in the Cold War and the Gulf War, and in response to the savagery of the Balkan wars, McCain became more forward-leaning about the propagation of American values and more convinced of the link between freedom and force. In 1999, he argued that America should use her "primacy in world affairs for humanity's benefit" and called for "rogue-state rollback". He was an enthusiastic proponent of the Iraq war and the subsequent surge.¹¹

McCain's description of himself as a "realistic idealist" hardly clarifies how the tension between the two traditions would manifest in the White House. Neither does his roster of advisers, which is equally divided between neoconservatives and assertive nationalists such as Bill Kristol, Robert Kagan and Randy Scheunemann, and realists such as Brent Scowcroft, Henry Kissinger and George Shultz. One recent speech, delivered in March to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council, illustrates McCain's baroque inconsistencies. He cautioned that "our great power does not mean we can do whatever we want whenever we want" and then called for the ejection of Russia from the Group of Eight (a forum which operates by consensus). He extolled "international good citizenship" but then diminished the admittedly imperfect body which helps to maintain a rule-based international order, the United Nations, by promising to establish a "League of Democracies". This is a particularly unrealistic proposal, for three reasons: regime type

is hardly the only determinant of regime behavior; any international organization should, for the sake of its effectiveness, include states which cause problems as well as those that fix them; and few democracies are enthusiastic about joining such a league in any case.¹²

On foreign policy as on domestic policy, Barack Obama presents himself as a pragmatic, almost post-ideological figure. The signature themes of his book *The Audacity of Hope* are not hope and change so much as reasonableness and balance. He will, for example, concur with George Bush's argument about freedom's universal appeal—but then quickly raise caveats against its imposition abroad and suggest that people “are looking less for an ‘electocracy’ than for the basic elements that … define a decent life … and the ability to make their way through life without having to endure corruption, violence or arbitrary power.”¹³ Unlike Bush and McCain, Obama does not dwell on the roles that good and evil play in the affairs of humankind; in his analysis of countries and organizations he tends to be a splitter rather than a lumper. His pragmatism was apparent in his 2002 speech against the invasion of Iraq, which was not the standard left-liberal critique:

I don't oppose all wars … What I am opposed to is a dumb war … a rash war, a war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics … I also know that Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States, or to his neighbors, that the Iraqi economy is in shambles, that the Iraqi military is a fraction of its former strength, and that in concert with the international community he can be contained until, in the way of all petty dictators, he falls away into the dustbin of history. I know that even a successful war against Iraq will require a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences.¹⁴

That is not to say that Obama would govern as a realist. He has claimed that mantle in recent months, stating that he prefers “foreign policy realism” to

“ideology”, advocating a “clear-eyed view of how the world works” and “tough, thoughtful, realistic diplomacy”, and calling in aid not only traditional Democratic foreign policy heroes such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Dean Acheson and John F. Kennedy but also George F. Kennan, Brent Scowcroft, James A. Baker and George H.W. Bush. Commentators have lauded this claim, notably Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek*, who characterized Obama as a “cool conservative” next to McCain’s “exuberant idealist.”¹⁵

To be a realist, however, you need to have ice in your veins, and it's not clear that Obama does—or that any Democratic administration would display the kind of steely devotion to national interests above all other considerations that the term implies. An Obama administration would be staffed by Democrats and animated partly by Democratic values such as a commitment to human rights; it would be influenced not only by foreign policy professionals but by Congress, labor unions, activists and the “netroots”—the movement which opposed Senator Hillary Clinton's centrism so passionately and effectively and which would maintain a constant pressure on Obama's left flank. Comparisons with George H.W. Bush's administration are not very helpful—and not only because the international system has changed so much over the past two decades. In office, Bush senior was criticized by Democrats for the amorality of his foreign policy.¹⁶ The affection many contemporary Democrats hold for Brent Scowcroft is based largely on his opposition to the Iraq war, not his full career or worldview. For many of Obama's advisers, the formative experiences of the 1990s were the Clinton administration's failure to prevent the Rwandan genocide and its success in stopping the blood-letting in the Balkans—so it is impossible to imagine Obama's secretary of state saying coolly, as did James Baker in 1991 of the Balkan wars: “We don't have a dog in that fight.” There is no question that Obama and the people around him admire the deftness of the George H.W. Bush administration in corralling a huge coalition to fight the Gulf War. But there is surely also a bit of gamesmanship involved in Obama's praise for Bush *père* over Bush *fil*: indeed, the Democratic candidate in 2004, Senator John F. Kerry, made similar comments.¹⁷ In sum,

Obama's foreign policies contain elements of liberal idealism just as McCain's contain elements of conservative idealism: he may not be a realist but he is more of a pragmatist than McCain.

MEANS

McCain and Obama differ as much on means as on ends. Their foreign policy instincts are largely—although not entirely—at odds, with the Republican being more unilateral, state-centric, muscular and comfortable with the role of force than his Democratic opponent. To be sure, McCain concedes that “approaching problems with allies works far better than facing problems alone”, just as Obama (travelling in the opposite direction) states that “our immediate safety can't be held hostage to the desire for international consensus” and reserves the right “to act unilaterally to protect our interests”. Yet based on their contemporaneous views on the Iraq war and current statements of policy, Obama sits closer to the multilateral end of the spectrum than does McCain. He is certainly no “U.N. groupie” and he has commented that the Security Council “too often appears frozen in a Cold War-era time warp”. But he does believe that the United States is stronger when it works with and through institutions as well as allies in order to project American power. Obama writes that “nobody benefits more than we do from the observance of international ‘rules of the road.’ We can't win converts to those rules if we act as if they apply to everyone but us. When the world's sole superpower willingly restrains its power and abides by internationally agreed-upon standards of conduct, it sends a message that these are rules worth following”. It is hard to imagine McCain uttering those words, let alone agreeing with Obama's characterization of President Bush's approach in this way: “we round up the United Kingdom and Togo and then do what we please.”¹⁸

A related conceptual difference between the two camps is that McCain is more state-centric in his assumptions, whereas Obama accords a greater weight to non-state actors and non-traditional security threats. Again, this is not a binary difference: Obama is fully cognizant of the need to get state-to-state relations right, and McCain often refers in lavish

terms to the threat posed by jihadist terrorism (describing it as “the transcendent challenge of our time” whereas for Obama it is only “one of the severe threats that we face”). But talking to McCain advisers, one gets the sense that they view the international system fundamentally as a contest between states, whereas often the Obama team looks at the world through the lens of globalization, referring to “transnational” threats and the need to find “integrated and cooperative solutions”. Obama emphasizes what he calls “interconnectivity”; his Berlin speech in July was one extended riff on the theme of “dangers that cannot be contained within the borders of a country or by the distance of an ocean”.¹⁹

Global problems such as climate change and nuclear proliferation require global solutions—and when Obama is asked about competitors such as Russia, he emphasizes the need to work with them to achieve such solutions. He does not “turn a blind eye to democratic erosion inside Russia”, but neither is it his principal concern. He rejected McCain's plan to expel Russia from the G-8 as “a mistake”, and his initial response to the Russia-Georgia conflict in August was relatively neutral, although he soon toughened up his criticism of Moscow.²⁰ In July 2007, Obama even said he would be willing to meet, without pre-conditions, the leaders of states such as Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea—although he has subsequently refined his position by saying that such meetings would only take place after doing “the appropriate groundwork” and “at a time and place of my choosing”.²¹

McCain, whose role models are Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, leans much farther forward when it comes to confronting U.S. adversaries. He agreed with President Bush's characterization of dialogue with “terrorists and radicals” as being akin to appeasement—although his momentum on this point was stalled by the administration's decision to send Undersecretary of State William Burns to participate in talks with the Iranians in July, and it may have been stopped by the September statement of five former secretaries of state, including Colin Powell, James Baker and Henry Kissinger, that Washington should talk directly with Tehran.²² In relation to the North

Korean nuclear program, it seems likely that both candidates would persist with the six-party process—but given McCain's hawkish history on the issue, he would probably be less patient with Pyongyang.²³ McCain also believes in muscling up to Moscow. In response to President Bush's statement about Vladimir Putin that "I looked the man in the eye ... I was able to get a sense of his soul", McCain is fond of saying "I looked into his eyes and saw three letters: a K, a G and a B." Obama says delicately that "Russia is neither our enemy nor close ally right now"; McCain talks bluntly of "revanchist Russia". In contrast to the more diplomatic Bush administration, the Republican standard-bearer states that America's missile shield will "hedge against potential threats from possible strategic competitors like Russia and China."²⁴ Ironically, Putin gave McCain a significant leg-up by his conduct of the Russia-Georgia conflict. The Cold War feel of the crisis worked in favor of the older, more experienced candidate, and Russia's behavior made McCain's hard-nosed approach appear prescient. It also undermined Obama's theme of change, because it made it seem that Central Europe was going back to the future. McCain made the most of the opportunity, taking a consistently tough line and telling Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili (whom he nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2005): "today, we are all Georgians."²⁵ In so doing, he made an implicit comparison with both 9/11 (after which *Le Monde* wrote "We are all Americans") and the Cold War (in particular, John F. Kennedy's declaration in 1963: "*ich bin ein Berliner*").²⁶

The two candidates also differ, in subtle but important ways, on a rising competitor, China. The emergence of China is transforming the diplomatic geometry of Asia, as U.S. allies and partners such as South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia move to accommodate the rising influence of the Middle Kingdom. Both McCain and Obama hold to what we might call the "Spiderman doctrine": that with Beijing's great power comes great responsibility. Sometimes China pursues its narrowly-defined interests with an uncompromising resolve that would be described as amoral belligerence were it attempted by the United States, and both McCain and Obama call Beijing on such behavior in the Security Council

and elsewhere. If McCain has been more critical of China on human rights and the nature of its military build-up, Obama has been more direct on economic issues.²⁷ Both argue for a U.S. strategy that combines engagement and balancing—however McCain's distrust of non-democracies and his concern with the regional distribution of power would restrict the level of engagement somewhat. A McCain administration would be warier of Beijing than an Obama administration, which would be closer to the engagement end of the spectrum. Relations between Washington and Beijing have been largely tranquil since 9/11, but things may get more difficult on the next president's watch.

There are strong similarities between the two candidates when it comes to the management of the U.S. military: both want to grow it (although McCain wants to add about 150,000 personnel to its ranks compared to about 90,000 for Obama); improve the benefits awarded to servicemen and women and the kit available to them; and build up their ability to fight insurgencies and advise foreign forces.²⁸ However as commander-in-chief, McCain would be more inclined to deploy the military in the pursuit of his international policies than would Obama. That is not to say that one is a warmonger and the other a weakling. McCain has spoken eloquently on what he called "the merciless reality of war": "I detest war. It might not be the worst thing to befall human beings, but it is wretched beyond all description. When nations seek to resolve their differences by force of arms, a million tragedies ensue". On the other side of the aisle, Obama is always careful to say that he "will not hesitate to use force ... to protect the American people or our vital interests whenever we are attacked or imminently threatened." However, the two men differ on where force sits in the foreign policy mix.²⁹

Since the mid-1990s, McCain has been a consistent and vocal hawk.³⁰ Obama has no comparable record which we can parse: as he was only elected to national office in 2004, he was not required to venture a contemporaneous opinion on most of the military actions that McCain supported.³¹ Yet Obama has made some general remarks in the past year that are revealing. In January he said of Iraq: "I don't want to just end the

war, but I want to end the mind-set that got us into war in the first place.” He has sent signals that the center of gravity of America’s international policies needs to shift away from the reliance on force. To a journalist last year, he asserted: “for most of our history our crises have come from using force when we shouldn’t, not by failing to use force.” In a national security speech in July, he said: “Instead of pushing the entire burden of our foreign policy on to the brave men and women of our military, I want to use all elements of American power to keep us safe, and prosperous, and free … I will pursue a tough, smart and principled national security strategy—one that recognizes that we have interests not just in Baghdad, but in Kandahar and Karachi, in Tokyo and London, in Beijing and Berlin.”³² (These last sentiments are not unique to Obama: in the past year, President Bush’s highly-regarded Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates has argued for the strengthening of the non-military side of American international capacities, in areas such as diplomacy and civilian state-building.³³)

Obama is no pacifist, as we saw when he vowed to use force against terrorist targets in Pakistan, even without Islamabad’s consent. Other center-left heads of government, notably former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, have become more hawkish upon assuming office. Some insiders suggest, in fact, that the international community’s “responsibility to protect” civilian populations from mass atrocity crimes may prove to be a theme of an Obama presidency. Many of the advisers around the candidate have strong views on humanitarian intervention, for example Susan Rice and Tony Lake argued in 2006 for U.S. military action, if necessary without U.N. sanction, to halt the genocide in Darfur. Obama has said that the occurrence of genocide is “a stain on our souls”; in the second presidential debate, he remarked that if “we stand idly by, that diminishes us”. It is hard to predict how he would balance the impulse to prevent such crimes against the widespread aversion to military intervention in the aftermath of Iraq. On balance, it still seems likely that Obama would be a more cautious commander-in-chief than McCain.³⁴

A final piece of evidence for this proposition is provided by the candidates’ approach to the doctrine of

preventive war that undergirded the Iraq war: the idea that unilateral military force should sometimes be used against a threat which is emerging, but not yet imminent. In an interview published in *The Atlantic* in October, McCain implicitly defended the invasion of Iraq on the basis of this doctrine, although he acknowledged “It’s very hard to run for president on this idea right now.” His comments on the Iranian nuclear program, discussed below, are in a similar spirit. By contrast, Obama has drawn a much sharper line between, on the one hand, Washington’s “right to take unilateral military action to eliminate an *imminent* threat to our security”, and on the other hand, military action against threats that have not yet crystallized, where he emphasizes the importance of multilateral cooperation. Although Obama does not rule out unilateral action against emerging threats, he is plainly less comfortable with that idea than is McCain.³⁵

What about the role of alliances in the worldviews of the candidates? The answer is not necessarily consistent across different regions. Opinion polls tell us that Obama would be a more congenial president in the eyes of Western European publics, and he would also be a more popular interlocutor with their governments.³⁶ In Asia, by contrast, McCain is more alliance-focused than his rival. In addressing the Asian region, McCain typically starts with Washington’s alliances with countries such as Japan, South Korea and Australia before moving on to other regional powers and issues. In *Foreign Affairs*, for instance, he wrote: “The key to meeting … challenges in a changing Asia is increasing cooperation with our allies”; in *The Australian* he said: “engagement must begin with our allies.” Obama does not always take this approach.³⁷ McCain also draws a brighter line between treaty allies and other Asian powers, emphasizing that the alliances are not only guided by interests but “rooted in the norms and values we hold in common with the region’s great democracies.” By contrast, Obama often brackets alliances with other, less intimate relationships, writing of his intention to rebuild “alliances, partnerships, and institutions”. It is a gross exaggeration to say, as John Bolton does, that Obama has “a post-alliance policy, perhaps one that would unfold in global organizations such as the

United Nations”—but for whatever reason, whether it be generational or normative, he may see alliances as less special.³⁸ Whether either candidate could actually persuade U.S. allies to shoulder additional burdens or provide more reliable support over the long term is an open question.

TEMPERAMENTS

As well as pursuing different ends and using different means, Obama and McCain would bring different temperaments to the Oval Office. Obama is disciplined, deliberate and cerebral. Intimates describe him as a measured problem-solver who rarely rushes to judgment. He is preternaturally calm—“no drama Obama”. Even in his days as president of the *Harvard Law Review* and as an Illinois state senator, Obama was known as a listener and a conciliator: reading the two books he has written, it is hard not to be struck by his even-handedness.³⁹ After eight years of a president with little patience for briefings and meetings, who interrupts his briefers with lines such as “Speed it up … this isn’t my first rodeo”, Obama’s intellectual curiosity would be welcome.⁴⁰ Of course, not all international problems are susceptible to rational agreement in the absence of leverage and pressure. Obama would need to make sure his reasonableness is not mistaken for weakness. In June, for instance, some European diplomats complained that his pledge to negotiate with Tehran without preconditions (in particular, without an Iranian suspension of uranium enrichment) reduced the West’s leverage over Iran.⁴¹

McCain is a different kettle of fish: intuitive, impulsive, unpredictable and possessed of an impressive temper, as many Republicans on Capitol Hill will volunteer under their breath. McCain revels in risk-taking, inclining towards the bolder option in most situations. In one of his books, he described his approach to decisions like this: “I make them as quickly as I can, quicker than the other fellow, if I can. Often my haste is a mistake, but I live with the consequences without complaint.”⁴² On two recent occasions, when he has found himself losing the political chess game to Obama, he has thrown the chessboard up in the air: in August, he chose an unknown female small-

state governor as his running-mate; in September, he suspended his campaign to deal with the financial crisis. It is redundant to say, of a man with McCain’s personal history, that he is determined and brave; his experiences have also left him unusually attentive to the demands of personal and national honor. Many of these attributes can be helpful in international relations, but they can also be harmful—for example, if McCain’s quickness to anger were to lead him to overreact to an unexpected event, such as another attack on the U.S. homeland, or if his highly personalized relationships with leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Mikheil Saakashvili were to drive Washington’s policy towards binary positions.⁴³

GLOBAL PERCEPTIONS

The final major difference between the two men is how the election of one or the other would affect global perceptions of the United States. The tenure of the Bush administration has coincided with a steep decline in international regard for the United States. This is a trend that Americans are keen to reverse: in a recent poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, an overwhelming 83 percent of respondents rated the goal of “improving America’s standing in the world” as “very important” (the highest rating for any foreign policy goal).⁴⁴ Anti-Americanism is, no doubt, partly a reaction against a country which looms as large culturally as it does economically or politically; but there is no question that much of this animus has been caused by the Bush administration and its international policies, in particular the invasion of Iraq. (The headline in London’s *Daily Mirror* the day after the 2004 election, for instance, read: “How could 59,054,087 people be so dumb?”)⁴⁵ One measure of the depth of this feeling is that after complaining about the unilateralism of Bush’s first term, much of the world is ignoring the multilateralism of his second term. People either have not noticed that Washington’s approach has altered, or they refuse to give the administration credit for its grudging about-face. As America’s standing has fallen, so too has its influence and its leverage: while governments may be more alert to the change in Washington’s behavior, they have been slow to reward it.

Recent opinion polling by the Lowy Institute and others indicates that, as we enter the final months of the Bush administration, America's image may be about to bounce back.⁴⁶ The country's soft power account will look much healthier the instant the next president is inaugurated. If it is McCain, his story, his character and his principled opposition to the darker trappings of Bush foreign policy—Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, waterboarding and all the rest—would stand him in good stead. Only a few would agree with this unlovely piece of analysis from *The Guardian's* Jonathan Freedland: "If Americans choose McCain, they will be turning their back on the rest of the world, choosing to show us four more years of the Bush-Cheney finger."⁴⁷

Although the election of either man would shift international perceptions of America, however, it is clear that Obama's election would shift them more—especially in those parts of the world where threats coalesce. It may even dislodge some international prejudices against the country. Which other presidential candidate in history could reminisce, as Obama does when he describes his childhood years in Indonesia, about "the feel of packed mud under bare feet as I wander through paddy fields"? Obama hinted at the broader geopolitical effect of his biography when he told *The New York Times Magazine*: "if you can tell people, 'We have a president in the White House who still has a grandmother living in a hut on the shores of Lake Victoria and has a sister who's half-Indonesian, married to a Chinese-Canadian,' then they're going to think that he may have a better sense of what's going on in our lives and in our country."⁴⁸ Along with this crown, however, comes a cross: the risk of dashed expectations on both sides. Such are the dizzyingly high levels of anticipation of an Obama administration that almost any foreign policy enacted by it—on climate change, Darfur, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,

or whatever—is likely to disappoint great swaths of international opinion. Equally, many Americans may find that public affection for Obama in foreign countries does not translate into a willingness on the part of their governments to share additional burdens and risks with the United States.

LESSONS LEARNED

Before moving on to specific policies, a final word on ends and means. It is greatly to be hoped that the progress which has been made over the past five years is not lost in the transition to a new administration. John McCain makes a reasonable point that the victories won in Iraq by the surge and internal Iraqi developments should not be surrendered through a precipitous withdrawal. But there is another danger, too. During George Bush's second term, U.S. foreign policy has undergone a difficult shift—from unilateralism to multilateralism, from a more ideological program to a more pragmatic one, from an overreliance on force to a more balanced array of approaches. It would be highly regrettable if America were now to unlearn those lessons. On the available evidence, there is little risk of this happening under a President Obama—but what about in the case of a President McCain, who would not be a lame duck like President Bush but a newly elected hawk? The hope is that McCain is cognizant of the Bush administration's sins and would not repeat them—that he shares the administration's new appreciation that American power, while great, is not unlimited—and that any irrational exuberance would be quietened by domestic and public sentiment. A pessimist would observe, on the other hand, that McCain's response to the Georgia crisis was more bellicose than that of either Obama or Bush. Obama argues that a McCain victory would usher in four more years of Bush policies. But the critical question is: which four years, the first or the second?

DIFFERENCES IN POLICY

The different foreign policy worldviews of McCain and Obama are also expressed as policy differences on most of the great international conflicts and challenges facing the United States, starting with the Iraq war. For each candidate, Iraq was an important calling-card during the primary season: Obama's early opposition to the war differentiated his candidacy from that of Senator Hillary Clinton; and McCain's prescient advocacy of the surge drove up the value of his national security credentials compared with his Republican rivals. That is not to say that the two decisions—to invade Iraq in 2003 and to insert more combat troops in 2007—were equivalent. The decision to invade Iraq and displace its regime in the absence of either a clear *casus belli* or comprehensive post-conflict plans represented a massive discontinuity for U.S. foreign policy and the international system, from which a thousand sorry consequences have flowed. The decision to deploy additional troops, while gutsy, was only one of several phases of the war launched by the prior decision.

The relative success of the new strategy has, to some extent, closed the gap between McCain and Obama: both now advocate drawing down troops in a manner that does not squander the progress that has been achieved. Furthermore, it is apparent from the new assertiveness of the Maliki government that, in future, U.S. policy on Iraq will be determined as much by politics in Baghdad as in Washington.

Notwithstanding this, the differences between McCain and Obama on Iraq remain profound. They disagree on the fruits of the surge: one argues that keeping U.S. troops in place provides space for an Iraqi po-

litical settlement; the other argues that their removal would force one.⁴⁹ In the medium term, McCain resists anything but a conditions-based withdrawal, saying American troops should stay until "Iraqi forces can safeguard their own country"; Obama would order a phased withdrawal of combat brigades over the course of sixteen months and promises that "I am going to bring the Iraq war to a close when I am president."⁵⁰ McCain regards Iraq as "the main battleground in the war on terror"; Obama replies that "Iraq is not the central front in the war on terrorism, and it never has been."⁵¹ These bifurcated views on the significance of the Iraq war are more important than any particular policy position, because they will inform how U.S. policy develops in response to unfolding events. McCain was a passionate advocate of both the war and the surge; he believes America has "incurred a moral responsibility in Iraq" and that to leave Iraqis to their own devices would be "an unconscionable act of betrayal, a stain on our character as a great nation." Obama opposed the war from the start and is determined to finish it. He wants to "turn the page in Iraq." He believes that hawks have shrunk U.S. foreign policy to the dimensions of Iraq: "This war distracts us from every threat that we face and so many opportunities we could seize." Obama intends to rebalance U.S. policy away from this conflict, telling General David Petraeus in Iraq that "my job as ... a potential commander-in-chief extends beyond Iraq."⁵² Developments on the ground may cruel the intentions of either McCain or Obama, but at the moment, the Iraq war figures very differently in the two men's thinking.

The candidates are closer to each other when it comes to the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan and

Pakistan—a similarity produced by the overwhelming pessimism in Washington on the subject. Both men agree with the sentiment of former ISAF commander General Dan K. McNeill that Afghanistan is an “under-resourced war”, and have called for an extra two or three combat brigades and other assets to be deployed there. However, McCain came to this view late, and it is not clear where he would find these troops without drawing down the U.S. force in Iraq. (McCain also called for the appointment of an “Afghanistan czar”—an unfortunate job title given the record of the Russian czars, and their Soviet successors, in Afghanistan.)⁵³ Both have demanded that U.S. allies shoulder a greater burden, and have criticized the operational caveats that have been imposed by many capitals restricting their personnel from being deployed outside certain areas, or at night, or in certain weather conditions, or even without an ambulance in tow. (If many states agree that the war in Afghanistan is a good fight, fewer are prepared to put their people in harm’s way in order to fight it.) However, they differ on the centrality of the Afghanistan war to U.S. interests: Obama intends to “refocus” American energies on it, as seen in his decision to visit Afghanistan before Iraq on his July Middle East tour; McCain awards it a lower priority compared to Iraq, although he also points to the interconnectedness of the two conflicts.⁵⁴

On the question of the Iranian nuclear program, both Obama and McCain agree the stakes are very high. A nuclear-armed Iran would threaten U.S. interests in a number of ways: it would embolden a regime with terrorist links; endanger strategic waterways in the Gulf; threaten key allies, especially Israel; and contribute to regional and global nuclear proliferation. Both are in favor of aggressive international diplomacy and strong sanctions against Iran (whether they are imposed inside or outside the U.N. system).⁵⁵ However, two critical differences remain. First, Obama would launch direct talks with Iran, which McCain believes would only enhance President Ahmadinejad’s prestige and produce “an earful of anti-Semitic rants”. Second, U.S. air strikes to interrupt the Iranian nuclear program are more likely to take place under a McCain administration. Obama has not ruled out the use of force but he did state in the

first Democratic presidential candidates’ debate that “it would be a profound mistake for us to initiate a war with Iran.”⁵⁶ People around him are chary of air strikes for the same reasons that have caused the Bush administration to stay its hand: the risks to America’s position in the region, the country’s international reputation, the situation in Iraq, the price of oil and the safety of Americans and others who would be targeted for retaliation by Iranian proxies. It is also questionable whether air strikes would deal a serious blow to a well-dispersed and protected Iranian nuclear program. (These calculations may change, of course: some analysts speculate that if Obama’s engagement strategy were to fail due to bad faith on Tehran’s part, the situation may be even more dangerous than before.)

McCain’s comments on this question, however, are of a different order—and here it is not necessary to wonder why he once sang “bomb Iran” to the tune of the Beach Boys’ song “Barbara Ann”. McCain’s stated position is that “there is only one thing worse than the United States exercising a military option and that is a nuclear-armed Iran.” As Gideon Rachman of the *Financial Times* has observed: “Given the trajectory of the Iranian nuclear program, that is essentially a commitment to attack Iran within the first term of a McCain presidency—unless the Israelis get there first.” We do not know which colored light an Obama White House would show if Israel were to make representations on that subject, but we do know what McCain’s running-mate, Sarah Palin, thinks: “We cannot second guess the steps that Israel has to take to defend itself.”⁵⁷

There is also a significant difference between the likely level of investment each candidate would make in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Both Obama and McCain are committed to Israel’s security and both have foresworn negotiations with Hamas, at least as it is currently constituted. But in their speeches to AIPAC in June and their essays in *Foreign Affairs* last year, Obama talked at length about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict whereas McCain mentioned it only in passing, concentrating instead on other Middle East challenges.⁵⁸ It seems likely that McCain would remain relatively aloof from the process whereas Obama

would try to re-energize it—although whether U.S. involvement would be sufficient to overcome the intimidating obstacles to peace in the Holy Land is another question altogether.

A similar pattern can be discerned on the two difficult global issues of nuclear disarmament and climate change. To some extent, the policies of Obama and McCain on these questions rhyme with each other: both express a desire for a nuclear weapons-free world and a commitment to eliminate particular systems while promising to retain a strong deterrent and not to unilaterally disarm; and both advocate market-based mechanisms designed to reduce carbon emissions and fund new clean technologies.⁵⁹ These positions are light years ahead of the Bush administration, which grimly resisted many disarmament measures and whose macabre dance of climate change denial, skepticism and delay seriously hampered international efforts to slow the heating of the planet.⁶⁰ However, on nuclear disarmament McCain's encouraging rhetoric is coloured somewhat by the strident opposition of many of his advisers to the concept, and the likelihood that his election would further strain relations with Russia, which is after all the other major nuclear weapons power. It would not be easy to square the circle of confronting Moscow yet also cooperating with it on the reduction of a principal source of its international prestige. The candidates frame the debate on global warming differently, too, which probably telegraphs how they would approach it in government: although both stress the energy security piece of the puzzle, and McCain has shown courage by bucking his party on the issue, only Obama believes climate change is "one of the greatest moral challenges of our generation."⁶¹

The candidates are also at odds on trade—although not as much, perhaps, as it appears at first sight. McCain is a far more consistent free trader than Obama, as evidenced by his rhetoric and his record. His boast that he is "the biggest free marketer and free trader that you will ever see" is not an idle one: he may never have seen a free trade agreement he could not vote for. He defends free trade even to its enemies, telling au-

toworkers in Michigan (a Republican primary that he went on to lose): "Some of the jobs that have left the state of Michigan are not coming back. They are not. And I am sorry to tell you that." By contrast, Obama was highly critical of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) during the primary season, labeling it "a mistake". He opposes the pending South Korea and Colombia free trade agreements (FTAs) in their current form and warns that FTAs should be required to meet tougher environmental and labour standards.⁶² But although Obama's free market rhetoric slipped during a hard-fought Democratic race, it is hard to paint him convincingly as a protectionist. Everything we know about Obama—his comfort with globalization, his preference for multilateralism, his distaste for overt nationalism and his cerebral approach to policy—points to him being an instinctive free trader. He has surrounded himself with free market types: not only Warren Buffett, Paul Volcker and Robert Rubin but campaign staff such as Jason Furman (who once angered fellow Democrats by praising Wal-Mart's contribution to the U.S. economy) and Austan Goolsbee (who caused a brouhaha in March by allegedly briefing Canadian diplomats that Obama's anti-free trade talk was mere politics). Shortly after defeating Senator Clinton, Obama walked back his position, admitting that "sometimes during campaigns the rhetoric gets overheated and amplified."⁶³

On trade more than most international policy questions, the Congress can be just as influential as the president. From a free trader's perspective, therefore, the operative question is not which candidate is the purer of the two, but rather, who would be in a better position to tone down the protectionist impulses of the next Congress, which is likely to be strongly Democratic? Opinions on this are divided. Some say that only a Democratic president with "fair trade" credentials would be able to prevail upon congressional Democrats to create majorities in favor of free trade—as President Bill Clinton did in the 1990s. Others argue this underestimates the extent to which Democratic feelings have soured on free trade, and that McCain would be more likely and better placed to establish a bipartisan coalition in favor of it.

PERSONNEL

The personality of the next president will largely determine the character of his administration's foreign policy, but his appointees to key foreign policy and national security jobs in the executive branch will also be highly influential. A popular exercise in Washington, D.C. at this point in the electoral cycle is to guess who will take the most senior of these positions. The problem is that these appointments depend on a constellation of factors, many of which are still unclear—so the answers to these questions are essentially unknowable, perhaps even for the candidates themselves. It is as much fun as speculating which footballer Sir Alex Ferguson will buy next for Manchester United, and just as useful. We can, however, make three points.

The first is that vice presidents matter. Al Gore was a key contributor to the deliberations of the Clinton administration; historians may conclude, should they win access to the documents necessary to reach a judgment, that no one bar President Bush himself was more crucial to the tenor of U.S. policy over the past eight years than Dick Cheney. In office, Joe Biden would likely play a substantial role in foreign policy given his long experience in the area, perhaps trespassing to some extent on the territory of the Secretary of State. It is hard to imagine John McCain deferring to Sarah Palin much in this field, although he could well allocate specific roles to her, such as energy policy. The real rub, however, would be if one of them were to assume the role of commander-in-chief. It would be hard to get too exercised either way about a President Biden, but the prospect of a President Palin is more of a concern. Democrats' criticisms of Palin after the Republican National Convention were

exaggerated: she has a colorful and interesting life story, buckets of political savvy and a lot of pluck, as she showed by fronting the Alaskan Republican establishment. Since McCain played his gambit, however, he has shielded Palin from the media, hoping to run out the clock. The few interviews she has given have made it clear that, in addition to possessing no foreign policy experience, she has only ever maintained a glancing acquaintance with the debate on America's role in the world—yet as John McCain himself has said repeatedly, in the White House "there will be no time for on-the-job training."⁶⁴

The second point is that the kind of people appointed by the next president to the central roles in the White House and at the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom will be a bellwether for his administration's direction. Obama's advisers are not, contrary to speculation, all drawn from the left of the Democratic Party. Although it is true that opponents of the Iraq war are over-represented, few members of his team are particularly ideological. This is in stark contrast to the McCain camp, which contains (among the serried ranks of realists) a number of highly influential neo-conservatives and assertive nationalists. As a pointer to future directions, one could watch the fortunes of McCain advisers such as, say, Richard Armitage and John Bolton.

If the ideology of those at the commanding heights of an administration's foreign policy structures is important to its success, however, its cohesiveness is just as vital. Many (although certainly not all) of the Bush administration's sorrows are related to the dysfunctional relationships between its key players, especially

in the first term. There are plenty of other examples of this phenomenon, such as the rivalry between Cyrus Vance and Zbigniew Brzezinski in the Carter administration, or the attempt by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger to lock out other pillars of the U.S. government in the management of foreign policy. It is impossible to say, from the outside, how damaging the ideological tensions between different McCain

advisers would prove in office—perhaps not at all. However, the silent and deadly effectiveness of the Obama campaign, which has revealed few internal frictions and generated few leaks, may point to a relatively cohesive operation in government. That said, the *esprit de corps* of the Obama team would be tested by hard issues such as Iraq withdrawal plans, Iran's nuclear program and humanitarian intervention.

CONCLUSION

At the first presidential debate last month in Oxford, Mississippi, the candidates faced off below an American eagle clutching an olive branch in one talon and arrows in the other. It was noted the next day that Barack Obama stood beneath the olive branch and John McCain stood beneath the arrows.⁶⁵

There are some policy similarities between these two individuals, but the fundamental differences between their worldviews are more important. Obama is pragmatic, conciliatory, cautious and cool. He is a child of globalization, intent on seeking global solutions to global problems, and his election would produce a burst of international optimism about America's role in the world. McCain is bolder and less predictable, more hawkish, more forward-leaning about the

propagation of American values and more focused on interstate competition. Obama's charm, steely determination and high intelligence evokes no one more than Jack Kennedy; McCain's taste for adventure and his muscular approach to life bring to mind the original Rough Rider, Teddy Roosevelt. Obama would be tested by America's adversaries; he might find that the international system is even less susceptible to change than his own country. McCain would be tested by his own temperament and the imperative for prudence in the deployment of American power.

Obama and McCain are seeking office at a dangerous time. Searching questions are being asked of them, and their answers could hardly be more different: hope and glory.

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