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Abstract

Bill Clinton ran for president on the theme of change-change in domestic policy and change in foreign policy. With the end of the cold war, candidate Clinton argued, American foreign policy had to meet novel challenges as it prepared for the twentyfirst century. What was needed, Clinton said in 1991, was "a new vision and the strength to meet a new set of opportunities and threats." "We face the same challenge today that we faced in 1946-to build a world of security, freedom, democracy, free markets and growth at a time of great change." In candidate Clinton's view, the Bush administration had failed to articulate such a vision and to put into place a post-cold war foreign policy strategy. Indeed, President George Bush's leadership, Clinton claimed, was "rudderless, reactive, and erratic," while the country needed leadership that was "strategic, vigorous, and grounded in America's democratic values."

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“While the Clinton administration has succeeded in identifying a set of [foreign policy] values, it has been less successful in presenting a coherent global vision and strategy to achieve those goals. . . the question remains whether the Clinton administration’s foreign policy orientation reflects the incipient elements of a new post-cold war order or a temporary interlude before the reemergence of a realist direction in foreign policy.”

Assessing Clinton’s Foreign Policy at Midterm

BY JAMES M. MCCORMICK

Bill Clinton ran for president on the theme of change—change in domestic policy and change in foreign policy. With the end of the cold war, candidate Clinton argued, American foreign policy had to meet novel challenges as it prepared for the twenty-first century. What was needed, Clinton said in 1991, was “a new vision and the strength to meet a new set of opportunities and threats.” “We face the same challenge today that we faced in 1946—to build a world of security, freedom, democracy, free markets and growth at a time of great change.” In candidate Clinton’s view, the Bush administration had failed to articulate such a vision and to put into place a post-cold war foreign policy strategy. Indeed, President George Bush’s leadership, Clinton claimed, was “rudderless, reactive, and erratic,” while the country needed leadership that was “strategic, vigorous, and grounded in America’s democratic values.”

Once elected, President Clinton was determined to have a foreign policy rooted in a clear set of principles, derived from America’s past and guided by a coherent and workable strategy. Moreover, domestic policy and foreign policy would be tied together in this approach. Only by shoring up economic and social strength at home would the United States be in a position to pursue an effective economic and security policy abroad. However, while the Clinton administration has succeeded in identifying a set of values, it has been less successful in presenting a coherent global vision and strategy to achieve those goals.

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FOREIGN POLICY PRINCIPLES

In the past three years, Clinton or his representatives have sought to outline the administration’s foreign policy on at least four different occasions. Although specifics have changed, some priorities can be identified.

The first occasion was the election campaign of 1991 and 1992. Despite his effort to downplay foreign policy in the campaign, Clinton supported global engagement by the United States and sought to restore more idealism to American foreign policy—especially by expressing a global commitment to democratization and human rights and chastising the previous administration’s go-slow policy on aiding democratization in Russia, the lack of moral content in its policy toward Bosnia and Haiti, and its embracing of the Chinese government. In short, idealism would be reintegrated into American foreign policy.

The second occasion was in early 1993, when the new Clinton administration attempted to be more specific about the key values that it wanted to pursue. In his confirmation hearings, Secretary of State-designate Warren Christopher summarized the administration’s foreign policy principles under three simple, albeit not simplistic, headings. The first principle, one the administration claimed was its highest foreign policy priority, was United States economic security. The rationale for this principle had been stated early on in Clinton’s campaign: “Our first foreign priority and our first domestic priority are one and the same: reviving our economy. America must regain its economic strength to play our proper role as leader of the world.” Christopher committed the Clinton administration to “advance America’s economic security with the same energy and resourcefulness we devoted to waging the cold war.”

To achieve economic security, the administration would develop an economic program making American companies and their workers more productive and more competitive abroad; it would try to put in place a

strategy to reduce foreign borrowing to support federal budget deficits; and it would take the necessary steps to make America a more reliable and capable trading partner. Structurally, the administration would add an Economic Security Council to the policymaking apparatus to complement the National Security Council and, as Clinton put it, ensure "that economics is no longer a poor cousin to old-school diplomacy."

While achieving economic security would be a central foreign policy objective, it would not be pursued in a vacuum. Commercial goals, Christopher noted, would not surpass all other concerns in dealing with states abroad. Advancing nuclear nonproliferation, promoting human rights, and enhancing sustainable development in the third world would remain part of the policy mix. In other words, some hedging on the centrality of economics was offered immediately.

The second principle the Clinton administration advanced was the need to maintain a strong but more flexible defense to meet new and continuing security challenges. Deterrence would remain an important function of the armed services, but America's defenses would also have to be prepared to meet new threats and to undertake new missions.

These threats would be distinct from those of the cold war years and would require continuous global attention and sustained readiness. Proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons in several countries (for example, Iraq and North Korea); enhanced conventional weapons, with new and more dangerous delivery systems (for example, in the Middle East); the dangers of ethnic rivalries in various regions of the world (for example, the former Yugoslavia); and the possibility of disorder in the former Soviet Union would require new missions for the American military. Peacekeeping, peacemaking, humanitarian missions, drug trafficking, and antiterrorism would likely become regular issues for United States national security policy.

Military force by the new administration would also be applied in a more calculated manner. American decision options must include, Christopher noted, more than "a choice between inaction or American intervention." Bilateral and multilateral approaches would be used, and collective security mechanisms would be employed when necessary and appropriate.

The third foreign policy principle was the promotion of democracy. During the campaign, Clinton promised to place greater emphasis on promoting democracy abroad; he attacked the Bush administration's support of the "status quo": "From the Baltics to Beijing, from Sarajevo to South Africa, time after time, George Bush has sided with the status quo rather than democratic change—with familiar tyrants rather than those who would overthrow them—and with the old geography of repression rather than a new map of freedom." By contrast, he argued, "my administration will stand up for democracy."

The administration viewed these three initial "pillars" of policy (as Christopher labeled them) as "mutually reinforcing." A strong economy would allow for a strong military, but not one that burdened the domestic economy. A sound economy and a sound military would enable the United States to conduct its foreign policy with greater credibility and legitimacy. And by promoting democracy, old threats would be eliminated, new threats prevented, and new markets for American products and American investments opened.

THE STRATEGY OF ENLARGEMENT

The third occasion for outlining the Clinton approach occurred in September 1993, in the midst of policy problems concerning Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq, and North Korea. President Clinton and three of his key advisers—Christopher, National Security Adviser Anthony Lake, and UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright—tried once again to define America's post-cold war course.

In response to fears that the United States was pursuing a "neoisolationist" policy, Ambassador Albright was emphatic: "Our nation will not retreat into a post-cold war foxhole." Such fears had grown since the undersecretary of state for political affairs, Peter Tarnoff, had called a few months earlier for a reduction in American involvement around the world because of domestic budget constraints. Secretary of State Christopher had quickly rejected the idea, but Lake, Albright, Clinton, and Christopher himself felt it necessary to emphasize America's commitment to global engagement.

Another clarification concerned whether the United States would act alone to protect its national interests or rely on collective security mechanisms such as the UN. Once again the administration was attempting to blunt criticism of the "assertive multilateralism" it had previously backed (and which Albright had endorsed in American policy toward Somalia). Strict reliance on unilateralism or multilateralism was rejected; instead, the United States would decide how to achieve its goals on a case-by-case basis. As Christopher noted, the question of unilateralism or multilateralism "creates a false polarity. It is not an either-or proposition."

A third and related theme concerned the use of American forces—when they would be used, under what conditions, and under whose command. The administration codified a new, tougher position on the use of American forces in peacekeeping operations in the May 1994 Presidential Decision Directive 25. According to PDD-25, several conditions must exist before the United States becomes involved in peacekeeping: there must be a threat to international security, defined as the need for immediate relief efforts, a democratic challenge, or severe violations of human rights; clear objectives for the UN mission; and agreement by all involved that the intervention should take place. Moreover, sufficient money and troops should

be available; a mandate appropriate to the mission must have been established; and an exit strategy must be in place. In addition, the administration downgraded its commitment to create a UN army—a pledge that had been made during the presidential campaign—and called for fewer UN missions around the world.

The administration also sought to identify policy priorities and the basic guidelines for American foreign policy. Clinton, in an address before the UN, focused on three substantive policy areas: conflict resolution around the world, nuclear nonproliferation, and the promotion of sustainable development. Lake, however, offered another approach: the promotion of democracy and open markets. As Lake put it, “the successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement—enlargement of the world’s free community of market democracies.”

Lake emphasized four key components of this strategy of enlargement: “First, we should strengthen the community of major market democracies—including our own—which constitutes the core from which enlargement is proceeding. Second, we should help foster and consolidate new democracies and market economies where possible, especially in states of special significance and opportunity. Third, we must counter the aggression—and support the liberalization of states hostile to democracy and markets. Fourth, we need to pursue our humanitarian agenda not only by providing aid but also by working to help democracy and market economics take root in regions of greatest humanitarian concern.” The first component of enlargement was aimed at allies like Europe and Japan; the second at new states like Russia and those in Central Europe; the third at the so-called backlash states like Iraq or North Korea that had to be contained and countered; and the fourth at developing states.

Despite the administration’s effort to refocus American policy and to encapsulate it in a larger picture of global democratization, widespread support did not materialize. Not only was the American public uneasy about this commitment to global democratization, but the scope of the policy was perhaps beyond what the United States really was willing to do. Indeed, the administration did not effectively articulate a real strategy for implementing “enlargement.”

FROM PRINCIPLE TO POLICY

This January and February, Secretary of State Christopher once again tried to articulate the Clinton administration’s foreign policy principles: a commitment to be engaged and to lead; a commitment to cooperative relations with powerful nations; a commitment to adapt and build economic and security institutions; and a commit-

ment to support democracy and human rights. In 1995 these principles would be applied to “advancing the most open global trading system in history; developing a new European security order; helping achieve a comprehensive peace in the Middle East; combating the spread of weapons of mass destruction; and fighting international crime, narcotics, and terrorism.”

As one would expect, articulating these various principles has proved considerably easier than implementing them. Disjunctures between Clinton and Congress, and between Clinton and the military have effectively hindered Clinton administration policies. Moreover, policy lapses quickly came to serve as a shorthand summary of the Clinton administration’s difficulties in foreign affairs. Indeed, one critic summarized the Clinton approach as conducting foreign policy “as if it were on a supermarket shopping spree, grabbing whatever it takes a fancy to, without worrying about the costs or whether the product is the right brand, or is genuinely needed.”¹

The administration fared slightly better linking economic security and foreign policy. A budget deficit package was developed and quickly passed by Congress in the summer of 1993, and the Tokyo summit that July briefly produced a “framework agreement” for reducing the trade deficit with Japan. But by the end of June 1995, the United States and Japan seemed headed for a trade war.

The administration’s efforts with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) were more promising. The administration campaigned vigorously for NAFTA and managed to gain passage of the agreement in the House and Senate by November 1993. Within a month, a breakthrough occurred in the most recent round of the GATT negotiations and, again, after some lobbying efforts, that pact was also approved by Congress in November 1994.

The Clinton administration initiated three other efforts in pursuing its goal of economic security. One was directed toward establishing a free trade area by 2020 among the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation countries, which the forum agreed to at the November 1994 APEC summit. The second was the December 1994 “Summit of the Americas” conference. The meeting’s aim was to set in motion the creation of a free trade zone throughout the Western Hemisphere; the conference attendees agreed to complete these talks by 2005, although the actual date for the elimination of all trade barriers was not set. The third effort, only recently proposed this June, is to create a transatlantic trading bloc linking Europe and America.

These multilateral policy actions—or what the administration calls “pluralilateral initiatives”—were fully compatible with the administration’s policy goals, even as bilateral trade with Japan and later with China was becoming more difficult. The administration no doubt wanted its foreign policy identified with its mul-

¹George Szamuely, “Clinton’s Clumsy Encounter with the World,” *Orbis* (Summer 1994), p. 393.

tilateral economic successes, but the administration's failures and shortcomings in dealing with more traditional political and military issues—and its departure from professed foreign policy principles—came to define its foreign policy record.

In several instances Clinton's policy seemed to assume the "ad hoc" approach of which the Bush administration had been accused. Caught between promoting democracy and human rights and fostering economic security with China, the administration opted for the economic principle, despite a Clinton campaign pledge to do otherwise. Faced with the prospect of expanding American involvement in Bosnia in order to defend human rights there, the administration equivocated. First it favored negotiations, then lifting the arms embargo on the Bosnian Muslims, and, more recently, it has opted for negotiation even as it sought to prohibit direct American involvement. Success may yet come from this approach, but it surely has been slow and haphazard. More generally, however, the administration often vacillated in its decision making (trade policy toward China), frequently proved indecisive or unable to decide on its policy course (support for democracy in Haiti), and regularly changed directions (negotiation or a "lift-and-strike" policy toward Bosnia).

Two exceptions to these problems were the administration's policies toward Russia and the Middle East. The administration has consistently supported President Boris Yeltsin's government. At the April 1993 Vancouver summit, President Clinton forcefully declared that "we actively support reform and reformers and you in Russia." Furthermore, the summit concluded with a commitment by Clinton and Yeltsin to develop a "new democratic partnership" between the two nations. Even now support for Yeltsin, despite the violence in Chechnya, remains largely intact. Clinton's Middle East policy, too, has not faltered, with sustained efforts for the peace process and the initiation of "dual containment" of Iran and Iraq. On balance, however, "indecisive," "incoherent," and "inconsistent" have too often become the catchwords for describing administration foreign policy.

A LONGER TERM PERSPECTIVE

To many analysts Clinton's policies seem to have the clear ring of an idealist or liberal internationalist approach to foreign policy—an approach generally consonant with America's past. Is the Clinton approach idealism in full voice? Or is it too optimistic and too "unrealistic," with a naïve view of America's ability to build democracy worldwide, achieve global justice, and construct global institutions?

More generally, can one even reasonably summarize the administration's underlying conceptual or theoretical approach? The Reagan administration has often been described as a throwback to the most frigid years of the cold war, but its priorities and policies were largely predictable. And while the Bush administration has variously been accused of "ad hocism," "pragmatism," or "realism lite" in its foreign policy approach, it did offer a fairly steady course. Can one say the same about the Clinton administration's approach?

Two concepts—free societies and free markets—shape much of the Clinton agenda; they are also key tenets of liberal internationalism. However, these core components are not very distant from the ones promoted by the Bush administration during its last months in office. In April 1992, Secretary of State James Baker 3d had argued for a new American foreign policy that would "replace the dangerous period of the

cold war with a democratic peace—a peace built on the twin pillars of political and economic freedom." The policy to build this peace, "collective engagement," would "allow the United States to rally like-minded nations on behalf of peace and to draw on international institutions where they can play a constructive part." The Bush administration's "collective engagement" and the Clinton administration's "engagement and enlargement" are surely close cousins.

Still, the "open markets—open societies" approach reopens long-standing debates about two important propositions in international politics: the relationship between democracies and peace and the

relationship between free markets and peace.

In general, many studies seem to provide compelling evidence for the argument that democracies do not fight one another and have mechanisms for resolving their disputes. The problem is, how does one go about building democracies? More specifically for the United States, does it have "the will and the wallet" to undertake such a task? And even if the democratic peace proposition is a true guide for future global order, the transition from nondemocracies to democracies could seriously destabilize the global community. While the end condition of a democratic world may be pacific, the process of building a democratic order and the movement toward "mature democracies" may not be.

The other tradition rooted within the Clinton approach, is, of course, the belief in the pacifying effects of free markets. This approach grows out of the functionalist school of international politics—more cooperation in so-called low politics arenas will eventually yield cooperation in high politics arenas as well. It also grows out of the controversial idea that states and societies are more interested in their own absolute

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gains than in their relative gains vis-à-vis their neighbors or trading partners. Thus, absolute gains by all participants in a cooperative venture (such as in a trading bloc) will be the driving force in sustained cooperative relations among states.

With the growing number of these free trade areas and potential free trade areas, the argument will surely be tested in the 1990s and beyond. Will NAFTA, ASEAN, APEC, the proposed Western Hemisphere free trade areas, an expanding EU, and even a North America–European pact become the model for this new global order or the source of rivalry? And is the promotion of democracy always compatible with the promotion of free trade and open markets or vice versa? Sino-American relations are a case in point. The Clinton administration has opted to promote open markets and has downplayed efforts to create a more open society in China. Similarly, will NAFTA have a democratizing effect on Mexico, as some proponents have argued, or will it exacerbate rivalries in that country because of increasing income gaps?

Finally, both philosophical traditions are largely heresy to many analysts schooled in the realist tradition of international relations, where the state, its interests, its power, and the balance of power form the core of international politics. The type of domestic regime and absolute gain from cooperative ventures are less relevant than the anarchic conditions of the international system and the relative gains sought by states. Many analysts schooled in realist foreign policy, including Anthony Lake, may have trouble sustaining these other perspectives.

There are, however, elements of realism in the Clinton approach. In Bosnia, despite the horrors of ethnic cleansing, the administration has until very recently adopted a selective, detached policy because a clear national interest could not be discerned—not far from what some realists might suggest. And Clinton's China policy represents the realist approach in full bloom. Idealism or neoliberal principles have largely been abandoned for economic and strategic considerations

because China is simply too large a market and too crucial an area. Delinking human rights conditions from the granting of most favored nation trade status was an action more realist in form than anything carried out in Sino-American relations during the Reagan-Bush years.

SUMMING UP

The Clinton administration has sought to develop a particular kind of liberal internationalism in which American foreign policy serves as a guiding force in the post-cold war era, but at the same time, the world shapes American actions in a more dynamic manner.

Yet caution is necessary in assessing how far the Clinton administration strategy has come. While American policy has surely changed in selected foreign economic and social areas, the administration's actual political and military policies have not yet achieved a wholly consistent focus and direction either for the United States or the global community. NAFTA and GATT will likely be seen as the success stories of the Clinton years, but the administration's political-military policy from Russia and Bosnia to Somalia, Haiti, and North Korea will receive more mixed reviews.

The Clinton administration has adopted some historical philosophical underpinnings for its foreign policy, but it has not yet created a clear strategy for achieving them in the post-cold war era. Although the administration has committed the United States to continued global involvement and some lofty global goals, it has failed to rally the American public or the American Congress behind these goals.

In short, the question remains whether the Clinton administration's foreign policy orientation reflects the incipient elements of a new post-cold war order or a temporary interlude before the reemergence of a realist direction in foreign policy. In light of the foreign challenges it faces today and the state of domestic politics at home, it will likely be more the latter than the former. ■