

A world of policy differences

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According to some analysts, the likely foreign policies of Barack Obama and John McCain would be quite similar. On the next president's watch, it is said, the number of US troops in Iraq will fall and the number in Afghanistan will rise; America's traditional alliances will be maintained; Guantanamo Bay will be closed; on climate change, minds will be opened.

One argument goes that the state of affairs inherited from the Bush Administration - the conflicts in the Middle East, the assertiveness of America's adversaries, the discrediting of unilateralism, the condition of public opinion and the seriousness of the financial crisis - will so restrict the policy options available to whoever takes over that Washington's global strategy does not depend much on the election result.

The argument is overstated. Yes, the differences between the two candidates have been camouflaged because of some convergence on big-ticket items and because the focus of voters has shifted from foreign policy to the economy. However, the differences between John McCain and Barack Obama - in terms of ends, means and temperaments - are far more conspicuous than their similarities.

There is a bipolar quality to McCain's foreign policy worldview. In the first two decades after his release from captivity in North Vietnam, he was often sceptical about proposed US deployments abroad and cautious about America's ability to remake the world. Yet the strains of idealism in McCain's makeup have become more noticeable since the mid-1990s. In 1999, he called for "rogue-state rollback"; in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, he began putting it into practice by enthusiastically advocating the invasion of Iraq.

By contrast, it's hard to detect much ideological content in Obama's statements on foreign policy. He promises a return to the post-World War II model of working closely with allies and institutions. Obama is no realist - in office, Democratic values such as a commitment to human rights would be evident - but he appears to be a committed pragmatist.

McCain and Obama differ as much on means as on ends. McCain leans farther forward when it comes to confronting America's adversaries and competitors. He would be more likely than Obama to launch air strikes to interrupt Iran's nuclear program. He agreed with Bush's characterisation of dialogue with "terrorists and radicals" being akin to appeasement. He would be very firm with Moscow. He is fond of saying of Vladimir Putin: "I looked into his eyes and saw three letters: a K, a G and a B."

Obama is no UN groupie but he is more of a multilateralist than McCain, commenting that "nobody benefits more than we do from the observance of 'international rules of the road'." He is no pacifist but he has sent strong signals that the centre of gravity of America's international policies needs to shift away from reliance on force.

The candidates would bring different temperaments to the Oval Office. Obama is disciplined, deliberate and cerebral. His intellectual curiosity would be welcome after eight years of a president with little patience for meetings, who interrupts those who brief him with lines such as "speed it up - this isn't my first rodeo".

Not all international problems are susceptible to rational agreement in the absence of leverage and pressure, however. Obama would need to make sure his reasonableness is not mistaken for weakness. European diplomats have complained, for instance, that his pledge to negotiate with Tehran without preconditions reduced the West's leverage over Iran. (On the other hand, Hillary Clinton would probably say Obama knows quite a lot about leverage and pressure.)

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. He is determined and brave, and his life experiences have left him unusually attuned to the demands of personal and national honour. Many of these attributes can be helpful in international relations but they can also be harmful - for example, if McCain's quickness to anger and his highly personalised relationships with foreign leaders were to drive Washington's policy towards binary positions.

Obama's charm, steely determination and high intelligence evoke 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. The risk posed by an Obama administration is that the dizzyingly high expectations for its foreign policy would not be met. The risk posed by a McCain administration would be that the shift made in Bush's second term from an ideological foreign policy to a pragmatic one would be reversed.

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 fitting that Obama stood beneath the olive branch and McCain beneath the arrows.

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