



PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

# Global Challenges for the Obama Administration

*By Kenneth R. Weinstein*

Hudson Institute



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*A strong U.S. foreign policy strategy that relies upon privileged bilateral relationships is now more important than ever. No more privileged relationship exists for maintaining stability in large tracts of the world, most notably the Asia-Pacific region, than that of the U.S.-Japan bilateral relationship. This significant and enduring alliance cannot afford to be neglected.*



The accession of Barack Obama to the White House has been greeted by a wave of enthusiasm around the globe. During the presidential campaign, Senator Obama frequently noted that he would place greater emphasis on multilateralism in American foreign policy.

Given the immense challenges the Obama administration faces as well as the new-found favoritism that American initiatives may now experience in the post-George W. Bush era, the President-elect would also do well to retain President Bush's focus on critical bilateral relations, as a firm basis for American foreign and defense policy.

The incoming administration faces significant global challenges, some of which were unimaginable when George W. Bush entered the White House in January 2001. Approximately 180,000 American troops are fighting major wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Iranian theocracy is moving swiftly to acquire nuclear weapons

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while sponsoring a network of Shiite extremists across the Middle East and Central Asia. North Korea holds Japanese hostages and perpetrates human rights abuses on its people unchecked, while boasting a growing missile stock and nuclear capability. An unstable, nuclear Pakistan is beset by Islamic terrorists, especially in its un-administered northwest tribal region, and tensions with India threaten returning to the dangerous levels of 2002 following jihadist attacks on Mumbai. An oil-rich, authoritarian Venezuela is funneling money to radical populists throughout Latin America. An increasingly autocratic Russia invades one democratic neighbor and menacing others while pursuing an anti-Western agenda. Overwhelming shortfalls in achievements through the increasingly erratic Six-Party Talks process have far outweighed any gains with North Korea. The world's largest dictatorship, China, is expanding its international footprint while dealing with severe domestic unrest. All of this is occurring against the backdrop of a massive spike in commodity prices and an international financial crisis, both of which pose the most serious threat to global economic growth since the Great Depression.

President Bush's foreign policy was indisputably uneven, shifting from an excessive idealism in his first term to a timid realism in his second term, but his administration can claim significant accomplishments. Just as President Harry Truman established the security framework that guided U.S. strategy in the Cold War, so President Bush reshaped institutions and policies to deal with today's asymmetric challenges. He deserves credit for preventing another terrorist attack on American soil after 9/11, for weakening the infrastructure of terrorist financing around the globe, and for adopting a new counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq that may well lead to a watershed victory in the struggle against jihadism.

For all the criticism of alleged American "unilateralism," it must be remembered that the war in Afghanistan, which is not faring as well as the war in Iraq, represents the model of multilateralism *par excellence*: sanctioned by the United Nations, it enjoys the support of more than 30 countries. However, many of our European partners have offered disappointingly small contingents in the battle against the Taliban. The unfortunate reality is that European militaries—with the exception of their elite special forces—lack the necessary capabilities to fight in places like Afghanistan. Our experience in Afghanistan shows that multilateralism itself, especially when reduced largely to NATO cooperative efforts with our European allies—helpful as these allies may be—cannot cure the world's ills.

Against this backdrop, Russia's invasion of Georgia in August offered a rude awakening. In spite of Bush administration policy that incorporated Moscow into multilateral diplomacy on Iran and North Korea, Russian behavior grew increasingly belligerent. The invasion reminded us that conventional "hard-power" challenges—

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against which the Europeans lack both the necessary training and equipment—remain endemic to international politics.

The United States is the only country capable of projecting power globally, and thus the primary leader in the fight to tackle challenges such as threats from North Korea or Iran. With the benefit of hindsight, it will seem clear that most Bush administration policies fell squarely within the mainstream of post-World War II American presidents. These policies—preserving American primacy, focusing on the internal character of foreign regimes, thwarting external aggression, asserting the right to launch preemptive military action if necessary—will remain in place for some time to come. And so, therefore, will tensions within the Atlantic alliance.

**A**nother transformative legacy of the Bush administration that will remain U.S. policy is the emphasis on valued bilateral relationships over the more multilateral approach favored by Bush's predecessors and our European allies. In no region are these favored bilateral relations more critical than in Asia, where these relationships are changing the security architecture of the region for the coming Pacific Century: one in which America will need to depend on strong, confident allies in North East and South Asia who, unlike the Europeans, have a growing willpower to meet regional and global challenges together with the actual capabilities needed to maintain peace and stability.

The enhanced bilateral relationship forged by President Bush and Prime Ministers Koizumi and Abe is critical to this effort. In this new century, Japan with its advanced technologies, naval prowess and ability to protect sea lanes and project power, will be an even more critical ally as we face challenges to energy security, the North Korean threat and the possibility of instability in the Taiwan Strait. The transformation of the once lukewarm U.S.-India relationship into a U.S. strategic partnership with the world's largest democracy, an English-speaking nation with a growing population and technological base, will likewise become ever more critical. The recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai, designed by Islamic extremists to damage this critical relationship, as well as India's growing security ties to Israel, make U.S.-India bilateral relations all the more critical. These two privileged relationships, and relations between our three nations, will enable us to continue a nuanced rapport with China; one that recognizes China's importance and potential while addressing the fundamental differences that give rise to concerns over China's human rights shortcomings, potential domestic instability, and threatening global aspirations.

President Obama will face grave choices immediately upon assuming office. Despite the massive financial costs and the growing fallout from the economic crisis, America cannot accept defeat in either Afghanistan or Iraq. The Iranian threat,

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moreover, must be resolved. Russia is resurgent, North Korea remains dangerously volatile, and China's interests often conflict with those of Western democracies.

Given these challenges, a strong U.S. foreign policy strategy that relies upon privileged bilateral relationships is now more important than ever. No more privileged relationship exists for maintaining stability in large tracts of the world, most notably the Asia-Pacific region, than that of the U.S.-Japan bilateral relationship. This significant and enduring alliance cannot afford to be neglected. President Bush recognized the principle, but may have not lived up to it in the case of Japan, which was eventually sidelined by the administration in the six-party talks over North Korea. President Obama has the opportunity to do so and would be well advised to prioritize it. ■

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