

Approaching the Benchmarks

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Contents

1. [Introduction](#)
2. Essay - [Approaching the Benchmarks](#)
3. [Nautilus invites your response](#)

Introduction

William Tow of the Australian National University notes that the forthcoming Australian election will take place at a time when US foreign policy has become a major issue in the presidential election campaign in that country. "The geopolitical stakes", writes Tow, "could not be higher with nothing less than the future of the United States' global standing increasingly at risk". He argues that

"the key question here is whether President Bush's successor can integrate soft power strategies into a U.S. posture that has been viewed as largely incredible and clearly detrimental to the United States' international influence throughout much of his administration."

Tow concludes that

"the U.S. presidential candidate that is best able to capture and articulate this reality is the one most likely to prevail. It is reasonable to surmise that the Australian counterpart who consolidates a similar type of foreign policy agenda into an election platform slated to be tested before the end of the year will have the best chance of overcoming similar challenges."

Essay - Approaching the Benchmarks

As Australia approaches its own federal election date, its national leaders and electorate will naturally view developments emerging in the United States as a key sign of how their own country's international position and prosperity is faring in an increasingly uncertain world. With the U.S. 2008 presidential contest looming over the horizon, the conventional wisdom that pocketbooks rather than foreign policy decide elections conducted by established democracies is being sharply tested.

The U.S. military intervention in Iraq clearly dominated the November 2006 Congressional elections and there is little sign that any domestic issue on the American political landscape will rise to eclipse the Iraq imbroglio, international terrorism, global climate change or other international security issues between now and the next Election Day. The leading presidential candidates from both major U.S. political parties are wrestling with the need to balance a clear necessity for the United States to project a more 'internationalist' security posture with an equally critical imperative to avoid advances by extremists in nuclear weapons development, in *jihadist*-sponsored wars and other in other areas that would be highly detrimental to U.S. national security interests.

Over the past few months, Iran has surfaced as the most urgent test case for striking any such policy balance. The Bush administration has warned Tehran that 'all options remain on the table', a phrase echoed by leading Democratic Party presidential contender Hillary Clinton at a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations in March 2007. Some respected independent analysts such as Seymour Hersh and Michael T. Klare have pointed to recent White House statements as preparing the American public for a new U.S. military effort designed to bring about 'regime change' in Iran before President Bush leaves office in early 2009. [1]

In fact, as demonstrated by the British public and covert American responses to the just completed hostage crisis involving 15 captured British sailors and marines, there is only a small prospect of the U.S.-led coalition of largely Anglophile states expanding the 'global war on terror' any time soon to include an Iranian component. Iran's seizure of these military personnel, most probably in Iraqi territorial waters, could well have escalated to the required *casus belli* needed by the British and American governments to up the Iranian ante if their current military resources were not so stretched and their publics not so wary of a conflict in Iraq that has turned out so badly. [2] Moreover, the risks of 'missing' key Iranian nuclear facilities that could quickly be used to regenerate Iran's nuclear weapons program were too high and the prospects that Iran would 'retaliate' by providing overwhelming support to Iraq's Shite factions in their almost certain quest to drive out Western forces from their country were too great to rationally contemplate a surgical strike against Iranian targets. As The Times correspondent Andrew Sullivan has lamented: 'The plain, unfortunate truth is that, at this moment, the West has no real choice but to do a deal [with Iran] and put the best possible face on it.' [3]

This outcome further underscores what the 2006 Congressional election had already foreshadowed: the death knell of the dominance of neo-conservative political factions in U.S. foreign policy. This certainly represents a substantial benchmark in U.S. foreign policy evolution. Vestiges of the neo-conservative approach still remain at the policy margins. After being outflanked by U.S. Secretary-of-State Condoleezza Rice on Middle East diplomacy, for example, Vice President Cheney's recently floated proposal to expand the Australia-Japan-United States trilateral security dialogue into a 'quadrilateral' arrangement of democratic member-states to include India is illustrative. This proposal reflects the neo-conservative preference for looking at international security politics with a protracted zero-sum lens. By incorporating both India and Japan - both viewed by China as potential strategic rivals - into this proposed framework, Beijing would clearly regard it as forming a ring of containment around itself and therefore inherently threatening to China's national security. The neo-

conservative ethos is also reflected by continued U.S. support of various Somalian warlord factions on counter-terrorist grounds. It is also evident in NATO's recent 'globalising' of its military campaign in Afghanistan by involving Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea as 'Pacific partners' in alliance operations in Central Asia. While all noteworthy, these neo-conservative inspired initiatives pale in comparison to the U.S. decision to negotiate a 'breakthrough' with North Korea within the Six Party Talks, its dawning recognition that Syria and Iran will be critical to any future stability in the Middle East and Persian Gulf, its growing realisation that Pakistan may be as much a liability in the global war against terrorism as an asset and its belated acceptance of soft power and multilateralism as legitimate instruments of statecraft. These new, central components of U.S. policy arise from more pragmatic elements in the American policy community becoming ascendant since the November 2006 election.

The forthcoming American presidential election constitutes a second potential 'benchmark' that could lead to major changes in U.S. foreign policy. The key question here is whether President Bush's successor can integrate soft power strategies into a U.S. posture that has been viewed as largely incredible and clearly detrimental to the United States' international influence throughout much of his administration. The extent to which this can take place rests on at least three key factors:

- Domestic political trends in key Middle Eastern states such as Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia evolving in ways that are compatible with a more visible American soft power diplomacy approach to the region;
- Strategies and events unfolding in directions that lead to more visible progress toward neutralizing major international terrorist movements, especially in terms of 'moderate' factions in the Islamic community rising to challenge and neutralize their more 'radical' counterparts; and
- American leadership (as well as policy-makers in allied states such as Australia) embracing a more diverse world view that includes a much broader spectrum of foreign goals, including regime building in areas of nuclear non-proliferation, global climate change and human security, that transcend mere 'zero-sum' calculations that dampen international security behavior in favor of more restrictive national security interests.

Eighteen months out from the presidential vote, it is still too early to know to what degree the major candidates will embrace the type of agendas required to engender the conditions cited above. Nor will projecting any such plan be easy as politically powerful U.S. interest groups such as religious evangelicals, energy firms, military veterans and labor unions gear up to ensure their own concerns are accommodated within any viable presidential campaign. Yet the geopolitical stakes could not be higher with nothing less than the future of the United States' global standing increasingly at risk. The U.S. presidential candidate that is best able to capture and articulate this reality is the one most likely to prevail. It is reasonable to surmise that the Australian counterpart who consolidates a similar type of foreign policy agenda into an election platform slated to be tested before the end of the year will have the best chance of overcoming similar challenges.

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End notes

[1] Seymour Hersh, 'The Iran Plans', The New Yorker, April 17, 2006 and Michael T. Klare, '[Bush's Future Iran War Speech](#)', Tomdispatch, February 26, 2007 .

<http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?pid=169271>

[2] See Andrew Sullivan, 'The West had no choice but to deal with fanatics', The Australian, April 9, 2007.

[3] Ibid.

Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to the editor, Jane Mullett: austral@rmit.edu.au. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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