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Bush's Third Term

by James Joyner

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President Obama took the oath of office six months ago. He did so after a long campaign in which he continuously **promised** “change” and to “restore America’s standing in the world.” Thus far, however, optics are all that keeps his administration’s foreign policy from being a continuation of George W. Bush’s.

In fairness, six months is not much time. Then again, it represents one eighth of the term. Further, as Obama himself has acknowledged vis-à-vis health care reform and other issues on the domestic agenda, we’re not far from the point where Congress’ attention turns to the 2010 election cycle and major change gets much harder. Soon thereafter, the race for 2012 gets underway and Washington becomes incredibly risk averse.

Further, there are strong signals that a real break will come on some secondary issues. Obama is much less enthusiastic about missile defense, more likely to show tough love to Israel and less apt to fervently pursue our half-century-old idiocy in Cuba. But on all the major issues, the movement has been cosmetic.

Iraq: Obama’s signature foreign-affairs item, going back to his 2004 Senate campaign, was his steadfast opposition to the war in Iraq. That he, alone among the serious contenders for the Democratic nomination, opposed the war from the outset allowed him to claim that, despite no relevant experience, he had better judgment on national-security issues than the old Washington hands.

A funny thing happened on the way to the White House, however. The “surge,” which he opposed, seemed to work. Or, at least, things got radically better at a time that was convenient for surge proponents. Further, the Bush administration negotiated a status off forces agreement that has the United States on a path to a relatively quick, dignified exit of combat forces from Iraq.

Yes, this is what Obama advocated all along. But it would have happened had Bush stayed in office.

Afghanistan: Obama campaigned on the slogan that we “took our eye off the ball” in Afghanistan because of Iraq. He argued that we needed to substantially increase our troop presence and shift into a counterterrorism, counterinsurgency mission. Within a week of taking office, he **hinted at a “new” Afghanistan policy** and he **announced the outlines** of it in late March.

But there was very little “new” to the new plan. **Bush had already announced a “quiet surge” in Afghanistan** six months earlier. He had also appointed General David Petraeus, the architect of the Iraq surge and leader of the movement to make counterinsurgency a heavy priority in the U.S. Army, as head of Central Command. Further, Obama kept Bob Gates on at Defense. Those men are now implementing what they started a year ago.

Iran: Like his predecessor, Obama repeatedly termed the prospect of the regime obtaining nuclear weapons “unacceptable” but, like Bush, understands that his options for doing much to prevent it are exceedingly limited. Obama campaigned on a policy of negotiation “without preconditions” with the Iranian leaders and advocated “tougher sanctions” executed in collaboration with Russia and China. But none of that looks likely at this juncture.

Pakistan: Aside from the coinage of “AfPak” to signify that Afghanistan and Pakistan should be viewed as part of one strategy — which it had been the practice for years — we’re still on the same path. Again, it’s ironic. Obama had been ridiculed by Republicans and Democrats alike for suggesting in 2007 that he would not hesitate to use Predators and other deadly measures to go after Taliban and al-Qaeda militants hiding in the FATA. Within months, that became Bush policy. Regardless, the continuity is striking.

Al-Qaeda: We still haven’t caught bin Laden! (This was always a silly test of the effectiveness of our policy, but it’s one Obama used to bludgeon Bush; now, the ball’s in his court.)

North Korea: Kim Jong-il is still both sick and of dubious sanity. The North Koreans are still testing missiles whenever they please and otherwise seemingly oblivious to pressure from the international community.

Russia: Despite rhetorically pushing the “reset button,” tensions between the old–cold war rivals remain intense. Obama has continued the Bush policy of proclaiming that the Russians “have to remove themselves from South Ossetia and Abkhazia” while doing nothing about it. Similarly, he continues to maintain that there will be no Russian veto on NATO expansion. While Obama got credit for the recent deal renewing the START treaty and modestly reducing nuclear arsenals, the negotiations had been going on long before he took office; his contribution was a signature.

Europe: There’s no doubt that Obama is viewed more favorably in Western Europe than was his predecessor, who was thought to be arrogant, unilateralist and perhaps not all that bright. Yet, nothing is significantly different. More European troops for Afghanistan will not be forthcoming, no matter how nicely Obama asks. (Indeed, he’s been shrewd enough not to bother asking.) We’re no closer to common ground on financial regulation than we were under Bush and we’ve had six months more to work on it.

Through some combination of political calculation and genuine misunderstanding, Obama campaigned against a caricature of Bush’s foreign policy. Early in Bush’s second term, he began quietly shifting away from the so-called neoconservatives, and the realists resumed their dominance. Paul Wolfowitz went off to the World Bank in 2005. Doug Feith left that same year. After the November 2006 midterm debacle, Don Rumsfeld was allowed to ride off into the sunset, too. Pragmatic realists Condoleezza Rice and Bob Gates came into ascendancy and quietly changed the administration’s focus. Obama has surrounded himself with pragmatic realists, too, so it’s not all that surprising that he’s carrying on the same basic strategy.

More importantly, however, despite the frenzy over personalities that we frequently find ourselves caught up in, the fact of the matter is that, like Bush before him, Obama is the American president. While different occupants of the Oval Office naturally have different instincts and emphases, their country has the same interests regardless of who's filling the big chair. Likewise, we seem to constantly forget, the countries with whom we deal have continuing interests.