

Kerry's foreign policy reels back Carter era

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Ever since Sen. John F. Kerry emerged as the Democrat Party's presumptive presidential nominee last spring, his Republican opponents have been accusing him of harboring the dream of restoring the Clinton era.

The Democrat Party's platform document, "Strong At Home, Respected In The World", however, envisages a Kerry presidency that would resemble more that of Jimmy Carter than Bill Clinton — at least in foreign policy.

Nearly half of the pages of the document, just approved at the party's convention in Boston, are devoted to foreign policy, twice more than its predecessor for the 2000 presidential campaign. It would be naïve to take this document as a blueprint for American foreign policy in a Kerry administration. It is primarily designed to persuade American voters that, as President, Kerry would be at least as tough as President George W. Bush on such issues as national security and the war on terror. Nevertheless, it offers some insight into what US foreign policy might look like under President Kerry.

The focus is on the Middle East and related issues of oil and terrorism. Issues like the future of NATO, the reform of the United Nations, the emergence of China and other new powers, the accelerating rate of international regulations, and the global environment are mentioned but hardly tackled in a serious way.

The Kerry foreign policy would be different from that of Bush in at least three areas:

Under Kerry, the US would forswear the right to take pre-emptive action against its foes. It will employ its military might only in a multilateral context, with the consent of the United Nations, and allies. Such a policy would give the UN and the allies, who are not identified, a veto on the use of force by the US. It also means that the US will act only after it has been attacked, and not to prevent a perceived attack on itself or its allies. Afghanistan is offered as an illustration of a "good war". It was right for the US to invade Afghanistan

respective countries, part or all of whose activities could be regarded as terrorist. The governments concerned are unlikely to disband them to please Washington, especially if refusal to do so entails no costs. The document's suggestion to "name and shame" countries that finance terror is no deterrent.

Though mostly concerned with generalities, the document cannot avoid three specifics.

The document states "People of goodwill will disagree about whether America should have gone to war in Iraq. This is a bizarre statement. Both Kerry and his vice-presidential running mate John Edwards are people of goodwill and yet did not disagree on the issue. Both voted for the liberation of Iraq twice and, to my knowledge, have said nothing to indicate regret on that score.

The document shows that a Kerry administration will not have a clear policy on Iraq. It proposes the nomination of an International High Commissioner, a kind of UN Pasha to run the place for an unspecified period. But we are long past that in Iraq. There is no way that Bremer Pasha could be replaced by another Pasha. The Iraqis have an interim government and are preparing for elections within six months. So, who is going to impose a new Pasha on them and how?

The idea of a UN Pasha was first aired by France's President Jacques Chirac before liberation. Chirac had even proposed former Defense Minister Francois Leotard for the job. To try and put the clock back two years is no way of going forward in Iraq.

Perhaps anxious not to antagonise the Howard Dean wing of the party, the document, is vague about the role of US troops in Iraq. Kerry would keep them there but in the context of "an international presence". But this is already the case. With the end of occupation the US and other coalition forces are in Iraq on the basis of a Security Council resolution. The UN has also appointed a new representative to Iraq. The problem is that he

because the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington had been orchestrated by Al-Qaeda from Afghan territory. This was also a "good war" because the UN approved it and the allies agreed to take part. The Iraq war, however, was a bad one: The US should have waited until after an attack from Iraq before reacting. Call it the Pearl Harbor Doctrine, if you like, but, if adopted, it would offer insurance to such regimes as North Korea and Iran. Pyongyang and Tehran would know that, short of attacking the US directly, they would be allowed to do what they like and fear no military retaliation.

A Kerry administration would abandon Bush's commitment to promoting democracy, including by military pressure and/or action. Instead, the US will adopt the "soft power" method, using public diplomacy, battle of ideas, education, development aid, and human rights. (Here, the document echoes themes developed by Carter in 1976.) This takes the world back to the era of détente during the Cold War in which preserving the status quo was regarded as more important than reshaping the world on the basis of democratic ideals.

The document insists that "democracy will not bloom overnight", echoing Kerry's statement that spreading democracy would not be among his priorities. The document says a Kerry presidency will help "sustain voices of freedom against repressive regimes. The word "sustain", used to avoid the word "support", is, of course, meaningless in this context, while the label "repressive regimes", instead of "anti-democratic regimes", is unfortunate.

In the war against terror, a Kerry administration would put the emphasis on measures that the US and its allies must take within their realm rather than impose on other nations. This means police cooperation among the 60 countries in which terrorist cells are active. The US will orchestrate the freezing of terrorist assets, and the closing of channels of communication used by terrorists. The problem, however, is that one man's terrorist is often someone else's "freedom fighter". For example, Syria and Iran will never admit that the Hezbollah is a terrorist organization and almost all Arab states refuse to label Hamas and Islamic Jihad as terrorist. There are also thousands of front organizations — charities, and NGOs, enjoying high profile patronage in their

cannot go there because the UN does not want him to be protected by American and coalition troops while no one else is ready to send soldiers for a proposed UN "protection force." All the 198 members of the UN are welcome to contribute troops to Iraq. But, apart from the 34 members of the US-led coalition, none seems willing to do so. Thus the document's proposal could mean only one thing: Putting the existing US and coalition forces under the UN flag.

The documents say: "A nuclear-armed Iran is an unacceptable risk to us and our allies." The use of the word "risk" instead of "danger" or "threat" is interesting. Risk has some positive connotations because it could involve both losing and winning, but a "danger" or a "threat" cannot but be negative. The diplomatic term "unacceptable" is also interesting because, according to the diplomatic lexicon, it represents the lowest level of dissatisfaction. For example if members of a friendly government boycotts a Fourth of July party at an American embassy this is "unacceptable" behavior.

What will Kerry do about a nuclear-armed Iran? The answer is: Nothing, unless we take into account the senator's recent proposal, not included in the document, to provide Iran with as much enriched uranium as it wants provided the US gets custody of all the spent fuel. (Tehran has dismissed the proposal as "arrogant musings".)

The document's message to Tehran is clear: Go ahead, we won't take pre-emptive action!

The document takes back Clinton's pledge to give part of Jerusalem to the Palestinians as the capital of their future state. It calls for a democratic Palestinian state under a new Palestinian leadership, echoing the Bush policy. It also calls for the revival of the special envoy tradition, initiated by Carter, and abandoned by George W Bush. But that, too, does not amount to much of a policy.

The first is with reference to Bush's "kid gloves" approach to the supply and laundering of money" for terrorism, and the second is in the context of a wish to reduce dependence on oil from OPEC, including Saudi Arabia. The first is too vague to stand analysis. The second is a pious hope, first expressed by Carter in his failed 1979 campaign.

On intelligence, Kerry will adopt the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, although some are either duplications or contradictory. But that is another story.