

Bush's agenda for second term

USA

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NOW when Mr George Bush has taken the oath of office for his second term, analysts are trying to figure out what lies in store for the next four years. With second term presidencies, the first two years are more important because, after the mid-term Congress elections, the presidency starts to lose its magic and the incumbent usually becomes a lame duck.

Since the first term was devoted to changing the world, the second term is expected to be devoted to changing America. It is widely believed that the main focus of change will be at home because Mr Bush wants to embark on a Republican New Deal. Besides other measures, he wants to privatize a part of the pensions system, and ultimately a part of the health system, simplify the tax system and create what he calls an "ownership" society. The magnitude of Mr Bush's domestic agenda is likely to keep him engaged on the home front most of the time.

It may be recalled that even in his first term Mr Bush introduced some extraordinary measures at home: among other things, one of the largest cuts in history, the biggest shake up of American schools for a generation, the transformation of the armed forces and the further consolidation of executive power.

What new trends are expected in American foreign policy in the next four years? Mr Bush told British Prime Minister Tony Blair last November that he would work to deepen America's transatlantic ties with European nations and intended to visit Europe as soon as possible after his inauguration. He is scheduled to arrive in Europe on February 22.

The choice of Ms Condoleezza Rice as secretary of state is significant. Though Ms Rice is less multilateralist than Colin Powell, her appointment will result in a more coordinated foreign policy. Also, it is taken as a signal that Mr Bush, by asserting greater control over the state department, is preparing to engage more with his European allies. This assessment is confirmed by the appointment of Robert Zoellick as deputy secretary of state. The former counsellor to James Baker, senior Bush's secretary of state, and at present US trade representative, Zoellick is a known internationalist and will facilitate dialogue with European nations. He fully understands the way globalization serves US interests and the need to manage it with European allies.

The real concern of Europeans is about unconstrained US power and about regaining some control over how it is exercised. Long accustomed to helping shape the world, they do not want to sit back now and let the US do

all the driving, especially when it is driving dangerously and sometimes even in the wrong direction. That is the reason European nations are trying to put relations with Washington back on track ahead of the Bush visit to the European Union and Nato headquarters next month.

Calls for stronger transatlantic cooperation are emanating not only from America's traditional allies — Britain, Netherlands, Poland and the Nordic countries — but also from Germany and France, who opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq. But it will not be easy to bring about genuine understanding and cooperation between the United States and its European allies. The two sides continue to differ on a number of economic and political issues like Iraq's reconstruction, peace in the Middle East how best to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions and cooperation with China.

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The issue of China is a sensitive one for both the Americans and the Europeans. Since the beginning of his first term, a lot of change has taken place in the thinking of Mr Bush with regard to China which has moved from public enemy number one to a more nuanced position. The choice of Zoellick, a known pragmatist on China, as deputy secretary of state, will also be helpful in maintaining good relations with the Chinese. The dispute with the Europeans over China has arisen because the EU is planning, after the visit of French and German presidents to Beijing, to lift the arms embargo on China imposed after the 1989 Tiananmen affair. The Americans do not want the arms embargo on China lifted.

The US grievance is that though in Iraq it did what the Europeans wanted it to do — transferred sovereignty, returned to the United Nations, arranged elections — France and Germany have hardly moderated their hostility. While the Americans are going to declare the Iraqi elections a success, the Europeans will declare them a failure. The Americans want at least political support from the Europeans on Iraq and preferably much more material help. But this seems a tall order at the moment.

As the domestic agenda sucks in Mr. Bush, there is a possibility that he will minimize his commitments overseas. The first opportunity is likely to come after the Iraqi elections.

After declaring that America has delivered democracy, there may be the temptation to leave Iraq before a new government has established itself in Baghdad, especially if American troops continue to die at the current rate.

Iran presents another problem. The Europeans want the United States to support the efforts being made by France, Germany and Britain to bring to an end Iran's nuclear programme. Publicly, Washington supports the Europeans, but privately Americans officials maintain that the negotiations are doomed to failure because the Iranians are bent upon acquiring nuclear weapons. Another bone of contention is that the Americans want the Europeans to agree that if their current negotiations fail and they hit a dead end in Iran, they will support US call for UN sanctions against Tehran.

Throughout his election campaign, Mr Bush repeatedly said that if, re-elected, he would fulfil his commitment to spread democracy throughout the Middle East. During his post-re-election meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair an intention was expressed to "use the next four years to spend the capital of the United States on a Palestinian state." The opening has come about because of a change in circumstances in the form of the demise of Yasser Arafat and the election of a new Palestinian leader. It is, however, not yet clear whether he will put stronger pressure on the Israelis and Palestinians to come to terms with each other or whether he just wants to build up Palestinian institutions and encourage Palestinian democracy.

All said and done, the fact remains that America's current global predominance constitutes unipolarity. Despite what others have argued or wished, no attempts to equal US power are likely to succeed in the foreseeable future. The sources of American strength are so varied and durable that the US at present enjoys more freedom in foreign policy choices than any other country in modern history.

As far as the conduct of the US foreign policy is concerned, it appears almost certain that the focus of the second Bush term will be on changing America rather than the world. George Bush will have less and less time for affairs outside the country. It also appears that there will be no major changes in the US foreign policy in the next four years.

During his recent visit to Canada, Mr. Bush was asked about polls showing fall in America's reputation north of the border. "I haven't seen the polls you look at," replied Mr. Bush. "We just had a poll in our country where people decided that the foreign policy of the (Bush) administration ought to stay in place for another four years." That confirms the view that no serious reappraisal of foreign policy is being contemplated for the second Bush term.

The writer is a former ambassador.