Chapter Twelve

Problematic Policies Toward the Middle East

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Two arguments are frequently made about second-term presidencies. The first is that the president may have exhausted his agenda and his personnel and therefore not be able to project and implement new ideas and new approaches. A second, contrasting argument is that second-term presidents may suffer from hubris and overreach themselves, with negative consequences for their policies as well as their political legacy.

President George W. Bush shows no evidence of having exhausted his agenda. Indeed, in both the domestic and foreign policy arenas he is vigorously promoting new policies, on the unstated assumption that his mandate is stronger now than after the first election. However, he has reconstructed his policy-making team in a way that fails to add new faces. Instead, he is recycling his previous advisors in order to tighten his control over the policy-making process.

Concerning the second argument, one could argue that the Bush presidency already suffered from hubris during the first term and that the declared aims of the second term are even more expansive domestically and internationally. Given the president’s apparent lack of intellectual curiosity, his sense of self-righteousness, and his lack of self-reflection,1 the consequences of such hubris could further inflame the crises in the Middle East and in relations with U.S. allies, not to speak of the Korean peninsula and elsewhere in East Asia. Despite the possibility of some forward movement on the Israeli-Palestinian front, the tensions in the wider Middle East are unlikely to abate and, if U.S. policy does not alter meaningfully, they are likely to deepen.

The First Term

U.S. actions during the first term had a highly polarizing impact internationally. Although Washington no longer confronted the Cold War, senior officials remained focused on maintaining the United States’ preeminent role internationally. They asserted the U.S. right to act without restraint in a unipolar world. In that regard, National Security Council advisor

Condoleezza Rice emphasized that the “United States has a special role in the world and should not adhere to every international convention and agreement.” The administration’s rejection of the Kyoto Treaty to control global warming, the treaty of the International Criminal Court, and canceling of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia are merely three of the most publicized cases of its refusal to abide by international agreements. The assumption was that the United States’ unmatched economy and vast armed forces would enable Washington to go-it-alone, managing its affairs in splendid isolation. (That was in stark contrast to the first Bush administration’s concept in 1991 of a “new world order.”)

Until 9/11, the dominant impulse was isolationism, notably, withdrawal from involvement in the Balkans and from active diplomacy in the Palestinian/Israeli arena. Iraq was the key exception. As early as the first meeting of the National Security Council in January 2001, destabilizing and potentially overthrowing the Iraqi regime was the centerpiece for the White House. In contrast, little attention was paid to al-Qaida during those initial months. National Security Council director Condoleezza Rice let Cabinet-level coordination of anti-terror efforts lapse, and the president did not activate any special measures when the CIA warned him in August 2001 that al-Qaida was planning attacks on U.S. soil.

The 9/11 attacks on the United States’ financial and political-military capitals transformed the mission of the Bush presidency, while deepening its unilateralist assumptions and approach. One can even say that the administration only acquired a real foreign policy mission at that time. The president’s biblical language—“with us or against us”—underscored that mission and reinforced Bush’s dichotomized view of the world. The administration quickly struck at a logical target: Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, which harbored Osama bin Laden’s training camps and al-Qaeda’s headquarters. However, that was merely the initial target in a world-wide and unending “war” against “terror,” an unseen but ubiquitous enemy. Suddenly, essentially nationalist and ethnic conflicts (e.g., in Chechnya, the Basque nationalists in Spain, Israel/Palestine, and Uighur nationalists in China) morphed into components of that war on terror, a perspective that legitimized military (rather than politico-diplomatic) actions by those governments against dissident groups.

Instead of withdrawing from this hostile world environment, the United States—the sole superpower—would fight on behalf of “civilized” values, on its own, if necessary. This interventionist approach suited Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who articulated the doctrine of “pre-emption”, meaning the right to attack before the enemy has the capacity to strike. They brushed aside Secretary of State Colin L. Powell’s efforts to build diplomatic coalitions, cooperate with the United Nations, and find non-military means to contain North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and other potentially hostile countries.

The doctrine of preemption was also applied to Iraq, their decade-long nemesis. And this doctrine was linked to the war on terror, which provided