By George Friedman

As August draws to a close, so does the first phase of the Obama presidency. The first months of any U.S. presidency are spent filling key positions and learning the levers of foreign and national security policy. There are also the first rounds of visits with foreign leaders and the first tentative forays into foreign policy. The first summer sees the leaders of the Northern Hemisphere take their annual vacations, and barring a crisis or war, little happens in the foreign policy arena. Then September comes and the world gets back in motion, and the first phase of the president's foreign policy ends. The president is no longer thinking about what sort of foreign policy he will have; he now has a foreign policy that he is carrying out.

We therefore are at a good point to stop and consider not what U.S. President Barack Obama will do in the realm of foreign policy, but what he has done and is doing. As we have mentioned before, the single most remarkable thing about Obama's foreign policy is how consistent it is with the policies of former President George W. Bush. This is not surprising. Presidents operate in the world of constraints; their options are limited. Still, it is worth pausing to note how little Obama has deviated from the Bush foreign policy.

During the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, particularly in its early stages, Obama ran against the Iraq war. The centerpiece of his early position was that the war was a mistake, and that he would end it. Obama argued that Bush's policies — and more important, his style — alienated U.S. allies. He charged Bush with pursuing a unilateral foreign policy, alienating allies by failing to act in concert with them. In doing so, he maintained that the war in Iraq destroyed the international coalition the United States needs to execute any war successfully. Obama further argued that Iraq was a distraction and that the major effort should be in Afghanistan. He added that the United States would need its NATO allies' support in Afghanistan. He said an Obama administration would reach out to the Europeans, rebuild U.S. ties there and win greater support from them.

Though around 40 countries cooperated with the United States in Iraq, albeit many with only symbolic contributions, the major continental European powers — particularly France and Germany — refused to participate. When Obama spoke of alienating allies, he clearly meant these two countries, as well as smaller European powers that had belonged to the U.S. Cold War coalition but were unwilling to participate in Iraq and were now actively hostile to U.S. policy.

A European Rebuff

Early in his administration, Obama made two strategic decisions. First, instead of ordering an immediate withdrawal from Iraq, he adopted the Bush administration's policy of a staged withdrawal keyed to political stabilization and the development of Iraqi security forces. While he

tweaked the timeline on the withdrawal, the basic strategy remained intact. Indeed, he retained Bush's defense secretary, Robert Gates, to oversee the withdrawal.

Second, he increased the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The Bush administration had committed itself to Afghanistan from 9/11 onward. But it had remained in a defensive posture in the belief that given the forces available, enemy capabilities and the historic record, that was the best that could be done, especially as the Pentagon was almost immediately reoriented and refocused on the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. Toward the end, the Bush administration began exploring — under the influence of Gen. David Petraeus, who designed the strategy in Iraq — the possibility of some sort of political accommodation in Afghanistan.

Obama has shifted his strategy in Afghanistan to this extent: He has moved from a purely defensive posture to a mixed posture of selective offense and defense, and has placed more forces into Afghanistan (although the United States still has nowhere near the number of troops the Soviets had when they lost their Afghan war). Therefore, the core structure of Obama's policy remains the same as Bush's except for the introduction of limited offensives. In a major shift since Obama took office, the Pakistanis have taken a more aggressive stance (or at least want to appear more aggressive) toward the Taliban and al Qaeda, at least within their own borders. But even so, Obama's basic strategy remains the same as Bush's: hold in Afghanistan until the political situation evolves to the point that a political settlement is possible.

Most interesting is how little success Obama has had with the French and the Germans. Bush had given up asking for assistance in Afghanistan, but Obama tried again. He received the same answer Bush did: no. Except for some minor, short-term assistance, the French and Germans were unwilling to commit forces to Obama's major foreign policy effort, something that stands out.

Given the degree to which the Europeans disliked Bush and were eager to have a president who would revert the U.S.-European relationship to what it once was (at least in their view), one would have thought the French and Germans would be eager to make some substantial gesture rewarding the United States for selecting a pro-European president. Certainly, it was in their interest to strengthen Obama. That they proved unwilling to make that gesture suggests that the French and German relationship with the United States is much less important to Paris and Berlin than it would appear. Obama, a pro-European president, was emphasizing a war France and Germany approved of over a war they disapproved of and asked for their help, but virtually none was forthcoming.

The Russian Non-Reset

Obama's desire to reset European relations was matched by his desire to reset U.S.-Russian relations. Ever since the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine in late 2004 and early 2005, U.S.-Russian relations had deteriorated dramatically, with Moscow charging Washington with interfering in the internal affairs of former Soviet republics with the aim of weakening Russia. This culminated in the Russo-Georgian war last August. The Obama administration has since suggested a "reset" in relations, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton actually carrying a box labeled "reset button" to her spring meeting with the Russians.

The problem, of course, was that the last thing the Russians wanted was to reset relations with the United States. They did not want to go back to the period after the Orange Revolution, nor did they want to go back to the period between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Orange Revolution. The Obama administration's call for a reset showed the distance between the Russians and the Americans: The Russians regard the latter period as an economic and geopolitical disaster, while the Americans regard it as quite satisfactory. Both views are completely understandable.

The Obama administration was signaling that it intends to continue the Bush administration's Russia policy. That policy was that Russia had no legitimate right to claim priority in the former Soviet Union, and that the United States had the right to develop bilateral relations with any country and expand NATO as it wished. But the Bush administration saw the Russian leadership as unwilling to follow the basic architecture of relations that had developed after 1991, and as unreasonably redefining what the Americans thought of as a stable and desirable relationship. The Russian response was that an entirely new relationship was needed between the two countries, or the Russians would pursue an independent foreign policy matching U.S. hostility with Russian hostility. Highlighting the continuity in U.S.-Russian relations, plans for the prospective ballistic missile defense installation in Poland, a symbol of antagonistic U.S.-Russian relations, remain unchanged.

The underlying problem is that the Cold War generation of U.S. Russian experts has been supplanted by the post-Cold War generation, now grown to maturity and authority. If the Cold warriors were forged in the 1960s, the post-Cold warriors are forever caught in the 1990s. They believed that the 1990s represented a stable platform from which to reform Russia, and that the grumbling of Russians plunged into poverty and international irrelevancy at that time is simply part of the post-Cold War order. They believe that without economic power, Russia cannot hope to be an important player on the international stage. That Russia has never been an economic power even at the height of its influence but has frequently been a military power doesn't register. Therefore, they are constantly expecting Russia to revert to its 1990s patterns, and believe that if Moscow doesn't, it will collapse — which explains U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's interview in The Wall Street Journal where he discussed Russia's decline in terms of its economic and demographic challenges. Obama's key advisers come from the Clinton administration, and their view of Russia — like that of the Bush administration — was forged in the 1990s.

Foreign Policy Continuity Elsewhere

When we look at U.S.-China policy, we see very similar patterns with the Bush administration. The United States under Obama has the same interest in maintaining economic ties and avoiding political complications as the Bush administration did. Indeed, Hillary Clinton explicitly refused to involve herself in human rights issues during her visit to China. Campaign talk of engaging China on human rights issues is gone. Given the interests of both countries, this makes sense, but it is also noteworthy given the ample opportunity to speak to China on this front (and fulfill campaign promises) that has arisen since Obama took office (such as the Uighur riots).

Of great interest, of course, were the three great openings of the early Obama administration, to Cuba, to Iran, and to the Islamic world in general through his Cairo speech. The Cubans and Iranians rebuffed his opening, whereas the net result of the speech to the Islamic world remains unclear. With Iran we see the most important continuity. Obama continues to demand an end to Tehran's nuclear program, and has promised further sanctions unless Iran agrees to enter into serious talks by late September.

On Israel, the United States has merely shifted the atmospherics. Both the Bush and Obama administrations demanded that the Israelis halt settlements, as have many other administrations. The Israelis have usually responded by agreeing to something small while ignoring the larger issue. The Obama administration seemed ready to make a major issue of this, but instead continued to maintain security collaboration with the Israelis on Iran and Lebanon (and we assume intelligence collaboration). Like the Bush administration, the Obama administration has not allowed the settlements to get in the way of fundamental strategic interests.

This is not a criticism of Obama. Presidents — all presidents — run on a platform that will win. If they are good presidents, they will leave behind these promises to govern as they must. This is what Obama has done. He ran for president as the antithesis of Bush. He has conducted his foreign policy as if he were Bush. This is because Bush's foreign policy was shaped by necessity, and Obama's foreign policy is shaped by the same necessity. Presidents who believe they can govern independent of reality are failures. Obama doesn't intend to fail.