

By George Friedman

Barack Obama is the Democratic candidate for president. His advisers in foreign policy are generally Democrats. Together they carry with them an institutional memory of the Democratic Party's approach to foreign policy, and are an expression of the complexity and divisions of that approach. Like their Republican counterparts, in many ways they are going to be severely constrained as to what they can do both by the nature of the global landscape and American resources. But to some extent, they will also be constrained and defined by the tradition they come from. Understanding that tradition and Obama's place is useful in understanding what an Obama presidency would look like in foreign affairs.

The most striking thing about the Democratic tradition is that it presided over the beginnings of the three great conflicts that defined the 20th century: Woodrow Wilson and World War I, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and World War II, and Harry S. Truman and the Cold War. (At this level of analysis, we will treat the episodes of the Cold War such as Korea, Vietnam or Grenada as simply subsets of one conflict.) This is most emphatically not to say that had Republicans won the presidency in 1916, 1940 or 1948, U.S. involvement in those wars could have been avoided.

Patterns in Democratic Foreign Policy

But it does give us a framework for considering persistent patterns of Democratic foreign policy. When we look at the conflicts, four things become apparent.

First, in all three conflicts, Democrats postponed the initiation of direct combat as long as possible. In only one, World War I, did Wilson decide to join the war without prior direct attack. Roosevelt maneuvered near war but did not enter the war until after Pearl Harbor. Truman also maneuvered near war but did not get into direct combat until after the North Korean invasion of South Korea. Indeed, even Wilson chose to go to war to protect free passage on the Atlantic. More important, he sought to prevent Germany from defeating the Russians and the Anglo-French alliance and to stop the subsequent German domination of Europe, which appeared possible. In other words, the Democratic approach to war was reactive. All three presidents reacted to events on the surface, while trying to shape them underneath the surface.

Second, all three wars were built around coalitions. The foundation of the three wars was that other nations were at risk and that the United States used a predisposition to resist (Germany in the first two wars, the Soviet Union in the last) as a framework for involvement. The United States under Democrats did not involve itself in war unilaterally. At the same time, the United States under Democrats made certain that the major burdens were shared by allies. Millions died in World War I, but the United States suffered 100,000 dead. In World War II, the United States suffered 500,000 dead in a war where perhaps 50 million soldiers and civilians died. In the Cold War, U.S. losses in direct combat were less than 100,000 while the losses to Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans and others towered over that toll. The allies had a complex appreciation

of the United States. On the one hand, they were grateful for the U.S. presence. On the other hand, they resented the disproportionate amounts of blood and effort shed. Some of the roots of anti-Americanism are to be found in this strategy.

Third, each of these wars ended with a Democratic president attempting to create a system of international institutions designed to limit the recurrence of war without directly transferring sovereignty to those institutions. Wilson championed the League of Nations. Roosevelt the United Nations. Bill Clinton, who presided over most of the post-Cold War world, constantly sought international institutions to validate U.S. actions. Thus, when the United Nations refused to sanction the Kosovo War, he designated NATO as an alternative international organization with the right to approve conflict. Indeed, Clinton championed a range of multilateral organizations during the 1990s, including everything from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and later the World Trade Organization. All these presidents were deeply committed to multinational organizations to define permissible and impermissible actions.

And fourth, there is a focus on Europe in the Democratic view of the world. Roosevelt regarded Germany as the primary threat instead of the Pacific theater in World War II. And in spite of two land wars in Asia during the Cold War, the centerpiece of strategy remained NATO and Europe. The specific details have evolved over the last century, but the Democratic Party — and particularly the Democratic foreign policy establishment — historically has viewed Europe as a permanent interest and partner for the United States.

Thus, the main thrust of the Democratic tradition is deeply steeped in fighting wars, but approaches this task with four things in mind:

Wars should not begin until the last possible moment and ideally should be initiated by the enemy.

Wars must be fought in a coalition with much of the burden borne by partners.

The outcome of wars should be an institutional legal framework to manage the peace, with the United States being the most influential force within this multilateral framework.

Any such framework must be built on a trans-Atlantic relationship.

Democratic Party Fractures

That is one strand of Democratic foreign policy. A second strand emerged in the context of the Vietnam War. That war began under the Kennedy administration and was intensified by Lyndon Baines Johnson, particularly after 1964. The war did not go as expected. As the war progressed, the Democratic Party began to fragment. There were three factions involved in this.

The first faction consisted of foreign policy professionals and politicians who were involved in the early stages of war planning but turned against the war after 1967 when it clearly diverged from plans. The leading political figure of this faction was Robert F. Kennedy, who initially supported the war but eventually turned against it.

The second faction was more definitive. It consisted of people on the left wing of the Democratic Party — and many who went far to the left of the Democrats. This latter group not only turned against the war, it developed a theory of the U.S. role in the war that as a mass movement was

unprecedented in the century. The view (it can only be sketched here) maintained that the United States was an inherently imperialist power. Rather than the benign image that Wilson, Roosevelt and Truman had of their actions, this faction reinterpreted American history going back into the 19th century as violent, racist and imperialist (in the most extreme faction's view). Just as the United States annihilated the Native Americans, the United States was now annihilating the Vietnamese.

A third, more nuanced, faction argued that rather than an attempt to contain Soviet aggression, the Cold War was actually initiated by the United States out of irrational fear of the Soviets and out of imperialist ambitions. They saw the bombing of Hiroshima as a bid to intimidate the Soviet Union rather than an effort to end World War II, and the creation of NATO as having triggered the Cold War.

These three factions thus broke down into Democratic politicians such as RFK and George McGovern (who won the presidential nomination in 1972), radicals in the street who were not really Democrats, and revisionist scholars who for the most part were on the party's left wing.

Ultimately, the Democratic Party split into two camps. Hubert Humphrey led the first along with Henry Jackson, who rejected the left's interpretation of the U.S. role in Vietnam and claimed to speak for the Wilson-FDR-Truman strand in Democratic politics. McGovern led the second. His camp largely comprised the party's left wing, which did not necessarily go as far as the most extreme critics of that tradition but was extremely suspicious of anti-communist ideology, the military and intelligence communities, and increased defense spending. The two camps conducted extended political warfare throughout the 1970s.

The presidency of Jimmy Carter symbolized the tensions. He came to power wanting to move beyond Vietnam, slashing and changing the CIA, controlling defense spending and warning the country of "an excessive fear of Communism." But following the fall of the Shah of Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he allowed Zbigniew Brzezinski, his national security adviser and now an adviser to Obama, to launch a guerrilla war against the Soviets using Islamist insurgents from across the Muslim world in Afghanistan. Carter moved from concern with anti-Communism to coalition warfare against the Soviets by working with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghan resistance fighters.

Carter was dealing with the realities of U.S. geopolitics, but the tensions within the Democratic tradition shaped his responses. During the Clinton administration, these internal tensions subsided to a great degree. In large part this was because there was no major war, and the military action that did occur — as in Haiti and Kosovo — was framed as humanitarian actions rather than as the pursuit of national power. That soothed the anti-war Democrats to a great deal, since their perspective was less pacifistic than suspicious of using war to enhance national power.

The Democrats Since 9/11

Since the Democrats have not held the presidency during the last eight years, judging how they might have responded to events is speculative. Statements made while in opposition are not necessarily predictive of what an administration might do. Nevertheless, Obama's foreign policy

outlook was shaped by the last eight years of Democrats struggling with the U.S.-jihadist war.

The Democrats responded to events of the last eight years as they traditionally do when the United States is attacked directly: The party's anti-war faction contracted and the old Democratic tradition reasserted itself. This was particularly true of the decision to go to war in Afghanistan. Obviously, the war was a response to an attack and, given the mood of the country after 9/11, was an unassailable decision. But it had another set of characteristics that made it attractive to the Democrats. The military action in Afghanistan was taking place in the context of broad international support and within a coalition forming at all levels, from on the ground in Afghanistan to NATO and the United Nations. Second, U.S. motives did not appear to involve national self-interest, like increasing power or getting oil. It was not a war for national advantage, but a war of national self-defense.

The Democrats were much less comfortable with the Iraq war than they were with Afghanistan. The old splits reappeared, with many Democrats voting for the invasion and others against. There were complex and mixed reasons why each Democrat voted the way they did — some strategic, some purely political, some moral. Under the pressure of voting on the war, the historically fragile Democratic consensus broke apart, not so much in conflict as in disarray. One of the most important reasons for this was the sense of isolation from major European powers — particularly the French and Germans, whom the Democrats regarded as fundamental elements of any coalition. Without those countries, the Democrats regarded the United States as diplomatically isolated.

The intraparty conflict came later. As the war went badly, the anti-war movement in the party re-energized itself. They were joined later by many who had formerly voted for the war but were upset by the human and material cost and by the apparent isolation of the United States and so on. Both factions of the Democratic Party had reasons to oppose the Iraq war even while they supported the Afghan war.

Understanding Obama's Foreign Policy

It is in light of this distinction that we can begin to understand Obama's foreign policy. On Aug. 1, Obama said the following: "It is time to turn the page. When I am President, we will wage the war that has to be won, with a comprehensive strategy with five elements: getting out of Iraq and on to the right battlefield in Afghanistan and Pakistan; developing the capabilities and partnerships we need to take out the terrorists and the world's most deadly weapons; engaging the world to dry up support for terror and extremism; restoring our values; and securing a more resilient homeland."

Obama's view of the Iraq war is that it should not have been fought in the first place, and that the current success in the war does not justify it or its cost. In this part, he speaks to the anti-war tradition in the party. He adds that Afghanistan and Pakistan are the correct battlefields, since this is where the attack emanated from. It should be noted that on several occasions Obama has pointed to Pakistan as part of the Afghan problem, and has indicated a willingness to intervene there if needed while demanding Pakistani cooperation. Moreover, Obama emphasizes the need for partnerships — for example, coalition partners — rather than unilateral action in Afghanistan and globally.

Responding to attack rather than pre-emptive attack, coalition warfare and multinational postwar solutions are central to Obama's policy in the Islamic world. He therefore straddles the divide within the Democratic Party. He opposes the war in Iraq as pre-emptive, unilateral and outside the bounds of international organizations while endorsing the Afghan war and promising to expand it.

Obama's problem would be applying these principles to the emerging landscape. He shaped his foreign policy preferences when the essential choices remained within the Islamic world — between dealing with Iraq and Afghanistan simultaneously versus focusing on Afghanistan primarily. After the Russian invasion of Georgia, Obama would face a more complex set of choices between the Islamic world and dealing with the Russian challenge.

Obama's position on Georgia tracked with traditional Democratic approaches:

"Georgia's economic recovery is an urgent strategic priority that demands the focused attention of the United States and our allies. That is why Senator Biden and I have called for \$1 billion in reconstruction assistance to help the people of Georgia in this time of great trial. I also welcome NATO's decision to establish a NATO-Georgia Commission and applaud the new French and German initiatives to continue work on these issues within the EU. The Bush administration should call for a U.S.-EU-Georgia summit in September that focuses on strategies for preserving Georgia's territorial integrity and advancing its economic recovery."

Obama avoided militaristic rhetoric and focused on multinational approaches to dealing with the problem, particularly via NATO and the European Union. In this and in Afghanistan, he has returned to a Democratic fundamental: the centrality of the U.S.-European relationship. In this sense, it is not accidental that he took a preconvention trip to Europe. It was both natural and a signal to the Democratic foreign policy establishment that he understands the pivotal position of Europe.

This view on multilateralism and NATO is summed up in a critical statement by Obama in a position paper:

"Today it's become fashionable to disparage the United Nations, the World Bank, and other international organizations. In fact, reform of these bodies is urgently needed if they are to keep pace with the fast-moving threats we face. Such real reform will not come, however, by dismissing the value of these institutions, or by bullying other countries to ratify changes we have drafted in isolation. Real reform will come because we convince others that they too have a stake in change — that such reforms will make their world, and not just ours, more secure.

"Our alliances also require constant management and revision if they are to remain effective and relevant. For example, over the last 15 years, NATO has made tremendous strides in transforming from a Cold War security structure to a dynamic partnership for peace.

"Today, NATO's challenge in Afghanistan has become a test case, in the words of Dick Lugar, of whether the alliance can 'overcome the growing discrepancy between NATO's expanding missions and its lagging capabilities.'"

Obama's European Problem

The last paragraph represents the key challenge to Obama's foreign policy, and where his first challenge would come from. Obama wants a coalition with Europe and wants Europe to strengthen itself. But Europe is deeply divided, and averse to increasing its defense spending or substantially increasing its military participation in coalition warfare. Obama's multilateralism and Europeanism will quickly encounter the realities of Europe.

This would immediately affect his jihadist policy. At this point, Obama's plan for a 16-month drawdown from Iraq is quite moderate, and the idea of focusing on Afghanistan and Pakistan is a continuation of Bush administration policy. But his challenge would be to increase NATO involvement. There is neither the will nor the capability to substantially increase Europe's NATO participation in Afghanistan.

This problem would be even more difficult in dealing with Russia. Europe has no objection in principle to the Afghan war; it merely lacks the resources to substantially increase its presence there. But in the case of Russia, there is no European consensus. The Germans are dependent on the Russians for energy and do not want to risk that relationship; the French are more vocal but lack military capability, though they have made efforts to increase their commitment to Afghanistan. Obama says he wants to rely on multilateral agencies to address the Russian situation. That is possible diplomatically, but if the Russians press the issue further, as we expect, a stronger response will be needed. NATO will be unlikely to provide that response.

Obama would therefore face the problem of shifting the focus to Afghanistan and the added problem of balancing between an Islamic focus and a Russian focus. This will be a general problem of U.S. diplomacy. But Obama as a Democrat would have a more complex problem. Averse to unilateral actions and focused on Europe, Obama would face his first crisis in dealing with the limited support Europe can provide.

That will pose serious problems in both Afghanistan and Russia, which Obama would have to deal with. There is a hint in his thoughts on this when he says, "And as we strengthen NATO, we should also seek to build new alliances and relationships in other regions important to our interests in the 21st century." The test would be whether these new coalitions will differ from, and be more effective than, the coalition of the willing.

Obama would face similar issues in dealing with the Iranians. His approach is to create a coalition to confront the Iranians and force them to abandon their nuclear program. He has been clear that he opposes that program, although less clear on other aspects of Iranian foreign policy. But again, his solution is to use a coalition to control Iran. That coalition disintegrated to a large extent after Russia and China both indicated that they had no interest in sanctions.

But the coalition Obama plans to rely on will have to be dramatically revived by unknown means, or an alternative coalition must be created, or the United States will have to deal with Afghanistan and Pakistan unilaterally. This reality places a tremendous strain on the core principles of Democratic foreign policy. To reconcile the tensions, he would have to rapidly come to an understanding with the Europeans in NATO on expanding their military forces. Since reaching out to the Europeans would be among his first steps, his first test would come

early.

The Europeans would probably balk, and, if not, they would demand that the United States expand its defense spending as well. Obama has shown no inclination toward doing this. In October 2007, he said the following on defense: "I will cut tens of billions of dollars in wasteful spending. I will cut investments in unproven missile defense systems. I will not weaponize space. I will slow our development of future combat systems, and I will institute an independent defense priorities board to ensure that the quadrennial defense review is not used to justify unnecessary spending."

Russia, Afghanistan and Defense Spending

In this, Obama is reaching toward the anti-war faction in his party, which regards military expenditures with distrust. He focused on advanced war-fighting systems, but did not propose cutting spending on counterinsurgency. But the dilemma is that in dealing with both insurgency and the Russians, Obama would come under pressure to do what he doesn't want to do — namely, increase U.S. defense spending on advanced systems.

Obama has been portrayed as radical. That is far from the case. He is well within a century-long tradition of the Democratic Party, with an element of loyalty to the anti-war faction. But that element is an undertone to his policy, not its core. The core of his policy would be coalition building and a focus on European allies, as well as the use of multilateral institutions and the avoidance of pre-emptive war. There is nothing radical or even new in these principles. His discomfort with military spending is the only thing that might link him to the party's left wing.

The problem he would face is the shifting international landscape, which would make it difficult to implement some of his policies. First, the tremendous diversity of international challenges would make holding the defense budget in check difficult. Second, and more important, is the difficulty of coalition building and multilateral action with the Europeans. Obama thus lacks both the force and the coalition to carry out his missions. He therefore would have no choice but to deal with the Russians while confronting the Afghan/Pakistani question even if he withdrew more quickly than he says he would from Iraq.

The make-or-break moment for Obama will come early, when he confronts the Europeans. If he can persuade them to take concerted action, including increased defense spending, then much of his foreign policy rapidly falls into place, even if it is at the price of increasing U.S. defense spending. If the Europeans cannot come together (or be brought together) decisively, however, then he will have to improvise.

Obama would be the first Democrat in this century to take office inheriting a major war. Inheriting an ongoing war is perhaps the most difficult thing for a president to deal with. Its realities are already fixed and the penalties for defeat or compromise already defined. The war in Afghanistan has already been defined by U.S. President George W. Bush's approach. Rewriting it will be enormously difficult, particularly when rewriting it depends on ending unilateralism and moving toward full coalition warfare when coalition partners are wary.

Obama's problems are compounded by the fact that he does not only have to deal with an

inherited war, but also a resurgent Russia. And he wants to depend on the same coalition for both. That will be enormously challenging for him, testing his diplomatic skills as well as geopolitical realities. As with all presidents, what he plans to do and what he would do are two different things. But it seems to us that his presidency would be defined by whether he can change the course of U.S.-European relations not by accepting European terms but by persuading them to accommodate U.S. interests.

An Obama presidency would not turn on this. There is no evidence that he lacks the ability to shift with reality — that he lacks Machiavellian virtue. But it still will be the first and critical test, one handed to him by the complex tensions of Democratic traditions and by a war he did not start.

(c) Strategic Forecasting 2008. www.stratfor.com Reproduced with permission. All rights reserved