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The Obama Revolution: From Hustings to Reality

LSE Ideas

By Lisa Aronsson

The Obama campaign turned American politics upside down. His approach to campaign financing revolutionised the rules of the game, and his use of the Internet and mobile web stirred unprecedented interest, brought people to the polls for the first time and produced a larger, more sceptical and informed electorate. Barack Obama portrayed himself as transcending politics, as a national reconciler, and as the harbinger of change in a disaffected country. No doubt President Obama has transformed American politics, but will he revolutionise American foreign policy as well?

Considering the nature of American politics, we may not be able to predict the tenets of President Obama's foreign policy until after his official inauguration and after he has appointed the key decision-makers in his administration. What we do know is that campaign rhetoric rarely turns into presidential policy and that Obama's policy will depend, of course, on how events unfold in the coming months.

Few President-elects have stirred so much emotion in America and risen to prominence with such high international approval ratings. Obama is a great symbol of change and progress in America, and his message is especially powerful considering the American and global public's dissatisfaction with the George W. Bush administration. As such, President Obama is likely to respond to these expectations early in his presidency with a series of highly symbolic foreign policy decisions. He will shift the rhetoric away from Bush's first term unilateralism and excessive reliance on military might. Obama's first decisions will aim to repair America's foreign relations and its reputation in the world. He will decide to close down Guantánamo Bay detention camp, end America's policy of torture, reconsider extraordinary rendition and re-engage America as a leader in multilateral negotiations for a global climate regime.

Such decisions will be easy for Obama to promise and they will earn him much applause around the world. When the applause dies down however, challenges will abound. Closing Guantánamo will require him to jump through a complex set of legal and political hurdles, while concluding negotiations on climate change will require unprecedented co-operation between the big emitters as well as leadership and vision. Obama's campaign provided few signposts for a new direction in foreign policy. Generally speaking, he will define the war on terror more narrowly and he will broaden the foreign policy agenda to include human security concerns, climate change, public health and organized crime. In a symbolic shift, the war on terror will no longer dictate the means and ends of American foreign policy. In a sense, his approach recalls the Clinton years – which focused on globalisation and humanitarian concerns – and the post-Vietnam era, when Republicans clung to Cold War thinking and Democrats acknowledged the Sino-Soviet split and the environmental agenda.

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Lisa Aronsson is Head of the Transatlantic Programme at RUSI and a Fellow of the LSE IDEAS Transatlantic Project

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