

Clinton's Foreign Policy (cont.)

Six weeks into a new administration is, of course, too soon to start making a definitive judgment about its foreign policy. But it is not too soon to start worrying that President Bush may be content to continue walking down dangerous paths in foreign and defense policy laid out over the past eight years by Bill Clinton. Conservative columnists across the country have been crowing about how refreshingly different Bush is from his predecessor. In some important respects they are right. But in foreign policy, we don't yet see much difference.

Bush's decision to adopt Bill Clinton's defense budget for the coming year was the first sign that something was amiss. Bush explains this as prudence: no new spending before a top-to-bottom review of defense strategy. But the decision to seek no increases was made not at the Pentagon, and not by any experts on defense planning. It was made by the Office of Management and Budget and above all, by political aides at the White House concerned about the tax cut. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who presumably knows about the needs of the military, was not asked his opinion. In fact, Rumsfeld believes a substantial increase in defense spending is needed right away to address the military's readiness crisis—the one Bush and Cheney warned about throughout last year's campaign. We can only hope the secretary of defense gets the president's ear in time to push through a supplemental appropriations bill for this year, as well as an increase to next year's budget proposal. But will Democrats in an evenly split Senate agree to a substantial defense budget increase later this year when even the White House has suggested there is no urgency?

At least Bush's stumble on the defense budget can be remedied. The same may not be true of the damage done by Secretary of State Colin Powell in the Middle East last week. The decision to drop most of the economic sanctions against Iraq in return for a new regime of so-called smart sanctions may have been a graceful, face-saving way to retreat from ten years of confrontation with Saddam Hussein. But make no mistake: It is a retreat. Powell told reporters that his decision would be criticized by some in the United States as a sign of "weakening." Notably, he did

not try to explain why the critics would be wrong.

In fact, the new smart sanctions will prove no more effective or enduring than the old dumb sanctions. Powell rejoiced to find that the Arab leaders he met with were supportive of his plan to ease sanctions on Iraq. What a surprise! Among those expressing their alleged support were the king of Jordan, the most pro-Iraq nation in the "moderate" Arab world, and the new leader of Syria, that great friend of the United States. Of course Saddam's frightened neighbors support easing sanctions on Iraq. But anyone who thinks they will be any more observant of the smart sanctions ignores the central reality of the current dismal situation: Absent a clear reversal of American policy, and absent a serious commitment to the genuine removal rather than the phony "containment" of Saddam, Arab nations will continue their current stampede toward full normalization of economic and political relations with Iraq.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration so far shows little sign of reversing Clinton's feckless approach to Iraq. After much Republican campaign ballyhoo about supporting the Iraqi opposition, the Bush team, led by Powell, shows scant enthusiasm for this more confrontational approach. So far they have dribbled out small amounts of money to Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress, just as the Clinton administration did. But at the State Department, the National Security Council, and the CIA, support for the opposition is almost nonexistent. This is not all that surprising given that some of the same people who made Iraq policy for Clinton are still making it for Bush. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, for instance, has apparently decided to keep on Bruce Reidel, a holdover from Clinton's Iraq team who has been sharply critical of the Iraqi opposition. President Bush, in his public statements, has not even hinted at a desire to remove Saddam. Like Clinton, he talks only of containment.

Finally, there are signs that Bush may continue the Clinton administration's dangerous courtship of China. When Bush learned that a Chinese firm had been helping Iraq build improved air defenses for the purpose of shooting down American aircraft, his first, instinctive response was anger. He vowed to "send a message" to China. But

then began the kowtowing. Condoleezza Rice hastened to correct the president, telling reporters that the administration is “not accusing . . . the Chinese of anything.” Beijing, after first accusing the United States of fabricating the charge, apparently promised to “investigate.” Within days, the Chinese were putting out the word, courtesy of the *Washington Post’s* John Pomfret, that the huge Chinese telecommunications firm helping the Iraqis try to kill Americans may have been doing so without Beijing’s knowledge or approval. If you’ll believe that, you’ll believe anything. Bush chose to believe it. In dealing with China, Bush declared, he was inclined to “begin with trust.”

Trust Syria. Trust Jordan. Trust China. We wonder how far this trust will go. On China, the next big test will come this spring when the Bush administration decides what new arms to sell to Taiwan. Senior Bush officials like Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Armitage, who will serve as Powell’s deputy at State, are on record favoring a much closer military relationship with Taiwan, with stronger guarantees that the United States will provide Taiwan the weapons it needs and will come to Taiwan’s defense in the event of a Chinese attack. But the Chinese government is already warning Bush that selling more advanced weapons to Taiwan will destroy the Sino-American relationship. Which course will Bush take? There are rumors that Bush plans to visit China to meet Jiang Zemin as early as this fall. Taiwan’s supporters in the United States fear, correctly, that

Bush will not want to poison the atmosphere for such a meeting by approving a controversial arms sale to Taiwan this spring. If Bush does rush off to see Jiang in the fall, it will be still more evidence that Bill Clinton’s foreign policy has outlasted Bill Clinton.

Our conservative and Republican friends have until now been giving their new president and his team the benefit of the doubt. You can be sure that if Bill Clinton or Al Gore’s secretary of state had done what Powell did in the Middle East, they would be screaming bloody murder. If Clinton had let the Chinese off the hook for building Iraqi air defenses, they would be calling for an investigation. If Gore had gone back on his campaign promise to increase defense spending, they would be hauling the Joint Chiefs of Staff out to testify about the aircraft that can’t fly and the troops that can’t train.

But maybe our friends are right to give Bush some more time to get his house in order. During the campaign, we applauded Bush for enunciating what he called a “distinctly American internationalism,” an active American role in the world to defend American principles and interests against the likes of Saddam Hussein and our primary “strategic competitor,” China. In his address to Congress last week, Bush spoke again of this “distinctly American internationalism.” It is a magnificent phrase. Bush should begin translating it into actual policies—soon.

—Robert Kagan and William Kristol

