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## Obama, Clinton and the Future of US Foreign Policy

LSE Ideas

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Today, one of the most polarizing figures in American politics went before the Senate for confirmation hearings on her suitability to serve as the next US Secretary of State. When Hillary Clinton was nominated back in November many on both sides of the political spectrum were outraged. But perhaps none were more disturbed by her selection than the die-hard, anti-war liberals that helped propel Obama to victory on November 4. While many might see this as a sign of politics as usual, the fact of the matter is Obama made a brilliant decision in choosing Clinton and she will be an excellent Secretary of State – if she is allowed to do her job.

The relationship between the Secretary of State and the President is second to none when it comes to the effective and smooth operation of American foreign policy. A good Secretary of State is one that is said to possess the total trust and confidence of the President. An ineffective Secretary of State is one overshadowed and micromanaged by the President. Rusk was ineffective because Kennedy, a foreign policy neophyte, chose weak man he could control. Kennedy wanted to run foreign policy by himself. Kissinger was effective because Nixon put all his faith in him. Baker did wonders for George H. W. Bush, Powell failed spectacularly because Cheney cut him off at the knees.

Appointing Hillary Clinton Secretary of State sent a message to the world about the importance of shifting American foreign policy in a more liberal internationalist direction. Obama went for political experience. While in the Senate, Clinton stunned experts from fields as diverse as nursing and education, to national security on her grasp of the small details of her diverse policy portfolios. She will bring that same dedication to her job at State. Furthermore, Hillary Clinton brings a level of star power to the post that will strengthen her ability to shed light on important issues by keeping them on the front burner.

But her appointment, and most likely confirmation, are not without risk. Senator Clinton and President-Elect Obama have been rivals. Senator Clinton is seen as pragmatic and reportedly does not carry personal grudges. It is rumored the same is not true for many of her personal staff. When it comes to filling out State Department posts in the next few weeks, the truth will be readily evident. But one should have no qualms about Mrs Clinton getting down to business as part of the team letting sleeping dogs lie.

After all, this is a woman who when elected to the Senate from New York went and worked with people like Lindsay Graham who just a few years earlier had tried to impeach her husband. In no time at all Clinton had Republicans singing her praises as a bipartisan politician. Even Rupert Murdoch reportedly apologized to her during her Senate tenure for the negative press she got in the *New York Post* while First Lady. If Hillary Clinton is anything at all, she is a can-do operator. But she can only be a doer if the other side plays ball.

Obama is the most popular American politician in living memory, with the star power of Jack Kennedy and the perceived wisdom of Franklin Roosevelt. If such a President backs his Secretary of State wholeheartedly then it would appear that the stars are in alignment. But at the same time, the President is the most visible figure in America. And globally Obama is even more popular. He of course will be giving the orders, but will he let Clinton carry them out in a manner befitting her talents? Even more important, where does Joe Biden, a man widely considered the dean of foreign policy in the Senate fit in to the future running of American foreign policy?

One good option is for Mrs Clinton to do the day-to-day diplomacy, while Mr Biden engages in a radical overhaul of the US national security establishment. Right now, American foreign policy is dead in the water not just because of failed Bush policies. The US Agency for International Development has been gutted, the State Department has been neglected, and the Department of Defense looms large over all aspects of American foreign policy, presenting an overly militarized Uncle Sam to the world. The various organizations do not work well together. Quite frankly, the relationship in conflict zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan has been downright hostile. No wonder US foreign policy is dysfunctional.

With a number of hot button issues such as Iran, Israel-Palestine, the war in Afghanistan, insecurity in Pakistan and a recalcitrant Russia, Mrs Clinton will not have time to run policy while over-seeing a massive overhaul of the State Department, never mind the wider national security architecture. State after all is only one part of a much larger puzzle. Mr Biden, with an excellent knowledge of the type of world America must lead and a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the US national security establishment would be well suited to carry out such a review and start change in coordination with the Secretaries of Defense, State and other related cabinet posts. Using such an approach will ensure that

policy problems will be well managed, structural issues can be addressed and Mr Obama will have time to worry about a number of other pressing domestic issues.

There is no reason to doubt that Mr Obama and Mr Biden will not back Hillary Clinton 110 percent. But if history is any guide, the going may be more difficult than many expect. Vanity and ego are not strangers to politics. Hopefully, the wisdom that Mr Obama has displayed in his selection of cabinet appointments will carry on into the execution of policy.

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