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100 Days of Obama's Presidency: Serious Questions on National Security Strategies

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While marking the first hundred days of a new presidency— is a tradition that dates back to the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, the focus of media hype and pundit analysis usually focuses on domestic policies—grading how effectively a new leader can shape Washington's agenda. Matters of foreign policy and national security, on the other hand, do not lend themselves readily to a 100-day agenda.

President Obama, however, has presumptively reversed many long-standing national security policies since taking over the White House. The speed and lack of transparent analysis and robust debate on these choices raises serious questions about the prudence and efficacy of national security decision-making in the new White House. The Administration must develop more deliberate means for formulating its national security policies and immediately move to review the rash decisions made since taking office.

Leading or Campaigning? On the most pressing national security matters—Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (despite the White House rhetoric from the contrary)—the Obama Administration has largely continued the strategic course laid out by the Bush Administration. This makes sense. U.S. vital national interests do not change because the party holding the presidency shifts. Neither do the facts on the ground, the resources available to the nation, or the enemy's objectives. It is therefore not surprising that the Administration would continue to advance the nation's interest in both parts of the world.

In contrast, on almost every other 100-day “national security initiative,” the Administration has directed shifts in direction without clear strategic rationale.

Change on Cuba. The President declared that “50 years” of U.S. policy had not worked as justification for reversing long-standing U.S. policies to isolate the Cuban dictatorship. This explanation is fatuous. If the U.S. had followed a similar strategy with the Soviet Union, it would have abandoned containment and left Russia and half of Europe controlled by a nuclear-armed evil empire. What is most troubling and unexamined with this decision is how other dictators will interpret the seriousness of U.S. opposition to a dictatorial regime and its willingness to persevere against oppression and systemic violations of human and civil rights.

Dumbing Down Missile Defense. The President approved a cut of about 15 percent of the Pentagon's budget for missile defense and abandoning deploying defenses in Western Europe. In addition, the White House downplayed the U.S. response to provocative missile launches by Iran and North Korea, as well as failing to obtain a serious U.N. Security Council response to either incident. Despite

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the advance of the North Korean and Iranian long-range missile programs, the Administration justified its decision by declaring it was more important to focus on “regional missile threats.”

The rationale for this decision is opaque. The ballistic missile threat has not diminished; in fact it is growing. The need to defend the United States and Western Europe has not changed. Abrupt changes in missile defense programs (that have been under development for over a decade) make no sense.

Gutting the Defense Budget. In a speech previewing the impending release of next year’s defense budget, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced deep cuts in procurement programs. In addition, the Administration is phasing-out supplemental spending, shifting the costs of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan into the “core” Pentagon budget. That will leave even less money for buying new equipment.

Gates justified the decision as eliminating “Cold War” weapons systems, including the F-22 stealth fighter aircraft and next-generation Navy destroyer. All the programs named by Gates came into development after the fall of the Soviet Union and were justified and funded by a succession of both Democratic and Republican Congresses and Presidents.

Gates also announced these decisions before the Pentagon had even completed the congressionally mandated Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) or a White House National Security Strategy (NSS)—documents that are supposed to provide the strategic rationale for such decisions. The decisions were driven not by national security needs but by a desire to rein in Pentagon spending. Projected Administration defense budgets over the next five years may underfund defense spending by over a trillion dollars.

Ho-Hum on Homeland Security. Administration officials have issued a plethora of ambivalent and contradictory statements on homeland security and counterterrorism policies since 9/11. Both the President and the secretary of homeland security have been reticent on the threat of transnational terrorism. The Department of Homeland Security

has shown signs of reversing Bush Administration strategies on border security and immigration enforcement.

The Administration lacks a coherent approach to homeland security and has adopted these steps before undertaking the congressionally mandated Quadrennial Homeland Security Review (QHSR).

Detainee and Counterterrorism Policy in Disarray. The President has promised the closure of the detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay and repudiated interrogation policies. In addition, the Administration has been unclear about its support for vitally important legislation reauthorizing critical investigation tools granted under the USA PATRIOT Act. While the President has dismissed Bush’s policies on combating terrorism, the Administration has not offered a credible alternative to address the pre-9/11 problems identified by the 9/11 commission. This gap could leave the nation at risk.

Reset on National Security. The lesson of the first 100 days is that the Administration needs to start over on national security. It should:

- Reconsider dramatic and unwarranted missile defense and Pentagon procurement cuts and ill-considered changes in counterterrorism and homeland security policy;
- Finalize and implement changes in reorganizing the National Security Council and use cabinet officials and the council, not unaccountable czars, to develop critical national security policies; and
- Make a serious effort to develop and engage with Congress and the American people on the QDR, QHSR, and NSS.

Presidents must keep the nation safe, free, and prosperous for four years, not 100 days. The White House has a lot more work to do.

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