



Opinion

Failures abroad force change of heart in US

MICHAEL NACHT

Seemingly without notice, President Bush is revising American foreign policy. The enormous damage done to US national interests and its image in the world from 2001-06 that led to "containment" of the United States by others is beginning to be reversed. The challenge for the new administration in 2009 is to deepen, broaden and accelerate this pace of change to remove the condition of self-containment.

US foreign policy under Bush, until recently, reinforced the nationalistic and jingoistic instincts of the American psyche, but had little appeal elsewhere. "My way or the highway" symbolised an arrogant dogmatism in Washington that refused to acknowledge the wisdom of anyone or any institution that did not fit the ideological premises of the President, his Vice-President, Dick Cheney, his Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defence and a few key advisers.

"ABC" stood for "anything but Clinton". The former president and his team were reviled by the Bush leadership. Bush was determined not to adopt a single strategy or tactic that remotely resembled what President Bill Clinton did or said. The military instrument and belligerent declaratory policies were emphasised to crush adversaries and bully allies. The rejection of international treaties and the downgrading of international organisations were aimed at highlighting the primacy of US military, political and economic power. And the polarisation of the US public debate was an intentional product of the strategy of the Bush adviser Karl Rove of "deepening" rather than "broadening" the President's political base.

These ideas were applied in Afghanistan and Iraq, North Korea and Iran, in the approach (or lack thereof) to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in applications to the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Kyoto Protocol on climate

change and a raft of other agreements.

By last year a new public understanding emerged. The Afghanistan situation had deteriorated significantly, and the Taliban were rejuvenated. Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had reconstituted al-Qaeda in Pakistan's tribal areas. Hussein had been toppled in Iraq only to be replaced by a virulent civil war pitting Sunni against Shia – struggles within each, al-Qaeda against both, plus Iranian, Syrian and other elements playing for their own gains.

North Korea developed and tested nuclear weapons. Iran's policies became more, not less, belligerent. The Israeli-Palestinian struggle worsened. Extremist elements – Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Lebanon – gained rather than declined in power and prestige. Russia, fuelled by petro-dollars, adopted a more authoritarian regime at home and a more anti-US stance abroad.

These failures were only partly offset by some progress in Asia: stable relations with Japan, a deepening (but worrisome) economic relationship with China, improved security and economic ties with India, and, of course, a solid relationship with prime minister John Howard in Australia. Moreover, the absence of additional terrorist attacks in the United States was a salient hallmark of success.

The congressional elections last year brought a resounding Republican defeat. The secretary of defence, Donald Rumsfeld, was removed. He was replaced by Robert Gates, who publicly called for the use of "soft power" (diplomacy, political, economic and cultural instruments) to play a key role in counter-terrorism. The balance of power within national security decision-making shifted from domination by Cheney/Rumsfeld to domination by Gates/Rice. Almost all the Bush Texas loyalists, including Rove, left government. The US Iraq military strategy was thoroughly revised and has paid some

dividends, although Shia-Sunni political accommodation still seems far off. Intensive bi- and multilateral diplomacy has led to important signs of progress with North Korea. The recent Annapolis meeting triggered the first direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in seven years. And the new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran makes US military action next year less likely.

The next administration must intensify this pace of change. The president must take the lead in the Middle East peace process. Important substantive and symbolic steps – from the closure of Guantanamo to a new compact on global climate change – must be adopted. Bilateral US-Russia nuclear arms negotiations to reduce deployed forces and to control nuclear materials better must be a top priority. Pakistan, an Islamic state with nuclear weapons that houses key terrorist elements, requires special attention. The fraying commitment of NATO and Australia to the Afghanistan situation demands fresh thinking.

The fragility of China's domestic structure is especially worrisome. The Communist Party strategy to sustain economic growth as a means of maintaining one-party control may be in for a rough patch if the US slips into recession and adopts protectionist legislation. Mr Bush has had the luxury of stable relationships with Russia and China, enabling a focus on Islam, terrorism and oil. The next president may not be so fortunate.

Steps must be taken so the US is no longer contained by its own misguided actions and statements. It must systematically build support at home and abroad, and listen far more than speak.

Michael Nacht is the Dean and Professor of Public Policy at the Goldman School of Public Policy, University of California, Berkeley. He visited Australia as a guest speaker for the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney.