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What appointing Chuck Hagel would say about Obama
By Lawrence J. Haas

President Obama's likely appointment of former Republican Senator Chuck Hagel as Defense Secretary has focused attention on Hagel's controversial views on Israel, its terror-sponsoring neighbors, and the appropriate U.S. posture towards the world's most volatile and dangerous region.

Fine. There's lots to review and lots to criticize. But, as with all presidential appointments, the issue is not the nominee, per se. It's what a likely nomination says about the thinking of the President.

For Obama, the key question is whether, fresh off re-election, his first-term experience as the nation's Commander-in-Chief and top diplomat will prompt changes in his world view as well as his approach to the leading U.S. challenges around the globe.

That Obama would even consider Hagel for such a key post, at such a perilous time for U.S. interests, sends a disturbing signal that, rather than re-think his world view, he's doubling-down on it.

To oversimplify a bit, when it comes to foreign policy, Presidents come in two varieties – realists and idealists. Realists counsel that the United States should single-mindedly pursue its “national interest” and avoid the temptation of nobler goals. Idealists advise that, as a key part of its “national interest,” the United States should use its power and influence to make the world a more peaceful and prosperous place.

In the post-World War II period, realism has been most often associated with Republican Presidents.

Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford and their foreign policy advisor, Henry Kissinger, are the quintessential examples, with their push for U.S.-Soviet détente and their backing of rights-abusing dictators across Latin America. But, George H.W. Bush, with his speedy return to business as usual with Beijing after Tiananmen Square and his reluctance to stop slaughter in the Balkans, is close behind.

Though a Democrat, Obama, too, is a realist. He praised the foreign policy of the aforementioned Bush while campaigning in 2008, sought guidance from leading realist Zbigniew Brzezinski, and drew rave reviews early in his tenure from such leading realists as Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Though, to be sure, Obama spoke about human rights and U.S. efforts to advance freedom and democracy abroad in his inaugural address and other high-profile speeches, he has operated as a day-to-day realist.

So, he downplayed human rights concerns in seeking better ties with autocratic regimes in China, Russia, Venezuela, and elsewhere, and he sought to re-balance the U.S. approach to the Middle East by pressuring Israel to make concessions for Israeli-Palestinian peace, seeking to find the hidden “reformer” in Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, and pursuing “engagement” with the terror-sponsoring mullah-crazy in Iran.

Four years in, China is challenging the United States and its Asian allies more aggressively in the Pacific while Russia continues to bluster about U.S. missile defense in Europe and to block U.S. efforts to prevent Iran from going nuclear and build a global consensus on how to usher al-Assad from office.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leaders responded to Obama’s pressure on Israel by digging their heels in more firmly on their own demands, making peace more elusive than ever; al-Assad’s response to “Arab Spring” protests in his country left those seeking the reformer in him to look foolish; and Iranian leaders made clear that they seek neither “engagement” nor warmer ties with the “Great Satan.”

That Obama would now turn to Hagel, a friend from their Senate days and co-chairman of his Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, can only reflect the President’s continuing confidence in his global statecraft.

In a sense, Hagel-ism is Obama-ism on steroids.

Israel?

Hagel complained that “the Jewish lobby intimidates a lot of people up here,” urged Obama in 2009 to negotiate directly with Hamas (a terrorist group dedicated to Israel’s destruction), urged President George W. Bush in 2006 to demand an immediate ceasefire after Israel responded to an attack by Hezbollah (another terrorist group dedicated to Israel’s destruction), opposed numerous efforts to isolate those and other Israel-targeting terrorist groups, and refused to express support for Israel during the second Palestinian intifada.

Syria?

Hagel met with al-Assad in the late 1990s, failed to vote on legislation in 2003 to authorize sanctions on Syria for its support of terrorism and occupation of Lebanon and, as recently as 2009, was a leading proponent of the view that al-Assad was ready for serious dialogue and a re-thinking of Syria’s strategic positioning (presumably, its close ties to Iran and hostility toward Israel and the West).

Iran?

Hagel cautioned against “push[ing] Iran into a corner” over its nuclear program, complained that “continued hostile relations between the United States and Iran will have the effect of isolating the United States,” opposed sanctions against the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in 2007

even as it was mounting attacks against U.S. troops in Iraq, opposed various measures to pressure Tehran over its nuclear efforts, and, recently, expressed skepticism about using military force to derail that program – just as at least some Administration officials were trying to make the military threat seem real.

In the end, Hagel's appointment to the Pentagon would be important less because of the advice that he'd give the President and more for what it would say about Obama's comfort with his views.

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