By Rodger Baker

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is making her first official overseas visit, with scheduled stops in Tokyo; Jakarta, Indonesia; Seoul, South Korea; and Beijing. The choice of Asia as her first destination is intended to signal a more global focus for U.S. President Barack Obama's administration, as opposed to the heavy emphasis on the Middle East and South Asia seen in the last years of the Bush administration. It also represents the kickoff of an ambitious travel plan that will see Clinton visiting numerous countries across the globe in a bid to project the image of a more cooperative U.S. administration.

Clinton's Asian expedition is not the first overseas visit by a key member of the new administration. Vice President Joe Biden traveled to Germany for the Munich Security Conference, where he faced the Russians. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell has finished his first trip to his area of responsibility, and is already planning a return visit to the Middle East. And Richard Holbrooke, special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, has visited both South Asian countries in addition to making a "listening" stop in India.

The emergence of a new foreign policy

As with any new U.S. presidency, there will be a period of reshaping policy, of setting priorities, and of balancing internal differences within the Obama administration. The various individuals and visits cataloged above in part reflect the Obama administration's emerging foreign policy. A two-pronged Obama foreign policy approach is unfolding.

The first prong, relating to the general tenor of foreign relations, involves a modern application of the "speak softly and carry a big stick" approach. The second prong, relating to the distribution of power within the administration, involves a centralization of foreign policy centering on a stronger and expanded National Security Council (NSC) and relies on special envoys for crisis areas, leaving the secretary of state to shape foreign perceptions rather than policy.

The Obama administration faced mixed expectations as it came into office. Perhaps the most far-reaching expectation on the international front was the idea that the Obama administration would somehow be the antithesis of the previous Bush administration. Whereas Bush often was portrayed as a unilateralist "cowboy," constantly confronting others and never listening to allies (much less competitors), it was thought that Obama somehow would remake America into a nation that withheld its military power and instead confronted international relations via consultations and cooperation. In essence, the Bush administration was seen as aggressive and unwilling to listen, while an Obama administration was expected to be more easily shaped and manipulated.

Anticipation of a weaker administration created a challenge for Obama from the start. While many of his supporters saw him as the anti-Bush, the new president had no intention of shifting America to a second-tier position or making the United States isolationist. Obama's focus on reducing U.S. forces in Iraq and the discussions during Clinton's confirmation hearing of reducing the military's role in reconstruction operations did not reflect an anti-military bias or even new ideas, but something Defense Secretary Robert Gates had advocated for under former U.S. President George W. Bush.

A reshaping of the U.S. military will in fact take place over the course of Obama's term in office. But the decision to reduce the U.S. military presence in Iraq is not unique to this administration; it is merely a recognition of the reality of the limitations of military resources.

Diplomacy and military power

The new administration has applied this decision as the basis of a strategy to refocus the military on its core competencies and rebuild the military's strength and readiness, using that as the strong and stable framework from which to pursue an apparently more cooperative foreign policy. U.S. diplomatic power needs a strong military, and operations in Iraq have drained U.S. military power - something highlighted by the U.S. inability to act on its policies when the Russians moved in on Georgia.

It is not only U.S. political power that is reinforced by military power, but U.S. economic strength as well. Control of the world's sea-lanes - and increasingly, control of outer space - is what ensures the security of U.S. economic links abroad. In theory, the United States can thus interdict competitors' supply lines and economic ties while protecting its own. Despite globalization and greater economic ties, physical power still remains the strongest backer to diplomacy. Ideology alone will not change the world, much less the actions of so-called rogue states or even pirates along the Somali coast.

The first principal of Obama's foreign policy, then, will be making sure it has big stick to carry, one freed from long-term reconstruction commitments or seemingly intractable situations such as Iraq. Only with an available and effective military can one afford to speak softly without being trod upon. Rebuilding U.S. military readiness and strength is not going to be easy. Iraq and Afghanistan remain to be taken care of, and there are years of heavy activity and at times declining recruitment to recover from.

While there are substantial benefits to a battle-hardened military accustomed to a high deployment tempo, this also has its costs - reset costs will be high. A very real domestic military shake-up looms on the one- to two-year horizon in order to bring the Pentagon back into line with fiscal and procurement realities, coupled with concerns about midlevel officer retention. But the Pentagon's thinking and strategic guidance already have moved toward cooperative security and toward working more closely with allies and partners to stabilize and manage the global security environment, with an emphasis on requiring foreign participation and burden-sharing.

A greater security role for Allies and a centralized foreign policy

Obama will also work on managing the U.S. image abroad. Opposition to Bush and opposition to the war in Iraq often became synonymous internationally, evolving intentionally or otherwise into broader anti-war and anti-military sentiments. Rebuilding the military's image internationally will not happen overnight. Part of the process will involve using the sense of change inherent in any new U.S. administration to push allies and others to take on a greater role in global security.

In Asia, for example, Clinton will call on Tokyo and Seoul to step up operations in Afghanistan, particularly in reconstruction and development efforts. But Tokyo and Seoul also will be called on to take a greater role in regional security - Seoul on the Korean Peninsula and Tokyo as a more active military ally overall. The same message will be sent to Europe and elsewhere: If you want a multilateral United States, you will have to take up the slack and participate in multilateral operations.

The multilateral mantra will not be one in which the United States does what others say, but rather one in which the United States holds others to the task. In the end, this will reduce U.S. commitments abroad, allowing the military to refocus on its core competencies and rebuild its strength.

A strong military thus forms the foundation of any foreign policy. Obama's foreign policy approach is largely centralized in a bid for a wider approach. Taking China as an example, for the last half-dozen years, U.S. policy on China was based almost entirely on economics. The U.S. Treasury Department took the lead in China relations, while other issues - everything from Chinese military developments to Beijing's growing presence in Africa and Latin America to human rights - took a back seat. While the U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue (or something similar) will remain a major pillar of U.S.-China relations under Obama, equally important parallel tracks will focus on military and security issues, nontraditional threats, politics and human rights. This multifaceted approach will require close cooperation among numerous departments and divisions to avoid the chaos seen in things like U.S. policy on North Korea.

This coordination will take place in an expanded NSC, one that brings in the economic elements on equal footing with security and political concerns. Combined with the appointment of special envoys for critical regions, this is intended to ensure a more unified and complete approach to foreign policy. This way, Obama retains oversight over policy, while his erstwhile rival Clinton is just one voice at the table. The State Department's role thus becomes more about image management and development.

Accordingly, Clinton's foreign travels are less about shaping foreign policy than shaping foreign images of the United States. She is demonstrating the new consultative nature of the administration by going everywhere and listening to everyone. Meanwhile, the hard-hitting foreign policy initiatives go to the special envoys, who can dedicate their time and energy to just one topic. Holbrooke got South Asia, Mitchell got the Middle East, and there are indications that managing overall China strategy will fall to Biden, at least in the near term.

Other special envoys and special representatives might emerge, some technically reporting through the State Department, others to other departments, but all effectively reporting back to the NSC and the president. In theory, this will mitigate the kind of bickering between the State

Department and NSC that characterized Bush's first term (a concern hardly limited to the most recent ex-president). And to keep it busy, the State Department has been tasked with rebuilding the U.S. Agency for International Development or an equivalent program for taking reconstruction and development programs, slowly freeing the military from the reconstruction business.

As Clinton heads to Asia, then, the expectations of Asian allies and China of a newfound American appreciation for the Far East might be a bit misplaced. Certainly, this is the first time in a long while that a secretary of state has visited Asia before Europe. But given the role of the vice president and the special envoys, the visit might not reflect policy priorities so much as a desire to ensure that all regions get visits. Clinton's agenda in each country might not offer an entirely accurate reading of U.S. policy initiatives for the region, either, as much of the policy is still up for review, and her primary responsibility is to demonstrate a new and more interactive face of American foreign policy.

Clinton's Asia visit is significant largely because it highlights a piece of the evolving Obama foreign policy - a policy that remains centralized under the president via the NSC, and that uses dedicated special envoys and representatives to focus on key trouble spots (and perhaps to avoid some of the interagency bickering that can limit the agencies' freedom to maneuver). Most importantly, this policy at its core looks to rebuild the sense and reality of American military strength through disengaging from apparently intractable situations, focusing on core competencies rather than reconstruction or nation-building, and calling on allies to take up the slack in security responsibilities.

This is what is shaping the first priority for the Obama administration: withdrawal from Iraq not just to demonstrate a different approach than the last president, but also to ensure that the military is ready for use elsewhere.