

Brzezinski opens policy debate for Clinton

by Paul Goldstein

On Nov. 5, before an overflow crowd of 400 people at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Washington, D.C., former Carter National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski laid out his conceptions of what the new Clinton administration will face. Stating from the outset that he is "not a member of the inner or outer circle" of the Clinton transition, Brzezinski nonetheless pronounced that the Clinton administration represents no fundamental change in U.S. foreign or security policy toward Europe and the Far East.

Brzezinski praised both President Bush and Governor Clinton for not bringing foreign policy into the presidential campaign, citing this as an example of a "new consensus" among the various institutions that determine foreign policy. "Although there will be some different emphasis in key areas of policy," Brzezinski added, "there will be no strategic departure" from the outlines of the Bush administration's policy.

No differences between Bush, Clinton

"Whatever differences with the Bush administration the Clinton team had on foreign policy were mere quibbles," Brzezinski noted. "Our commitments, whether the U.S. leaves 150,000 or 100,000 troops in Europe, are simply not a fundamental policy debate or a significant departure from the present policy." This was not the case during the transition from the Ford to Carter administration. "In 1976, the Carter administration's stated announcement of withdrawing of U.S. forces from South Korea left the impression that a discontinuity existed in U.S. policy. This will not happen under a Clinton administration." Brzezinski distinguished the Republican Party debate between isolationism and internationalism as an aberration within GOP ranks. The only real debate with the national security establishment is between "internationalism and unilateralism." That is, whether the United States acts alone or within the framework of the United Nations or some other multilateral institution.

Brzezinski generally avoided discussion of trade and economic issues and concentrated on the strategic crises in Yugoslavia, Russia, and China, and the Middle East peace process. Concerning Yugoslavia, he emphasized that the "Clinton administration will have a greater inclination toward direct U.S. engagement in the conflict." Although "Clinton never explicitly came out with a call for U.S. intervention,"

Brzezinski underscored that the "ongoing situation is immoral" and that an active stand must be taken. Furthermore, he anticipates that unless some military action is taken to contain the Balkan conflict, it will spread into Albania and Macedonia, potentially igniting a Turkish-Greek war.

Never mentioning Bush, Brzezinski instead attacked the Europeans for their "failure to intervene" in Yugoslavia. He proposed that a joint U.S.-European force be fashioned for a more assertive response under U.N. auspices. For Russia, Brzezinski somberly stated that "Russia is devolving into 'political anarchy.'" A crisis of political instability and a "socio-economic breakdown is under way. Russia faces a 'Great Depression' only greater than the 1930s in the United States because of its underdeveloped economy." Many in the audience of the Washington diplomatic and political community were stunned by Brzezinski's comments. He explained that the "rising level of unemployment and hyperinflation coupled with the lack of the institutionalization of power" represent a "breakdown crisis."

"The President of Russia is the only popularly elected official. The Russian parliament is a relic of the political past. The Army and KGB's loyalty is neither assured nor [is it] known which direction they will go in this crisis. . . . With Russia moving toward anarchy, a major international crisis" is on the horizon, and this situation might force Clinton to "shift his focus from his domestic agenda into facing an international crisis reminiscent of what happened to President Lyndon Johnson."

On China, he anticipates a "sharp demarcation from the Bush administration," because "Congress will hold Clinton's feet to the fire," and an "intensification of friction in the U.S.-China relationship, especially in the area of human rights." But the real challenge for Clinton is not to be diverted from realizing his domestic agenda, or that the Russian or Chinese developments force him into a hands-on role. Concerning the Mideast peace process, Brzezinski called for an active U.S. role. Although the United States "opposes the creation of a Palestinian state, this should not be totally excluded in the negotiations."

Brzezinski proposed that Clinton signal the international and U.S. elites that his "domestic agenda will proceed not to the exclusion of foreign policy, by appointing a prominent Republican from Congress." This move will enable the Clinton administration to fashion a "bipartisan program on foreign policy" and create a cohesive management structure in which the secretary of state defines policy and the national security adviser helps to coordinate it, not make policy. "Clearly the secretary of state must predominate, unlike in the Carter administration," he said.

Brzezinski opposed the creation of an Economic Security Council because, he said, it would encourage an unnecessary bureaucratic war. As long as the United States "concentrates on domestic affairs and the economy responds, only this will allow the U.S. to play its historic role," he concluded.